

**THE AESTHETIC, PLEASURE AND HAPPINESS,
OR: WHY FREEDOM IS NOT ENOUGH**

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ABSTRACT: *Do the aesthetic aspects of our experience play a role in our happiness or must we avoid any aesthetic conditioning of our freedom in order to lead a good life? This paper is based on some philosophical ideas derived from John Dewey's thought, which are examined in the light of the debate on happiness, well-being and human flourishing that has productively been conducted on the threshold between philosophy and economics.*

Setting out from Dewey's thesis that aesthetic aspects are structural traits of every experience which concern our dependence on the surrounding environment, the paper suggests that the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and autonomy are not enough to develop a morally and politically good life, because a good life must also be a full, satisfactory one, that is an inclusive, expanding life, emotionally and imaginatively rich, capable of final consummations and not only of analytical reflections.

In particular, the author argues that Dewey's suggestions allow us to consider a further option in addition to those presently discussed: one strictly related to the structurally aesthetic or qualitative traits of our human interactions with the environment and capable of not being confined to an idea of happiness as something totally consisting in momentary sensory pleasure, but also of not neglecting or expunging our sensibility.

Can aesthetics claim to have any serious connection with our idea of happiness and with our actual well-being? Or is it better for this philosophical discipline to merely theorize about Art, still written with a capital "A" and rigorously expressed in the singular?

We might like to refer here to the first letters *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, in which Friedrich Schiller tries to convince his interlocutor and patron, Prince Friedrich Christian von Schleswig-Holstein-

Augustenburg, that in order to face the dramatic political situation and the moral crisis of the period immediately following the French Revolution, he ought to consider the possibility of a new development of humanity through the medium of an aesthetic education. This long path should start from a new anthropological stance that will neglect neither the human impulse to lend form to every field of experience – the cognitive dimension, but above all the moral one – nor more sensuous, material drives, encouraging us to find satisfaction in our lives. In Schiller's opinion, aesthetic freedom is not foreign to the opposite necessities these impulses force us to follow; on the contrary, it results from the capacity to play opposite necessities off against one another, thereby annulling their coercive qualities.¹

I am not sympathetic to Schiller's transcendental solution to our moral and political problems, but I believe that he was able to see into some basic human needs, which must be seriously considered if we wish to think about happiness, well-being and freedom – that is, about what kind of life we wish to live – starting from our being peculiarly complex social organisms and not disembodied consciousness, or in other words from the material culture we live in.

My approach will be based on some philosophical ideas derived from John Dewey's thought, which in my opinion can be used and further developed in the debate on happiness, well-being and human flourishing which has productively been conducted on the threshold between philosophy and economics.

1. A look at the aesthetic aspects of our experience

The point of departure of my argument is the fact that the conception of the aesthetic in the thought of John Dewey is not – or not primarily – confined to either the allegedly strict realm of the so-called fine arts, or to the

¹ Schiller, J.C.F. 1879. *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*. Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, in particular the two opening letters.

wider field of human artistic behaviours. Even before being developed and refined into more or less proper artistic activities, the aesthetic aspects of every experience constitute structural traits: they concern our being dependent upon and exposed to our surrounding natural and naturally social environment and our interacting with it from the inside. To use a different, philosophically more traditional language, we might say that the aesthetic concerns the deepest roots of our humanity, that it plays a central role in shaping our humanity. The aesthetic concerns sensibility understood primarily not as sense perception, but rather as affectivity, as emotional exposure to the natural and social environment surrounding and affecting us – from the most bodily aspects to the more intellectual ones.

To be more analytic², we might say that in *Experience and Nature* the adjective “aesthetic” – Dewey never resorts to the noun form – appears to characterize the basic traits of our immediate experience, that is those qualitative aspects unreflexively connoting human interactions with the environment, both in its natural and in its social constituents. I will at once feel the situation I find myself in to be comfortable or dangerous for my own existence, attractive or disgusting, pleasurable or unpleasant. According to Dewey, these experiential traits are meaningful for the impact they have on our lives, because of what things and other individuals can do to us directly. By contrast, when a certain problem arises about what to do, we have to stop, the fulfilment of a certain experience has to be postponed, the complex whole of an immediate experience has to be reflexively reconsidered and thought of as a means to something else – in terms not of what things and persons can do to us directly, but

with reference to further things.³ This is why Dewey can claim that immediate experience is *consummatory*, that is that it comes at once to the end of the interaction, that it comes to its fulfilment, even if the concept of consummatory experience can be used to identify a certain phase of an experience – but I shall return to this aspect towards the end of my discussion.

Dewey does not feel the need to clarify why he uses the word “aesthetic” – maybe because this use was rather common in pragmatism – but he explicitly bases it on the distinction between *having* or *feeling* a certain situation and *knowing* it, that is analytically reconsidering it in the light of further ends. This is a kind of sensibility which cannot be ascribed to what is allegedly only a form of sensory perception, because the senses themselves, together with our organic constitution, play a central role, yet in affective terms, as something qualitative or emotional and not as a source of alleged primary pure perceptual data.

Hence, aesthetic aspects are basic traits of our environmental experience, which would appear to be an essential part of us as human beings – but of course, they can further be developed into eminently artistic experiences.

This is not a complete novelty: some substantial differences notwithstanding, one might consider the significance of the *Gefühl der Lust und der Unlust* in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* – although this is not the place to pursue such comparison any further.

² I have analysed this subject in the second chapter of my book on sensibility and language: see Dreon, R. 2003. *Il sentire e la parola. Linguaggio e sensibilità tra filosofie ed estetiche del novecento*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis, pp.49-73.

³ Dewey, J. 1988. *Experience and Nature*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.1: 1925, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

It has been already noted⁴ that William James too assigned a primary role to the aesthetic dimension of experience.

In particular, we might say that James and Dewey share the thesis that the aesthetic, qualitative or affective aspects of our experiences do not match the traditional dichotomy between subjective and objective. Dewey's strong anti-dualism leads him to claim that if I feel a certain environment to be hostile – and later in *Art as Experience* he was to speak of a sad picture⁵ – I am not projecting my subjective hostility on a certain context, or my supposedly private mental state on a certain artistic object; rather “hostile” and “sad” are first of all traits of the peculiar interactions that are taking place, and therefore they regard both the subjective and the objective side as non-independent parts of their relations.⁶

⁴ Cf. Shusterman, R. “Dewey's *Art as Experience*: The Psychological Background”. In: *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 44/1, 2010, pp.26-43 and Shusterman, R. “The Pragmatist Aesthetics of William James”. In: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51/4, 2011, pp.347-361.

⁵ Dewey, J. 1989. *Art as Experience*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.10: 1934, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

⁶ James upholds the thesis (in James, W. 1983. *The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience*. In: *Essays in Psychology*, Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, pp.168-187) that the ambiguous or hybrid character of affective phenomena proves that the distinction between material and spiritual aspects does not regard two different substances, but only two diverse kinds of functions or relations, because we tend to differentiate things depending on their ways of acting. While according to the individualistic tradition “our pleasures and pains, our loves and fears and angers” but also “the beauty, comicality, importance or preciousness of certain objects and situations” must be ascribed to the spiritual dimension, we must often take into account the “immediate bodily effects” that affectional facts produce on us. Hence, according to James, this instability shows that our distinction between material and spiritual, subjective and objective, is not already given in the world, since in our lives we do not need to classify what is happening. It is rather when “more purely intellectual” needs emerge that we begin to distinguish various aspects, being driven to do so by specific situations. Yet, as Dewey might put it, this kind of distinction is an analytical, reflexive one rather than a primary one, and it

Dewey and James also agree on the thesis that the aesthetic or qualitative aspects of our experience provide crucial orientation even on a cognitive level. Dewey's position – from *Qualitative Thought* and *Affective Thought*⁷ to *Art as Experience* – is clear enough in pointing out that these aspects function as selection and guidance criteria to distinguish the relevant factors in our experiences, while also functioning as control criteria to test the capacity of a certain reflexive analysis to resolve the problems arising from an indeterminate situation and to enrich our immediate experiences. We might also suggest that the aesthetic qualities of our interactions with the environment include proto-evaluative elements, granting us a sort of primary orientation in the world both on the cognitive level and on the moral one.⁸

However, I believe that the most typical Deweyan trait is the naturalistic – one might even say existentialistic – background to his position. Chapter Two of *Experience and Nature* emphasizes the precarious and uncertain quality of our experience of the world, forcing us to recognize that if man is fearful, his fear is first of all a

would be fallacious to take its results to be primary elements.

⁷ See Dewey, J. 1984. *Qualitative Thought*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.5: 1929-1930, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, pp.243-262, and Dewey, J. 1988. *Affective Thought*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.2: 1925-1927, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, pp.104-110.

⁸ I am referring to Dewey, J. 1978. *Ethics*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.7: 1932, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press and Dewey, J. *Ethics* 1985. In: *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, Vol.5: 1908, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press. On the other hand, in the essay quoted before James argues that it is the affective or aesthetic contour of our experiences that lends emphasis to certain objects at the expense of others, by showing that they are important, interesting or salient for us – and therefore allowing us to orientate ourselves in an environment where we would otherwise be exposed to an overwhelming range of stimuli. This last point however has more accurately been examined by Dewey, as I set out to argue in the next section of the text.

function of the environment and not a private feeling. Each form of life belongs to a certain environment, but human organisms, for their own physical, biological and even cultural characteristics, suffer from (or simply have) a peculiar degree and kind of exposure to their environment, because their behavioural answers are not predetermined, but plural as well as relatively free, and hence dangerous, risky. Therefore, it is man's peculiar human exposure to his environment and in particular his dependence from the social environment he belongs to from his premature birth onwards that ensures the central relevance of the so-called aesthetic aspects of our experience. First of all, our world is felt to be threatening or welcoming, fearful or delightful, painful or pleasurable, because every human interaction, from those of our ancestors to our present hyper-technological ones, concerns our survival or our possibility of enhancing our lives, to make them flourish.

If we follow Dewey's reasoning, these aspects cannot be removed from our idea of happiness and even freedom, but must be combined with his more ethical and political observations on these themes. Complementary human experiences cannot be reduced to cognitive inquiries or to reflexive analyses, even if they play a central role in our lives, while the most distinctive trait of our humanity cannot be exclusively confined to reason, because we do not spend our whole lives reflecting and solving problems: very often we simply enjoy or suffer the world around us, being guided within it by our sensibility, and reacting to its affections more or less habitually. Hence, these aspects must be carefully considered if we are to define the peculiar freedom and happiness of human beings as opposed to an alleged disembodied consciousness.

2. The ethical and political relevance of aesthetic aspects

A first very simple observation – a rather trivial point, yet one rarely made by scholars – can help bring into focus the deep moral and political implications of the aesthetic aspects of our experience according to Dewey's thought: we need to remember that the most important texts centred on the aesthetic aspects of our experiences and on the role of art in our interactions with the world – that is Chapter 9. of *Experience and Nature*, dating back to 1925, and *Art as Experience*, published in 1934 – were written in the same period in which Dewey presented two of his most important political essays – *The Public and its Problems*, 1927, and *Individualism Old and New*, 1929 – and prepared the second edition of his *Ethics*, which was developed together with James Tufts and published in 1932.⁹

To any reader of these political writings it is clear that aesthetic questions are an integral part of political questions for Dewey, in the sense that they play a structural role in human interactions with a natural and naturally social environment and hence cannot be

⁹ Dewey, J. 1984. *The Public and Its Problems*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.2: 1925-1927, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press and Dewey, J. 1988. *Individualism Old and New*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.5: 1929-1930, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press. The first person to grasp the political implications of Dewey's aesthetics was probably George Herbert Mead (see Mead, G.H. 1926. "The Nature of Aesthetic Experience". In: *International Journal of Ethics*. 36/4, pp.382-393), although Georgina Melvin also noted this aspect in 1937 (now Melvin, G. *The Social Philosophy Underlying Dewey's Theory of Art*. In: Tiles, J.E. (ed.) 1992. *John Dewey. Critical Assessments. Vol.III: Value, Conduct and Art*, New York: Routledge, pp.302-311). For an historical as well as theoretical survey of the connections between Dewey's aesthetics and his thoughts on democracy see Westbrook, R. 1991. *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca-New York: Cornell University Press. With regard to his influence on the cultural policies of the New Deal, see Grieve, V. 2009. *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

abstractly banished from the state – as the Platonic tradition recommends – and from human rational or allegedly purely critical evaluations, choices and actions, as suggested by a typically negative and uncompromising Adornoian position.¹⁰ On the contrary, those aesthetic aspects of our experience – such as the perceived significance of the environmental context with and within which our interactions take place, but also impulses, desires, emotional attitudes, pleasures and pains – have a structural function in pursuing a “public socialism” capable of making everyone's lives rich and expansive – and thus worthy of being lived – instead of merely embellishing people's barren existences in their work-free weekends.¹¹

Both *The Public and its Problems* and *Individualism Old and New* suggest a variety of negative examples: as human beings, we need to find gratification in what we are doing, in its social function – as with the satisfaction of being part of a whole afforded by nationalism in 1930s, or even the exclusive and identity-centred communities of today. The need to identify ourselves with more than just intellectual principles, along with the need for an emotionally and imaginatively rich life, can be satisfied by those kinds of powerful totalitarian propaganda capable of eliciting fears and desires. Our need for consummatory experiences can find gratification in the cheap and extremely varied forms of amusement presently guaranteed by the industrial production of commodities and experiences and by their technological means of distribution. I would add that a confirmation of these observations strewn throughout Dewey's texts is now provided by the growing success of the so-called economy of experiences, which in contrast to classical economy considers the customer and his

ways of behaving as bodily, sensuous and emotional needs to be satisfied, while maintaining the pursuit of exclusively private profit as an obvious and unquestionable assumption.¹²

The point is that if we do not recognize that man is a “consuming animal” as well as a “political one”,¹³ we remain at the complete mercy of media providing very accessible forms of enjoyment and distracting us from political concerns, instead of enjoying the consequences of shared political actions. Because we do not simply need communication as a medium to convey informations, we tend to appreciate actualized communion – or even to hate it if it is felt to be oppressive rather than expansive and inclusive.

On the ethical side, in the *Ethics*, in contrast to the modern foundation of aesthetics as the philosophy of art, Dewey reminds us of the common, deeply intertwined roots of aesthetic and ethical judgements.¹⁴ Disgust and feelings of repulsiveness go hand in hand with judgements reflecting moral disapproval; feelings of admiration can constitute the basis for moral approval; and the sense of symmetry and proportion is not alien to that of fairness and justice. Of course, our primary sense of orientation in the world – what Dewey describes as customary morality – is above all based on reinforced

¹⁰ The classical references are Plato. *The Republic*. Book X., but also Adorno, T.W.- Horkheimer, M. 1969, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer and Adorno, T.W. 1970. *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

¹¹ See Dewey, J. 1988. *Individualism Old and New*. cit. p.98.

¹² See Pine, B.J.-Gilmore, J.H. 1999. *The Experience Economy. Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, Schmitt, B.H. 1999. *Experiential Marketing: How to Get Customers to Sense, Feel, Think, At and Relate to Your Company and Brands*, New York: The Free Press, Ferraresi, M.-Schmitt, B.H. 2006. *Marketing esperenziale. Come sviluppare l'esperienza di consumo*, Milano: Franco Angeli.

¹³ Dewey, J. 1984. *The Public and Its Problems*. cit., p.321)

¹⁴ On this point see Gadamer, H.G. 1960, *Wahrheit und Methode*. Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, in particular the chapter devoted to the “Humanistische Leitbegriffe”. I have developed the thesis of the common roots of Dewey's aesthetic and ethic evaluations in Dreon R. 2012. *Fuori dalla torre d'avorio. L'estetica inclusiva di John Dewey oggi*. Genova: Marietti, Chapter VI. “Qualcosa in comune tra l'estetico e l'etico. A partire da Dewey”.

habits and on the aesthetic significance that certain things, events and people have and exercise directly upon us, while our morality becomes reflexive by distinguishing between the various aspects of indeterminate situations, including regressive habits, inborn tendencies, impulses and immediate feelings. But we must also remember that, according to Dewey, every reflexive inquiry has to meet the needs of our primary unreflexive experience, has to enrich and expand its possibilities and can be evaluated by once again referring to implicit, often qualitative or aesthetic criteria.¹⁵ As previously noted, we must always remember that experience is not equivalent to – and not exhausted by – cognition (what Dewey defined as the intellectualistic fallacy), even if reason, as an active process of reflection, plays an indispensable function in resolving problems and enriching our ordinary experience with the results of previous inquiries.¹⁶

3. Which idea of freedom?

It is interesting to note that precisely in this period – from the late 1920s to the latter half of the 1930s, if we take *Freedom and Culture* into account – Dewey also developed a critical interpretation of our idea of freedom.¹⁷ In my opinion this analysis is related to his belief that the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and autonomy are not enough to develop a morally and politically good life, because a good life must also be a full, satisfactory, happy one – that is an inclusive,

expanding life, emotionally and imaginatively rich, capable of final consummations and not only of analytical reflections. Criticism in the sense of reflective thinking plays an important part in our everyday life that is in every situation where our habitual behaviours do not match environmental conditions as usual: whenever, that is, we have to act in a different way from what we are used to. We must not forget, however, that “much of life is immediate, appreciative, primary experience”.¹⁸

The point, as argued in *Freedom and Culture*, is not to give up the idea of freedom – this would be a tragedy for Dewey, of course - but to ask whether our present desire for freedom is “inherent in human nature or is a product of special circumstances”.¹⁹ In this perspective, we should firstly recognize its connections with the social, political and economic conditions of the world where it appeared and secondly the possibility that our deeply changed material culture is ready for the emergence of a different concept of freedom.

The first aspect to consider is the close relation between our idea of freedom and the modern tradition of individualism, already noted by Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems*.²⁰ It must be recognized that a very strong claim against oppressive forms of power, starting from the Church in European countries, was converted into an inborn attribute, into the natural right of *the* individual, understood as an isolated and independent entity that is predetermined, regardless of any association with other individuals.

Hence, both in the American and in the English liberal tradition, stretching back to Locke, the idea of freedom has been grounded on the individual as opposed to the

¹⁵ Dewey, J. *Ethics* 1985. cit., p. 271.

¹⁶ About the “intellectualistic fallacy” see Dewey, J. 1988. *Experience and Nature*. cit., pp.26-27, Dewey, J. 1988. *The Quest for Certainty*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.4: 1929, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, pp.174-175 and also Dewey, J. 1951, *Experience, Knowledge and Value: a Rejoinder*. In: Schlipp, P.A. (ed.), *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, La Salle: Northern University and Southern Illinois University Press, pp.297-309.

¹⁷ Dewey, J. 1988. *Freedom and Culture*. In: *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol.13: 1938-1939, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, pp.63-188.

¹⁸ Cfr. Stroud, R. S., “John Dewey and the Question of Artful Criticism”. In: *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. 44/1/2011, p.38.

¹⁹ Dewey, J. 1988. *Freedom and Culture*. cit., p.65.

²⁰ Dewey, J. 1984. *The Public an Its Problems*. cit., p.289 and p.329.

social and has come to be defined in terms of autonomy or independence of choice.

On the contrary, in *The Public and Its Problems* Dewey does not simply argue that humans are social, as most mammals are, because they structurally depend on their social environment in order to survive and flourish. The point is rather, on the one hand, to understand how human modes of association differ from other animal forms of association and, on the other, to consider how individuals are shaped by social habits, traditional behaviours, etc.²¹ From this point of view, freedom is very relevant, of course, as the source of individual identity and responsibility, yet it only comes into play later, within a consolidated system of responses and activities that is already there at the birth of the individual and which contributes to welcoming (or even rejecting) him – as Dewey's argument on the relations between customary and reflexive morality suggests. In this respect, individual freedom has to do with responsibility understood in an almost literary sense: as the need to respond to the impulses and the requests coming from our environment, and especially other people, by saying "I" after having habitually behaved like everyone else.

Furthermore – and this second aspect is very important for the subject we are discussing in this paper – in *Freedom and Culture* Dewey reminds us of the fact that in the continental European tradition the idea of freedom is typically associated with that of pure rationality, as though every affective, qualitative or indeed aesthetic aspect were to be expunged from epistemological judgements and moral evaluations. It has already been recalled that, according to Dewey, "the idea that men are moved by an intelligent and calculated

regard for their own good is pure mythology"²² – a myth that lives on in the modern idea of the *homo oeconomicus*. It is well known that the American pragmatist, like William James, constantly emphasized the regulative, controlling and selective role of the affective, qualitative aspects of our inquiries – that is, even in relation to our reflexive analysis of our immediate experience, both when an indeterminate situation is eminently a moral one or when it deals more properly with epistemological problems.

I would argue that this criticism has to do with Dewey's rejection of the alleged body-mind dualism and the particular attention he devoted to its political consequences. As he writes in an essay from the same years, *Body and Mind* (1928), the idea of distinguishing an allegedly nobler part of our humanity – the spiritual one – from the more animal-like one – the material side – is not just a speculative question, but "is the most practical of all questions we can ask of our civilization".²³ The problem is that "spiritual idealism" – like traditional modern individualism – is a "state of action" legitimating a situation where "ends are privately enjoyed in isolation from means of execution and consequent public betterment".²⁴

Hence, which idea of freedom are we to uphold and develop, once we acknowledge the historical ties of the present conception of liberty to the ideology of individualism – both past and present – and the myth of an allegedly pure rational will?

I would suggest that, even though Dewey is critical of the form of human association achieved by the present technological, industrial and financial means of production, exchange and consumption, he believes that

²¹ Dewey developed this second point in his work on social psychology (Dewey, J. 1988. *Human Nature and Conduct*. In: *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, Vol.14: 1922, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press).

²² Dewey, J. 1984. *The Public an Its Problems*. cit., p.335.

²³ Dewey, J. 1984. *Body and Mind*. In: *The Later Works (1925-1953)*, Vol. 3: 1927-1928, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, p.8.

²⁴ Ibidem.

we need to consider whether they can create the conditions for new, intelligent and less regressive modes of being free individuals. Maybe they can help us bring out a new form of freedom which is no longer envisaged as standing in contrast to the social and as requiring us to strip every qualitative, affective or emotional aspect from our supposedly pure rational will. What I mean by this is an idea of freedom capable of including aspects of pleasure, the possibility of enjoying what we do, of enjoying our lives and deriving pleasure from our relations with other people and the situations we experience. In contrast with the typical assumptions of the Enlightenment, Dewey tells us that "Fraternity, liberty and equality isolated from communal life are hopeless abstractions".²⁵ However we can understand and practice freedom otherwise, as "personal participation in the development of a shared culture",²⁶ as the

"secure release and fulfillment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others: the power of being an individualized self-making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association."²⁷

For the purposes of the present discussion, it might be useful to compare this conception of freedom to some considerations by Amartya Sen on the subject. Firstly, it is worth noting that Sen emphasizes the ambiguities of the concept of individual freedom in his *Individual Freedom as Social Commitment*.²⁸ By recalling Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between negative and positive conceptions of liberty,²⁹ that is between the lack of limitations an individual can impose on another and what a person can achieve, Sen suggests that the limits

between negative and positive forms of freedom are often nuanced and overlapping, because of their reciprocal implications and intertwining. Sen thus upholds the thesis that social commitment in favour of individual freedom has to consider both sides of freedom itself. In the Deweyan perspective, the negative definitions of freedom appear to be historically connected to individualism and the need for a positive form of freedom is invoked as the possibility to develop a new, more intelligent and less regressive form of individual and associated life.

Secondly, it is worth recalling another distinction suggested by Sen some years before, in his 1984 Dewey Lectures *Well-being, Agency and Freedom*, and which can be more fruitfully be compared to Dewey's position. According to Sen, a more basic distinction with regard to freedom than that between its negative and positive meanings is the distinction between power and control. We can understand freedom by focusing on the effective power to achieve some results, to bring certain consequences about, but also by pointing out "whether the person is himself exercising control over the process of choice".³⁰ In our tradition of moral and political philosophy the tendency to overemphasize the autonomous control of the subject over his own acts has been privileged even at the expense of evaluative considerations of the actual consequences of his actions. Sen criticizes this overestimation of the controlling aspects of freedom in favour of a wider conceptualization of freedom itself, capable of taking into account also the actual power of achieving results. This is an important point because, as may be seen in the following pages of Sen's lecture, it is strictly connected with the structural "interdependency of social living".³¹ If we were to couch the question in Deweyan terms, we might say that the consequences of our actions for

²⁵ Dewey, J. 1984. *The Public an Its Problems*. cit., p.329.

²⁶ Dewey, J. 1988. *Individualism Old and New*. cit. p.57.

²⁷ Dewey, J. 1984. *The Public an Its Problems*. cit., p.329.

²⁸ Sen, A. 1998, "Individual Freedom as Social Commitment". In: *India International Centre Quaterly*. 1/1998-1999, p.53-69.

²⁹ Berlin, I. 1969. *Four Essays on Liberty*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

³⁰ Sen, A. 1985. "Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984". In: *The Journal of Philosophy*. 82/4, p. 209.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 211.

others, what we actually do to others, is at least as important as the fact that we can exercise complete control over our own actions. Furthermore, this is one aspect with regard to which Dewey is able to reconsider Mill's peculiar contribution in comparison with Bentham's, while Sen is more generally critical of utilitarian positions. But I will return to this point later on. What I wish to stress here is that both Sen and Dewey seem to share a view of human social dependence from others as a structural component of a definition of freedom not only in its negative aspects, as independence from foreign coercion, but also in its affirmative and productive sense, as the power to achieve something.

However there is another aspect, apart from structural interdependency, that is lacking in Sen's account of freedom, while it plays a role in Dewey's thought. At a first glance, this might seem like a mere matter of emphasis, but Dewey always includes an element of enjoyment in the free contribution to a community, together with an enhancement of living that can be immediately felt or brought to its consummation. While we cannot ignore the wide number of situations in which freedom stands in contrast to well-being, the American pragmatist seems to suggest that a closer relation exists between the two. In other words, Dewey's argument suggests that a free choice and above all a free life must not only include a reflexive comprehension of what we are doing, but must be also felt and possibly enjoyed in itself.

4. Happiness, well-being and the perceived quality of life

In recent decades a very interesting debate has taken place in the economic field about happiness and its relation to wealth. The problem emerged thanks to Easterlin's famous inquiries on the relation between happiness and riches, dating back to 1970. His researches revealed a paradox, namely that the degree

of happiness felt by an individual does not increase proportionally to the rising of his financial resources. While at a low level an increase of income can be very important for the betterment of life conditions and correlatively of the degree of life satisfaction, further income risings are often only temporarily relevant, but very soon lose their significance.

This discovery of a more complex relationship between happiness and wealth is philosophically significant because it challenges the traditional model of the *homo oeconomicus*, whose individual choices are supposed to be guided exclusively by the calculation of the total amount of utilities he can ensure for himself.³² Secondly, it has been noted³³ that this interest of economics in happiness is not completely new, because it characterized a minority economic school – the losing one in comparison to the classical economics of Smith and Ricardo, originally oriented to pursuing the wealth of nations, and later just private profit – that is the Italian school of Genovesi, which was focused on the pursuit of “*felicità pubblica*”, or “public happiness”. Evidently, this is no minor difference, because it concerns nothing less than the end which economics is supposed to pursue.

But the important point in relation to our present speech is that this discussion has led to a kind of polarization between two different concepts of happiness, represented by two key figures in the debate, Amartya Sen and Daniel Kahneman.

In brief, the notion of happiness upheld by Kahneman is explicitly derived from Jeremy Bentham and consists in the pursuit of momentary pleasure, in the “hedonic quality”, conceived as “experienced utility”.³⁴

³² See Motterlini, M.- Piattelli Palmarini M. (eds.), 2012., *Critica della ragione economica*. Milano: il Saggiatore, p.12.

³³ See Bruni, L. 2002, *Felicità e scienza economica. Storia, problemi aperti e spunti teorici*. In: Working Paper Series-University Milan-Bicocca, 48/2002.

³⁴ Kahneman, D. 1997. “Back to Bentham? Explorations of Experienced Utility”. In: *The Quarterly Journal of*

Kanheman's contribution is centred on the idea of distinguishing a memory-based approach to experienced utility from a moment-based utility, because this distinction enables a more reliable calculation of happiness, understood as the sum of the total utility based on instant utility units, rather than as a final subjective judgement on the happiness of a certain period of time that has already passed. However, it is clear that this position betrays many unquestioned assumptions, the first one being that happiness is equivalent to pleasure or to a sum of pleasures; the second, that pleasure is a sort of sensation that it is instantaneous and can differ only in quantity.

Criticizing the utilitarian concept of happiness and the role it is supposed to play in connection to the administration of our resources. Sen prefers to speak about well-being, "human flourishing" or "fulfilment", by explicitly referring to the ancient Aristotelian idea of *eudaimonia*, where happiness is strictly related to the exercise of virtue.³⁵ In particular, Sen points to the contrast between happiness as a hedonic quality and freedom, which can be deeply compromised by the pursuit of momentary pleasures. For example people, may feel satisfied by mass consumption or ideological propaganda, but of course these pleasurable experiences could imply a deprivation of freedom.

To summarize Sen's position, we might say – with David Crocker – that "Human well-being cannot be identified with utility, and, for Sen, the human good cannot be identified with well-being".³⁶ The second part of this

formula lead us back to Sen's thesis according to which a good moral approach – in open contrast with the reductive utilitarian approach - must take into account not only well-being, but also agency as a crucial factor, which cannot be neglected by focusing only on the benefits or the disadvantages we can get from our interactions.³⁷ But it is the first part of this thesis that is more interesting for the present argument. What is well-being and how can it be defined? According to Sen, it cannot be reduce to either a subjective momentary state or utility, or even to the fulfilment of desire, but rather has to do with human functionings and capacities. If living is "a combination of doings and beings", the functioning vector characterizing each one of us results from "the various combinations of things a person is able to do or be – the various functionings he or she can achieve".³⁸ Sen suggests that well-being is connected to human capabilities that is to the freedom of choosing between different combinations of functionings, between what we might call different forms of life and different ideas of a good life.

This emphasis on what we could do or be does not at all sound alien to a Deweyan ear, which is used to pragmatically focusing on the consequences of our actions. Nevertheless it must be noted that this conception tends to expunge or almost marginalize human pleasures (at least more material or sensuous ones) – people's needs and desires to derive enjoyment from what they are doing, from their relations with others and their environment, from the perceived quality of their life. Robert Sudgen maintains that the so-called capacity-based approach shared by Sen and Martha Nussbaum is conditioned by their traditionally humanistic attitude, so that, although they grant human

Economics, 112/2, 375-405 and Kanheman, D. 2000. *Experienced Utility and Objective Happiness: A Moment-Based Approach*. In: Kanheman, D., Tversky, A. (eds.) 2000, *Choices, Values and Frames*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.673-692.

³⁵ See Sen, A. 2006. *La felicità è importante ma altre cose lo sono di più*. In: Bruni, I.- Porta, P.L. (eds.) 2006. *Felicità e libertà. Economia e benessere in prospettiva relazionale*. Milano: Guerini e Associati, pp.39-58.

³⁶ Crocker D.A. 1992. "Functioning and Capability: The Foundations of Sen's and Nussbaum's Development

Ethic". In: *Political Theory*, 20/4, p.602.

³⁷ See Sen, A. 1985. "Well-being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984". cit.

³⁸ Sen, A. *Capability and Well-being*. In: Hausman, M. (ed.) 2007. *The Philosophy of Economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.270-271.

emotions, desires and even appetites a certain significance, they always subordinate them to the role of our rationality, which is considered as the most distinctive and most authentic trait of the human being.³⁹

I believe that some of Dewey's suggestions allow us to consider a third option, strictly related to the structurally aesthetic or qualitative aspects of our human interactions with the environment, capable of not being confined to an idea of happiness as totally consisting in momentary, sensational pleasure, but also of not neglecting or expunging our sensibility. This third possibility may be seen to emerge both from Dewey's discussion of utilitarianism in the first version of his *Ethics* and from his concept of consummatory experience. A new, different kind of individualism – of being individuals – must be sought according to Dewey, but also – I would argue – a different kind of happiness, which is capable of including pleasure, enjoyment and fulfilment, and which does not neglect the characteristic human need to feel welcomed and gratified by one's environment.

It is interesting to note that when he started dealing with the concept of happiness and its role in moral life in his *Ethics* (and particularly in the first 1908 edition) Dewey devoted a good number of pages to discussing utilitarian positions on pleasure. I speak of “positions” in the plural here because in his analysis Dewey is careful to distinguish between Bentham's and John Stuart Mill's interpretation of pleasure. But let us follow Dewey's reasoning.

One of the first points is of course based on the traditional critique of the utilitarian conception of happiness as consisting in a mere cumulative sum of

pleasures, whose differences can be only quantitative – a critique which Sen directs against Kanheman's return to Bentham. If pleasures are isolated entities, how can we measure and compare them, sum them up and subtract the pains? This is an aspect which has created some difficulties in classical economics, leading to the exclusion of factors of this kind from theories about consumer evaluation and choice – while Kahneman's distinction between “moment-based utility” and “memory-based utility” was partially meant to provide a solution to this problem.

But the core of Dewey's criticism concerns two other aspects, deeply interrelated with the one just mentioned. On the one hand, the American pragmatist points out that, in contrast to the hedonistic perspective, we must note that our desires are primarily directed towards objects that can satisfy them and not pleasures, so that pleasure cannot be regarded as the object of desire; rather, a certain object becomes pleasurable because it corresponds to or satisfies a certain desire. This point reflects the Darwinian naturalism of Dewey, who observes that:

„Biological instincts and appetites exist not for the sake of furnishing pleasure, but as activities needed to maintain life – the life of the individual and the species. Their adequate fulfilment is attended with pleasure. Such is the undoubted biological fact. [...] But desire is still for the object, for the food.”⁴⁰

This is the reason why, according to Dewey, there can be no previous determination of allegedly substantive pleasures which our desires are supposed to pursue; rather, from time to time there are pleasurable things, satisfying our desires. But this is the reason why we have to recognize that desires and the need for satisfaction are as structurally human as reflexive reason in both a moral and cognitive sense. Happiness has to conform to these aspects, even if it cannot be reduced to them.

³⁹ Sudgen, R. 2006. *Capacitazioni, felicità e opportunità*. In: In: Bruni, I.- Porta, P.L. (eds.) 2006. *Felicità e libertà. Economia e benessere in prospettiva relazionale*. cit., pp.95-132.

⁴⁰ Dewey, J. 1978. *Ethics*. cit., p. 247.

Hence, we can say that Dewey takes the utilitarian interest in pleasure seriously.

On the other hand, the second problem with a utilitarian conception of happiness is that it does not distinguish between the different existing levels: the first is the level of happiness understood as the fulfilment of desire, as the reaching of the desired end. But even if we understand happiness as the satisfaction of one's deepest needs and as self-development, this is a form of happiness which can be deeply compromised by one's character: a racist may desire to close his country to immigrants seeking political asylum, because "what has been said applies to the criminal as well as to the saint; to the miser and the prodigal and the wisely generous alike".⁴¹ Therefore, we need a "conception of happiness as a standard",⁴² that is we need a criterion to distinguish the true or good form of happiness.

This is the point where Dewey discriminates between Bentham and Mill, by generally appreciating the utilitarian social characterization of the good, with its resulting claims to democracy, equality and the structural criticism of established patterns of behaviour and thought. Their shared idea is that because "the true good is [...] an inclusive or expanding end", "the only end which fulfils these conditions is the social good".⁴³ The problem with Bentham, however, is that in his view "the desired object is private and personal pleasure".⁴⁴ On the contrary, Dewey seems to find already in Mill's thought one of his most distinguishing thesis, that is the idea that we are structurally social beings: "We cannot think of ourselves save as to some extent social beings".⁴⁵ This means that the happiness of the other people whom we are always more or less associated with is a basic part of our own happiness: we cannot but find our own good in

the good of others.⁴⁶ Sympathy or benevolence are not further traits of an individual, which can help him reach his or her ends; rather – together with negative social affections – they are a basic part of naturally social beings, whose well-being depends on and is constituted together with the well-being of others. In this way the common good proves to be a standard for distinguishing what sort of happiness we are pursuing.

Nonetheless, it may be argued that this aspect could be understood as almost partially convergent with the idea of happiness as *eudaimonia*, where virtue is of course not conceived as the property of an isolated and independent individual that can further establish relations with his or her counterparts, but is rather based on humans sharing a common world.

I would not say that Dewey is utterly foreign to the Aristotelian conception of happiness: he explicitly speaks in favour of Aristotele's *eudaimonia* in the second edition of his *Ethics*. What I am suggesting is that Dewey has something more to say about happiness and social ties, since he characterizes the common good as "the adequate aesthetic and intellectual development of the conditions of a common life".⁴⁷ "Aesthetic" here does not primarily refer to artistic activities, but rather to the possibility of enjoying perceived qualities of life and in particular what Dewey calls "communion actualized". Desires and pleasures are an integral part of our unreflexive experience and it is necessary to acknowledge that they play an important role even in the constitution of our happiness, in so far as this implies that our experiences must be brought their fulfilment, or consummation, and not merely be critically or reflexively evaluated. Hence, moving towards a conclusion, I would like to spend some words on Dewey's concept of consummatory experience.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 255.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 251.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 261.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 263.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 268.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 269.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p.272.

5. Consummatory experiences and life prosperity

The term *consummation* is introduced in the chapter of *Experience and Nature* entitled “*Nature, Ends and Histories*”, in order to present the thesis that in our immediate unreflexive experience objects are felt to be final: that they “have the same quality of immediate and absorbing finality that is possessed by things and acts dignified by the title of esthetic. For man is more preoccupied with enhancing life than in bare living”.⁴⁸

This quote is especially interesting in two regards.

First of all, it suggests that human beings primarily tend to be absorbed by the world they live in – feeling assaulted, embraced or rejected; that they tend to enjoy or suffer the situations, things and individuals in the environment they are interacting with from within. In other words, human beings are inclined to complete their interactions until their fulfilment, their consummation.

The second interesting point is that Dewey makes this claim within the context of his naturalistic stance – a cultural-naturalistic, not reductionistic one. Against this background, it is clear that no organism is self-sufficient, as it develops and dies only in connection with the environment on which its life energies depend. But the peculiarity of human beings is that the energetic exchange is never oriented towards mere subsistence; rather, it also ensures the enhancement of life itself, of its prosperity and development. Dewey considers the anthropological results of the inquiries of Boas or Goldenweiser as reinforcing his thesis.

Furthermore, we have to remember that various Dewey scholars have pointed out that in *Art as Experience* the concept of consummation – when used to describe *one* experience that might range from the aesthetic aspects

in our ordinary experiences to eminently artistic forms of interaction – does not regard our immediate, unreflexive experiences, but rather a third phase of experiencing, where the results of a previous analytic, reflexive phase are absorbed and enjoyed in themselves.⁴⁹

As already George Mead had understood after the publication of *Experience and Nature*, the idea of *consummatory experience* concerns the possibility of enjoying what we are doing without having to rush beyond it, in order to achieve a further purpose.⁵⁰ An experience can be described as consummatory when it succeeds in being complete, in coming to its fulfilment, in the sense that we do not limit ourselves to instrumentally pursuing a certain end, but enjoy even the means by which we reach it, and this fact produces a reinforcement or an enhancement of living. From this point of view, the idea of consummatory experience is very far from any form of teleological behaviour: for it requires us to pay attention to and take care of what we are doing so as to enjoy it in itself, without being wholly focused on the pursuit of a given end.

This point of view helps us appreciate what is peculiar in Dewey's conception of happiness, even when it is more or less understood in terms of communion, of the sharing of a common world, of the finding of individual identity in the contribution each person can provide: it

⁴⁹ See Mathur, D.C. 1998. *A Note on the Concept of “Consummatory Experience” in Dewey's Aesthetics*. In: Tiles, J.E. (ed.) *John Dewey: Critical Assessments, Volume III: Value, Conduct and Art*. cit., pp.367-373. See also Zeltner, P.M. 1975. *John Dewey's Aesthetic Philosophy*, Amsterdam: Gruner B.V., who takes into account Dewey's answer to Romanell's criticism (Romanell, P. 1949. “A Comment on Croce's and Dewey's Aesthetics”. In: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 8/1949, pp.395-398; for Dewey's answer see Dewey, J. 1950. “Aesthetic Experience as a Primary Phase and as an Artistic Development”. In: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 9/1950, pp.56-58. See too Kaminsky, J. 1957. “Dewey's Concept of an Experience”. In: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 17/3, 1957, pp.316-330.

⁵⁰ See Mead, G.H. 1926. “The Nature of Aesthetic Experience”. cit.

⁴⁸ Dewey, J. 1988. *Experience and Nature*. cit., p.71.

refers not to any kind of Kantian normative ideal – or regulatory idea – but to the effective, consummatory enjoyment of this kind of state.

To conclude with a formula, from a Deweyan point of view a better life consists not just in a more rational, wiser or more virtuous life, but also in a more satisfying one, capable of enhancing our experiences at all levels. To quote Friedrich Schiller's *Letters*, which opened this essay:

Um aller Mißdeutungen vorzugeben, bemerke ich, daß, so oft hier von Freyheit die Rede ist, nicht diejenige gemeynt ist, die dem Menschen, als Intelligenz betrachtet, notwendig zukommt, und ihm weder gegeben noch genommen werden kann, sondern diejenige, welche sich auf seine gemischte Natur gründet.⁵¹

⁵¹ Schiller, J.C.F. 1879. *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*. cit. The quotation is from the note to Letter XIX.