

LIVING AS A CREATIVE ACTIVITY

– AN INTRODUCTION

TO JOHN DEWEY'S THEORY OF EXPERIENCE

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The consideration of the human being as an essentially rational entity has been accepted by the most varied and divergent philosophical and scientific traditions. Due to its significant relevance and fascinating complexity, the study of cognitive functions has occupied a preeminent position within scientific and philosophical inquiry in such a way that the analysis of sensory perceptions, emotional responses, instinctive behaviors or intuitions — non-rational mechanisms, fundamentally — has been often consigned to a secondary place.

As a result of the privileged position traditionally granted to cognitive capacities, the relation of the human being to the environment has generally been described as an intellectual process by means of which the individual transforms the product of non-rational operations into conceptual realities. Sensory perceptions, intuitions or emotional understanding, among many other mechanisms, become thus subordinated to the activity of reason to be considered a mere means to a higher end. Similarly, those cognitive and intellectual operations which do not lead to an objective comprehension of the world are also relegated to a subsidiary role under the suspicion of being too subjective, non-demonstrable, or simply meaningless.

Hence, the importance attributed to intellectual processes has given rise to the ascription of a special relevance and an even greater degree of reality to the product of such operations, namely, the world of physical, tangible, measurable, predictable, and articulable things. As a result, those materials

characteristic of non-rational operations — like intuitions or sensory perceptions, among many others — or of those intellectual activities of a subjective or ambiguous nature — fictions or opinions, for example — become neglected in favor of objective, absolute, logical, and stable realities. As John Dewey observes, such a point of view, from which the world is conceived as an organized system subjected to a coherent and universal order that must be necessarily comprehended and explained in conceptual terms, can be found on the basis of a great number of currents of thought. As he observes, “variant philosophies may be looked at as different ways of supplying recipes for denying to the universe the character of contingency which it possesses so integrally that its denial leaves the reflecting mind without a clew, and puts subsequent philosophising at the mercy of temperament, interest and local surroundings.”²

Due to the relegation of these non-rational and non-objective mechanisms to such a secondary role — not only in the domain of science and philosophy, but also in education and society in general — individuals have been progressively and mistakenly persuaded of the insignificance and unreliability of their intuitive and emotional capacities. Hence, it is possible to recognize nowadays the increasing disorientation that many individuals feel when dealing with those realities that cannot be experienced, or at least not entirely, by means of reason. Works of art, for example, which cannot be understood from a purely intellectual approach, are very often regarded as abstruse pieces that are seldom comprehended or appreciated as they should be. Social and personal relationships, moral matters or education, which, as aesthetic appreciation, demand from the individual an activity that goes beyond that which is strictly intellectual, awaken similar doubts.

Dewey, particularly critical of what he considers an incomplete description of the human experience and of the relation between the individual and her

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² John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925 – 1953, Volume 1: 1925, Experience and Nature* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 46.

environment, severely questions the privileged position that has been traditionally granted, in particular within the philosophical context, to rational operations.

When intellectual experience and its material are taken to be primary, the cord that binds experience and nature is cut. That the physiological organism with its structures, whether in man or in the lower animals, is concerned with making adaptations and uses of material in the interest of maintenance of life-process, cannot be denied. The brain and nervous system are primarily organs of action-undergoing; biologically, it can be asserted without contravention that primary experience is of a corresponding type.³

In defending the importance of organic functions, which are the means by virtue of which humans come into direct contact with nature, Dewey emphasizes the continuity that indeed exists between the individual and her environment, for as he states, living "is not something which goes on below the skin-surface of an organism: it is always an inclusive affair involving connection, interaction of what is within the organic body and what lies outside in space and time, and with higher organisms far outside."⁴

Dewey's approach to experience entails, therefore, the eradication of those subjectivistic stances according to which the world is conceived as a mere product of the mind, as well as of those which defend the existence of an objective reality ontologically independent of any perceptual process. What he proposes is, in summary, an inclusive conception of the human experience according to which the relation between the individual and her environment is described as an endless and bidirectional interaction. As he argues, "the process of living is continuous; it possesses continuity because it is an everlastingly renewed process of acting upon the environment and being acted upon by it."⁵

³ Ibid., 29.

⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁵ John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925 – 1953, Volume 10: 1934, Art as Experience* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 109.

The process of interaction to which Dewey refers is not restricted, in any case, to mere primary operations. As he explains, not only organic functions, but also mental processes of all kinds, including complex rational mechanisms, operate concomitantly within the same experiential activity in such a way that none of them, not even the most intellectually elevated, can be dissociated from nature.

Since both the inanimate and the human environment are involved in the functions of life, it is inevitable, if these functions evolve to the point of thinking and if thinking is naturally serial with biological functions, that it will have as the material of thought, even of its erratic imaginings, the events and connections of this environment. And if the animal succeeds in putting to use any of its thinking as means of sustaining its functions, those thoughts will have the character that define knowledge.⁶

From the Deweyan perspective, the human being is no longer conceived as an exclusively rational entity who observes an antecedent world from a privileged position or who interprets it as the mere product of his mind. He is, rather, a complex being who, in his interaction with the environment, acts making use of what he knows, feels and intuitively; of his organic functions, intellectual mechanisms, and instinctive responses; of his predilections, prejudices, social and cultural habits as well as of his past experiences, future aspirations or doubts. Similarly, the world can neither be regarded as a bare unification of objective realities perfectly ordered by the intellect according to a universal system, but as an integral whole which includes also what cannot be understood or envisaged by reason.

According to Dewey's approach, human experience must be described, in summary, as an interaction of interactions, a complex and demanding activity which impels the individual not simply to observe and comprehend the logic of the world, but to confront the contradictory, inexplicable, boring, surprising, beautiful,

⁶ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 212-13.

unfinished or painful, and which requires not only knowledge and understanding, but also ability, imagination, emotion, good taste, effort, or even luck.

Very often philosophy has shown itself unable to or simply uninterested in recognizing the inclusive nature of experience. Dewey is even more severe in describing it as hatefully ironic due to the indifference that, in his view, it exhibits towards "the conditions that determine the occurrence of reason while it asserts the ultimacy and universality of reason."⁷ From Dewey's point of view, philosophy must adopt a new perspective, the empirical method, according to which human experience may be recognized as the integral and comprehensive activity it really is.⁸

Such an empirical approach does not entail, however, that experience must be regarded as an indiscriminate sum of exchanges, reactions, events, and realities. Dewey maintains, on the contrary, that critical and selective attitudes play a crucial role both in the occurrence of experience and in the way it must be analyzed. As he states, "the purport of thinking, scientific and philosophic, is not to eliminate choice but to render it less arbitrary and more significant."⁹

The ultra-realist perspective Dewey defends aims, hence, to take into consideration and carefully observe those elements involved in such an interaction of interactions which is experience, as well as to recognise and regulate how they connect and relate to each other at every moment. From such a point of view, experience is conceived as a confluence of elements that become very often imbued with a common quality giving rise thus to unique and distinctive situations. As Dewey argues, such a quality is, in other words, the specific trait which characterizes each experience and which gives it its unitary sense: "An experience has a unity that gives it its

name, *that* meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts."¹⁰

The importance of the concept of quality, central in Dewey's philosophy, is due to the essential role it plays as a regulative factor in the occurrence of every particular situation, for, as he argues, every selective and associative procedure which takes place in experience depends upon and is regulated by it: "The underlying unity of qualitiveness regulates pertinence or relevancy and force of every distinction and relation; it guides selection and rejection and the manner of utilization of all explicit terms."¹¹ Now, how does the predominant quality from which the selective and associative procedures develop manifest itself?

As Dewey explains, the immediate qualitiveness of a situation cannot be directly known by the intellect, but only experienced by means of intuition. Paradoxically, however, it is on the basis of such a predominant quality that all subsequent intellectual operations develop. The quality of a situation is, in other words, the starting point from which all thought begins.

Reflection and rational elaboration spring from and make explicit a priori intuition. But there is nothing mystical about this fact, and it does not signify that there are two modes of knowledge, one of which is appropriate to one kind of subject-matter, and the other mode to the other kind. Thinking and theorizing about physical matters set out from an intuition, and reflection about affairs of life and mind consists in an ideational and conceptual transformation of what begins as an intuition. Intuition, in short, signifies the realization of a pervasive quality such that is regulates the determination of relevant distinctions or of whatever, whether in the way of terms or relations, becomes the accepted object of thought.¹²

⁷ Ibid., 99.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 44.

¹¹ John Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," in *Philosophy and Civilization* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 99.

¹² Ibid., 101.

At this point we must be careful not to misinterpret what Dewey means by all of this, for the pervading quality to which he refers here cannot be conceived as a mere external trait, neither can the intuitive mechanism by means of which it becomes revealed be seen as a mere perceptual process. Rather, qualities belong to the inclusive interactional experience that naturally takes place between the individual and her environment; they are, Dewey says, "qualities of interactions in which both extra-organic things and organisms partake . . . they are as much qualities of the things engaged as of the organism."¹³

From Dewey's a point of view, experience is not conceived as something that simply happens, as an inevitable consequence of the past or as a reality tied to an inescapable present, but as an *activity* oriented towards the future. As Richard Bernstein explains in his illuminating study on Dewey's philosophy, we are not "creatures who must wait for the fortuitous circumstances in which nature brings about the goods that we directly prize and the disappearance of the conditions that we find objectionable. We may inquire and deliberate; we may formulate ends-in-view — ends that are chosen for resolving the conflicts of specific situations and will bring into existence states of affairs that are judged desirable."¹⁴ Experience is, in short, a creative activity; it is, Dewey says, "art in germ":

Experience in the degree in which it *is* experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing. Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its

rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience.¹⁵

Hence, even though experience is constituted by a number of situations and circumstances that go beyond the individual's control, many aspects depend actually upon her predispositions, attitudes and capacities. Life does not occur according to a preestablished itinerary; rather, it is the individual who *creates* — at least, to some extent — the conditions of every particular situation.

The creative character of experience proves to be particularly evident in the occurrence of what Dewey calls experiences with aesthetic quality: singular and particularly unitary situations that are not only imbued with a pervading quality, but that have, in addition, a consummatory sense. As he explains, experiences with aesthetic quality are those that do not happen by chance or as a result of a coincidental convergence of factors, but due mainly to the impulse of a deliberate interest not exclusively motivated by primary urgencies, but inspired by imagination and curiosity, by the desire to learn and enjoy, by the hope to have an entirely satisfying life. As Dewey states, the distinctive trait of such experiences is, in summary, their characteristic orientation towards the achievement of a particular goal, towards an end whose accomplishment gives rise to a moment of exceptional intensity. As Dewey explains, the characteristic feature of these experiences is that there is in them "a conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversion, into a movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close."¹⁶ They are, in short, situations in which the elements and forces involved in them are harmoniously connected giving rise thus to an integrated and coherent unity which constitutes an end in itself. Dewey sums up as follows:

¹³ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 198-99

¹⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, *John Dewey* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 117-18.

¹⁵ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

There are situations in which self-enclosed, discrete, individualized characters dominate. They constitute the subject-matter of esthetic experience; and every experience is esthetic in as far as it is final or arouses no search for some other experience. When this complete quality is conspicuous the experience is denominated esthetic. The fine arts have as their purpose the construction of objects of just such experiences; and under some conditions the completeness of the object enjoyed gives the experience a quality so intense that it is justly termed religious. Peace and harmony suffuse the entire universe gathered up into the situation having a particular focus and pattern. These qualities mark any experience in as far as its final character dominates; in so far a mystic experience is simply an accentuated intensification of a quality of experience repeatedly had in the rhythm of experiences.¹⁷

The correlation between experience and art Dewey suggests may seem unnatural, even unjustified if it is not examined from the appropriate perspective. Very usually, artistic activity has been regarded as a bare expressive exercise while aesthetic appreciation has been considered a mere passive contemplation of something already finished. Due to such a pallid conception, art has been often conceived — and is still so today — as a simple entertainment, superfluous ornament or, at worst, pure business. What Dewey proposes in *Art as Experience* — which must not be merely regarded as a study on aesthetics, but as a true extension of his theory of the human experience — is precisely an invitation to reconsider "the function of art in relation to other modes of experience."¹⁸

Hence, when art is seen as a form of consumatory interaction between the individual and her environment, its exemplary value and its importance as a true inspiration for the rest of human experiences, transcendental or ordinary, relevant or insignificant, becomes finally revealed. As a result, some of the alleged differences between art and science, philosophy and

daily life get dissolved and it is then possible to comprehend that the real distinction lies between the fact of carrying out such activities in an anemic, superficial and unfruitful way or the capacity and desire to do it in a truly creative manner. As Dewey points out, when the individual "perceives clearly and adequately that he is within nature, a part of its interactions, he sees that the line to be drawn is not between action and thought, or action and appreciation, but between blind, slavish, meaningless action and action that is free, significant, directed and responsible."¹⁹ The great artist is not, therefore, the only individual who is capable of living creatively, but so is the committed philosopher, resolute scientist, honest politician, devoted teacher, or good parent.

The arts of science, of politics, of history, and of painting and poetry all have finally the same *material*; that which is constituted by the interaction of the live creature with his surroundings. They differ in the media by which they convey and express this material, not in the material itself. Each one transforms some phase of the raw material of experience into new objects according to the purpose, each purpose²⁰ demands a particular medium for its execution.

As Dewey concludes, living creatively means, in summary, solving problems and difficulties by modifying the processes of interaction involved in them with the aim of constructing a more harmonious experience. It implies learning from the past and recreating the present with the final purpose of living a pleasurable future. It means, in short, intelligently interacting with the raw material of experience to create the necessary conditions for the accomplishment of a desired end. Regardless of the form this end acquires — a symphony, a philosophical theory, a scientific discovery, a political precept, an illuminating lesson or a friendly conversation — it will be considered an end with aesthetic quality, a true work of art, in so far as it leads to the expansion and enrichment of life.

¹⁷ John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925 – 1953, Volume 4: 1929, The Quest for Certainty* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 188.

¹⁸ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 17.

¹⁹ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 324.

²⁰ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 323.

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