

JOHN DEWEY: A CULINARY PERSPECTIVE¹

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ABSTRACT: Although John Dewey is not commonly associated with food studies, his writings are punctuated with reflection on cooking and sharing food as well as references to gastronomical experience. The American pragmatist believed that food cooking and sharing could be productively integrated into educational processes. Even more interesting are passages of *Art as Experience* which refer to cooking and eating food. Examples borrowed from the realm of gastronomy often usefully illustrate Dewey's philosophical considerations and serve as models of central aesthetic categories. The paper analyses the contexts in which culinary examples are used and their consequences for the Deweyan concept of experience and perceptions of the function and status of dietary practices in culture.

'The kitchen is not just the place where survival and pleasure are planned.

It is also an ideal place for training the mind.'

Massimo Montanari,
*Let the Meatballs Rest, and Other Stories
about Food and Culture*

Teaching by cooking

Soon after moving to Chicago in 1894, thirty-five-year-old John Dewey had an opportunity to apply his theoretical insights in practice. A school whose didactic priority was learning by doing came to serve as a unique laboratory of his theories.²

Cooking took a pronounced position in the curriculum of Dewey's school, one reason for this being that it offered an easy way to integrate diverse disciplines of knowledge. Cooking together helped acquire, for example, knowledge of chemistry, history, botany, physics and arts.

Children of all age groups were involved in cooking. The curriculum kept changing adaptively as they grew and

developed new needs. The youngest kids helped prepare lunch each week. It gave the youngsters an opportunity to work on their own, display initiative and learn independence. Older kids were eager to continue cooking together. While some of them laid the table, others prepared cocoa, for example. Still another group would write stories to be read out during the meal. The children's responsibilities included also serving the food and cleaning the table. Both girls and boys were involved in all these chores.

Cooking stimulated the children's creativity, in a broad sense of the term, and taught them planning ahead and team work. It is splendidly exemplified in a picture in which the kids stand behind each other in a row and tie each other's aprons up. Responsibility for one's particular task, the proper execution of which contributed to the success of the whole enterprise, turned into responsibility for the whole group; in this way team work promoted the immediate aim, i.e., the meal.³ Cooking connected the public sphere (school) and the private sphere (home). It offered an opportunity to merge the two, usually separated, orders, which was Dewey's fond preoccupation. Given Dewey's famous dictum that democracy is "the idea of community life itself,"⁴ it is evident that the division into the private and public spheres is only relative, and, consequently, any barriers artificially erected between the two thwart the progress of democratic processes. The same activities may belong in each of the two spheres, and associating them with one is determined not by nature, but by the totality of circumstances in which they are embedded. School, which Dewey viewed as a laboratory of democracy, should offer opportunities to cross the borderline between the private and the public. And cooking was for the American pragmatist a prototypical activity to naturally integrate the two realms.⁵

¹ The work this text was supported by the NCN grant: *Aesthetic value of food. Pragmatist Perspective*, No. 2013/11 / B / HS1 / 04176.

² If separated from activity, as was the case in the traditional education system, wisdom is stripped of the embodied meaning life gives to it. It becomes then an abstraction difficult to integrate with one's needs.

³ Cf. Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards, *The Dewey School* (New York: Atherton Press, 1966), p. 299.

⁴ John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 191, pp. 148.

⁵ Luis Menand lists Dewey's educational experiments among the practices that have permanently transformed

Dewey's belief in the utmost importance of cooking and sharing food is reflected not only in his design of educational processes. Examples borrowed from the realm of gastronomy often usefully illustrate his philosophical considerations and serve as models of central aesthetic categories. Several passages of *Art as Experience* refer to cooking and eating food.

The everyday and art

The idea behind *Art as Experience* was to produce an account of how works of art are brought into being under everyday human conditions.⁶ In other words, Dewey sought to develop a theory which could explain how works of art refine and intensify experience.⁷ Experience is not something that merely emerges in contact with art; rather, it can be said to co-create art. The American pragmatist sets himself against the tradition which sees the subject and the object of experience as two dichotomously opposed entities. In his framework, the subject is not a passive recipient of aesthetic feelings since experience is an interaction of two parties on equal footing. Moreover, what Dewey refers to as a work of art is an outcome of this interaction rather than the starting point of the process, that is, the physical presence of an "expressive object."⁸ To highlight his position, Dewey evokes culinary experiences: "As with cooking, overt, skillful action is on the side of the cook who prepares, while taste is on the side of the consumer. ... The cook prepares food for the consumer and the measure of the value of what is prepared is found in consumption."⁹ Art construed as experience is an outcome of interactions and mutual interdependence of action and sensation.

America. Cf. Luis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club. A story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), pp. 285-337.

⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), p. 9.

⁷ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 9.

⁸ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 96.

⁹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 54.

Our lives unfold in ongoing transmutations of our relations with the environment. They are dynamic interactions in which both parties – the human and the environment – are active agents: "All interactions that effect stability and order in the whirling flux of change are rhythms. There is ebb and flow, systole and diastole: ordered change."¹⁰ Ordering and stabilizing are, however, only momentary. Life produces new tasks, new problems to solve, and there is no room for enduring stability in experience: "There are rhythmic beats of want and fulfillment, pulses of doing and being withheld from doing."¹¹ Dewey describes our lives as reiterations of loss and recovery of unity with the environment. They abound in tensions that can be alleviated, yet not by passive acceptance, but rather by development-promoting activity. Emphatically, the reinstatement of unity never entails restoring the situation from before the loss: "[I]n a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed."¹² The consecutive rhythms of life lead us to successive stages of existence, where return is impossible since "[c]hanges interlock and sustain one another."¹³ Nature finds itself in constant motion, permanently confronting a threat of potentially lethal chaos as "living creatures can go on living only by taking advantage of whatever order exists about them, incorporating it into themselves."¹⁴

An experience/a culinary experience

In art, life turns unexpectedly vivid and colorful while in life to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary poses a serious challenge. "Pleasures may come about through chance contact and stimulation; such pleasures

¹⁰ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 22.

¹¹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 22.

¹² J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 19.

¹³ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 19.

¹⁴ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 19.

are not to be despised in a world full of pain,"¹⁵ insists Dewey. And then, he adds: "But happiness and delight are a different sort of thing. They come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being – one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence."¹⁶ This adjustment, while not being a subordination, is an effect of a momentary order, of attunement of the human and the environment in the process of "active and alert commerce with the world."¹⁷

Experience is a continuous process, but its composition and intensity vary. The moment when a new order is forged, when a culmination and amalgamation of all elements of experience is effected, is the most intense moment of existence. It is in such moments that the aesthetic may emerge. The American pragmatist believes that "the esthetic is no intruder in experience from without, whether by way of idle luxury or transcendent ideality, but that it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience."¹⁸

Aesthetic experience is a unique pattern of all other experiences; it is pure experience "freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience."¹⁹ What brings everyday experience closer to aesthetic experience is the aesthetic – aesthetic properties which function to produce "connectedness" and "closure" in experience. When experience matures, when it is given a harmonious closure, it makes room for the following, surging waves of experience, which is an uninterrupted process just like life itself. "Because of continuous merging, there are no holes, mechanical junctions, and dead centers when we have an experience. There are pauses, places of rest, but they punctuate and define the quality of movement."²⁰ Movement that leads toward consummation is

organized and orderly; it imbues experience with inner cohesion. Elsewhere, Dewey adds that despite integration of the subsequent stages of experience, which proceed one from another, these parts never forfeit their distinct character: "As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself."²¹

Dewey does not exempt any sphere of life from this principle. For example, the difference between a merely correct mathematical formula and a brilliant one lies in the latter's aesthetic component, elegance of equations, neatness and beauty of reasoning. As we can see, aesthetic experience as continuation of, improvement on and intensification of "common" experiences is by no means confined to so-called fine arts as it can emerge in any human pursuit, from mathematics, to angling, sports and sex,²² to cooking and sharing a meal. Discussing this issue, Hans Joas writes: "the contrast is not between art and everyday life, but between rounded versus fragmented experience. Every kind of practical action can have the aesthetic quality of being 'rounded out'... 'Roundness' is not meant to be a formal quality, but rather implies that each partial action is comprehensively laden with meaning for the actor."²³ In his account of Dewey's concept of action, the German sociologist observes that the concept's core idea is that every action has a creative component to it. In this sense, action does not involve adjusting means to goals set in advance, but entails the means and ends mutually implying each other: "Human action is therefore characterized not simply by the interplay of values and impulses, but by the creative concretization of values as well as the constructive satisfaction of impulses. No creative action would be possible without the bedrock of pre-reflective aspirations towards which the reflection

¹⁵ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 16.

¹⁶ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 16.

¹⁷ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 23.

¹⁸ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 52-53.

¹⁹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 290.

²⁰ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 43.

²¹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 43.

²² See, *Ibid*, p. 41. For aesthetics of sex, see, for example. R. Shusterman, "Aesthetic Experience: From Analysis to Eros," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2, 2006.

²³ H. Joas, *Creativity of Action*, trans. J. Gaines, and P. Keast (Chicago: Polity Press, 1997), p. 140.

on the concretization of values is oriented. Thus corporeality shows itself to be the constitutive precondition for creativity not only in perception but also in action itself."²⁴ In this concept, the aesthetic component is accorded an essential role as it is through it that the subject is capable of grasping the creative character of his/her own action.

As Dewey emphasizes, an experience may come to pass if sensory impressions, cognition, will and emotions are fully merged. It is an exceptional state attained only with the greatest difficulty. It requires special attention and care for all components of experience, feelings, actions and meanings. It is distinct for its intensity and tend to be well remembered. Still, most of our experiences remain "incomplete." We embark upon various actions, and then abandon them unfinished because of distractions, forgetfulness or slouching; "what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other."²⁵ Because they grossly outnumber successful experiences, all kinds of defective experiences accustom us to their standards, which we come to accept and regard as a norm. Consequently, the common belief that there is a gap between imperfect everyday experiences and perfect art only gets entrenched and reinforced, which makes experience continue as paltry and shallow.

Experience reaches its closure when its material is perfectly integrated and, in becoming *an* experience, it becomes a source of exceptional satisfaction, which leads one to recognize the essence of certain phenomena or relationships. As such, *an* experience may change one's life trajectory. The integration of experiential material may result from dedicated, sustained work on experience or from attentive striving for consummation, but it may also paradoxically unfold all of a sudden, and take one by surprise, so to speak. One example Dewey provides of such an experience is an exceptional meal: "There is that meal in a Paris

restaurant of which one says 'that was an experience.' It stands out as enduring memorial of what food may be."²⁶ Having gone through such an experience, one will never perceive things in the same way as a new perspective on this particular portion of reality opens up for one. Dewey's statements about an experience might be viewed as corresponding to William James's reflections on religious conversion, which, for James, involves a shift in which notions once peripheral in a person's consciousness become central to it.²⁷ If we do not doubt that conversion brings about a total mental change, most of us would not consider eating-related experiences to be so thorough. However, it seems there are testimonies asserting that an exquisite meal may indeed be life-transforming. For Julia Child, a famous American chef who taught her compatriots to love French cuisine, this extraordinary quality was attached to the first meal she had after arriving in France in 1948. At a restaurant in La Couronne she had *sole meunière*, a dish she called an epiphany. The perfectly cooked fish, pan-fried in butter, not only gave her exceptional gustatory satisfaction but also stirred her interest in and, later, fascination with French cuisine. It was only the beginning of a domino effect. That *Sole meunière* made Child a reformer of American culinary tradition and an icon of popular culture.

Eating is a common element of our everyday lives, but, necessary as it is, it may be performed in a variety of forms and ways. Sometimes, eating is treated as a very trivial activity to which hardly any attention is devoted. If we approach eating as merely a stage in the metabolic transformations going on in our bodies, we certainly deny cooking a chance to reach the elevated heights of culinary art. That requires effort and thoughtfulness in selecting the ingredients, cooking the dish and then serving it in style. For a meal to become an extraordinary, intensified experience, it takes a skillful combination of knowledge about products and

²⁴ H. Joas, *Creativity of Action*, trans. J. Gaines and P. Keast (Chicago: Polity Press, 1997), p. 163.

²⁵ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 41.

²⁶ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 42.

²⁷ Cf. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Cosimo Publications, 2007) pp. 193-219.

processing techniques, dedicated work and emotions invested in cooking. Eating which transcends the level of biological needs is addressed by Child in her memories of France: "In Paris in the 1950s, I had the supreme good fortune to study with a remarkably able group of chefs. From them I learned why good French food is an art, and why it makes such sublime eating: nothing is too much trouble if it turns out the way it should. Good results require that one take *time* and *care*. If one doesn't use the freshest ingredients or read the whole recipe before starting, and if one rushes through the cooking, the result will be an inferior taste and texture – a gummy beef Wellington, say. But a careful approach will result in a magnificent burst of flavor, a thoroughly satisfying meal, perhaps even a life-enhancing experience."²⁸ What else is this passage but a perfect exemplification of Deweyan notion of *an* experience? The time and care enumerated by Child as necessary conditions of successful cooking are highlighted also by Dewey as two essential factors in an experience: "Zeal for doing, lust for action leaves many a person, especially in this hurried and impatient human environment in which we live, with experience of an almost incredible paucity, all on the surface."²⁹ The problem is that, living in a hurry, we face a risk of distraction and preclude any closure of experience. Before it fully crystallizes, we abandon it for something new. Dewey warns against collecting as many impressions as possible as they often are hardly "more than a flitting and a sipping,"³⁰ passing and vanishing before any sense is made of them. An experience requires linking impressions to facts; it demands engagement which helps one make conscious, informed choices. Otherwise, „[t]here are beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations and conclusions. One thing replaces another, but does not absorb it and carry it on. There is experience, but so slack and

discursive that it is not *an* experience."³¹ Such pathologies are outcomes of a lack of balance between action and perception, the interaction of which founds experience.

Besides haste and a desire to do as much as possible in as short a time as possible, another threat to experience pointed out by Dewey is mechanical action. Automatism forestalls emotion and eliminates any personal investment in the tasks, activities and objects associated with them. When "[o]bstacles are overcome by shrewd skill, but they do not feed experience"³²; a conscious, meaningful engagement is lacking as is also the case with actions undertaken without belief or certainty. This is counterbalanced by activities which proceed toward an end in a sequence of steps, whereby they foster a sense of growing relevance, which culminates at the moment of fulfillment. In his article on emotion in *Art as Experience*, P. G. Whitehouse observes that the artist is guided and advised first and foremost by emotion, instead of by reason or practical aim.³³ Such attitude is what distinguishes the artist, but it is also relevant to other practices. Dewey insists: "Craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be 'loving'; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised."³⁴ He is certainly right. It is because they lack this "loving" factor, food industry products will never match hand-made foods, and are not discussed in the context of culinary art. Art materializes with the touch of the hand collaboratively coordinated with the eye – "instruments through which the entire live creature, moved and active throughout, operates."³⁵

To conclude, we could evoke the contrast between the ideas of *fast food* and *slow food*; standardized, assembly-line-produced hamburgers, which look and taste the same irrespective of the season of the year and

²⁸ J. Child, and A. Prud'homme, *My Life in France* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), pp. 332-333.

²⁹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 51.

³⁰ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 51.

³¹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 46.

³² J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 45.

³³ P. G. Whitehouse, "The Meaning of 'Emotion' in Dewey's Art as Experience," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37/2 (Winter, 1978), p. 154.

³⁴ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 54.

³⁵ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 56.

the geographical coordinates of their serving venue, on the one hand, and, on the other, foods that convey the character of the area where they were cooked and the person who devoted his/her time and talent to cooking them.

Educating taste

The painter, the architect, and the cook alike orient their actions to the perceiving recipient and, the other way round, the aesthetic experience is “inherently connected with the experience of making.”³⁶ Perception is a creative task. Perception is understood as “a process consisting of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment,”³⁷ which brings appreciation and making closer together. “The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest.”³⁸ A work of art comes into being according to a certain intent, with the artist performing the subsequent stages, having in mind all along his plan of arriving at a particular end, which corresponds to the pattern of a complete experience.³⁹ That is why if sensory satisfaction is to be complete, it must to a degree follow the artist’s intent, for “it does not stand by itself but is linked to the activity of which it is the consequence.”⁴⁰ This principle holds also in the relationship between the cook and the eater. Dewey entertains no doubts about it: “Even the pleasures of the palate are different in quality to an epicure than in one who merely ‘likes’ his food as he eats it. The difference is not of mere intensity. The epicure is conscious of much more than the taste of the food. Rather, there enter into the taste, as directly experienced, qualities that depend upon reference to its source and its manner of production in connection with

criteria of excellence.”⁴¹ These words clearly insist that, first, to be complete, experience requires following the maker’s intent and, second, the capacity and pleasure of joining the maker’s world must be preceded by effort and learning, both necessary to supplement a purely sensory sensation and explore, in this case, gustatory excellence. Few realize that aesthetic perception demands skill, and probably even fewer would not be surprised by a postulate to educate taste. After all, the common opinion holds that we like what we do, end of story. Dewey, however, avers that it is not enough to simply look at a work of art to really see it, and, likewise, it is not enough to just eat, to appreciate gustatory perfection: “seeing, hearing tasting, become esthetic when relation to a distinct manner of activity qualifies what is perceived.”⁴² Many contemporary chefs propose new versions of and innovative takes on classic cuisine. To appreciate the mastery of interpretation, one must know tradition first.

Outstanding culinary talents are, similarly, a rarity. Many people cook, but the skill of perfect harmonization of flavors is an exceptional gift. Danièle Mazet-Delpeuch, a personal chef of the French President François Mitterrand, distinguishes between a gift, an inborn predisposition, and a talent that requires patient honing. In the kitchen, she says, “two things are important – a gift and a talent. A gift lies beyond our control, just like the color of our eyes or hair. A talent is different – it needs developing. You must keep training; a talent simply requires sustained practice. Slowly, step by step, you can attain excellence.”⁴³ What emphatically surfaces here is time it takes for experience to achieve fullness. Mazet-Delpeuch herself learned by watching her female kin, and used a similar instruction method of imitation in her own cooking courses. One can teach the mechanisms of the entire universe by teaching cooking, as Dewey’s School vividly demonstrates.

³⁶ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 55.

³⁷ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 59.

³⁸ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 62.

³⁹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 59.

⁴⁰ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 55.

⁴¹ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 55.

⁴² J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 55.

⁴³ Łukasz Modelski, *Pięty smak. Rozmowy przy jedzeniu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2014), p. 251.

Conclusion

Food is a message that conveys intellectual, emotional and sensory content, and may have an aesthetic quality. Can food and eating be thus seen as an art? Drawing on Dewey's writings, one cannot answer this question conclusively in the affirmative. Although a clear affinity between culinary experience (and any other experience in fact) and art is highlighted in *Art and Experience*, and Dewey frequently resorts to culinary examples in describing aesthetic experience, he does not identify art with culinary art. For art is a realm in which only aesthetic values are realized. Cooking can indeed be granted the status of culinary art only within what Dewey calls *an* experience, where aesthetic qualities are an indispensable condition, but the very fact that aesthetic qualities appear does not in and by itself make soup, be it impeccably delicious, an artwork.

Still, approaching everyday meals as exceptionally important components of the order of life that both require and deserve attention, care, and patience will certainly be beneficial, for every experience, if it is *an* experience, augments our lives and makes them simply better.