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NOTION OF 'EXPERIENCE' IN JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY

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"Experience" is the key concept in John Dewey's philosophy. Dewey labored long and diligently to clarify this concept. He dealt with it in his major works, such as, *Experience and Nature* (1925), *Art as Experience* (1934), *Experience and Education* (1938), and some of his last writings, for example, his unpublished drafts¹ of a new introduction for *Experience and Nature*, show his continuing concern for this key notion. This paper is an attempt to clarify what Dewey means by experience. This will be done in two ways: by showing how Dewey's view differs from traditional notion of experience and by providing a detailed account of Dewey's positive characterization of experience.

The history of philosophical thinking shows that most philosophers postulate a separation of what is called

"experience" from what is called "nature." When this postulation is made, "experience" is taken to be subjective and "nature" is taken to be objective. The most obvious example of this kind of philosophical dichotomy is Descartes. Dewey rejects this Cartesian dualism, and develops his view of "naturalism" from two directions. First, he says that he was impressed during his undergraduate days with the writings of T. H. Huxley on the interrelations of the human organism and nature.² Second, the part of his philosophical background that was Hegelian had developed an abstract view of the doctrine of internal relations. As Dewey's thought matured, he came more and more to stress the biological interrelations of the human organism and nature, and the Hegelian aspects of his philosophy faded away³.

Dewey offers an experimental interpretation of experience. For him, as for William James, experience is a double-barreled fact which includes both the experienced and the experiencing. It is an affair of intercourse, mutual adaptation, between a living organism and its physical and social environment, a matter of simultaneous doings and sufferings. It is of as well in nature. It constitutes the entire range of man's transactions with nature at large. It is "something at least as wide and deep and full as all history on this earth, a history which ... includes the earth and the physical relatives of man."⁴

In his early philosophy Dewey was influenced by the Hegelian tradition which took experience as a single, dynamic, unified whole in which everything is ultimately related. There are no rigid dichotomies in experience and nature. All distinctions are functional and play a role in a complex organic system. But as Dewey drifted away from his early Hegelian orientation he indicated three major respects in which he rejects the idealistic notion of experience.⁵ First, the Idealists distorted the character of experience in holding that all

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experience is a form of knowing. But for Dewey experience is primarily nonreflective and noncognitive – man is primarily a being who acts, suffers and enjoys. In the second place, against the idealists' commitment to the idea of a single unified whole in which everything is ultimately related, Dewey now argues that life consists of a series of overlapping and interpenetrating experiences, contexts, or situations, each of which has its internal qualitative integrity. Finally, Dewey maintained that though the idealists did have important insights into the organic nature of experience, they have overgeneralized them into a false cosmic projection. Dewey, instead, provided a more naturalistic, detailed and scientific articulation of the organic character of experience.

Dewey's notion of experience can be best understood if we distinguish his position from other philosophers' views on experience. Dewey was sympathetic with what he took to be the Greek view on experience, which considers it as consisting of a fund of social knowledge and skills and as being the means by which man comes into direct contact with a qualitatively rich and variegated nature. Experience, for the Greeks, "denoted the accumulated information of the past, not merely the individual's own past but the social past, transmitted through language and even more through apprenticeship in various crafts, so far as this information was condensed in matter-of-fact generalizations about how to do certain things like building a house, leading an army, or knowing what to expect under given circumstances."⁶ Dewey admired Greek philosophers' enlightened naturalism, their appreciation of man as a genuine part of the natural world, and their emphasis on the social character of experience and the ways in which experience is developed and transmitted by habit and custom. Indeed, Dewey frequently thought of his own philosophy as "a *critical* return to the spirit of Greek philosophy."⁷ But Dewey

holds that the Greek view of experience is not scientific – this view needs to be reconstructed in light of the experimental method of the sciences. Experimental method is for him is the only method worthwhile. No other method has any value, and in *Experience and Nature* he assures us of the futility of attempting to use any other method: "The problem to which non-empirical method gives rise in philosophy are blocks to inquiry, blind alleys; they are puzzles rather than problems."⁸ Dewey's concept of experience combines the strong naturalistic bias of the Greek philosophers with a sensitive appreciation for experimental method as practiced by the sciences.

In his polemical essay "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" (1917)⁹ Dewey offers five points of contrast between what he calls the "orthodox" view of experience and a view more "congenial to present conditions." First of all, in the orthodox view, experience is regarded primarily as an affair of knowledge, but Dewey points out that experience includes far more than knowing situations. "Experience" designates the affairs of an organism interacting with its physical and social environment. Dewey holds that man is primarily a being who acts, suffers and enjoys. Most of his life consists of experiences that are not primarily reflective. If we are to understand the nature of thought, reflection, inquiry, and their role in human life, we must appreciate their emergence from, and conditioned by, the context of "nonreflective" or "noncognitive" experience. Although any experience may become an object of knowledge or reflection, the knowing is always part of a larger basically "noncognitive" interaction. "For things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things had before they are things cognized."¹⁰

Secondly, for the traditionalists, experience is a psychical thing, infected throughout by "subjectivity", in an inner private collection of mental states set over against an outer physical world. For Dewey, on the other hand, experience flows in and through its objective environment, which supports or blocks it and is in turn modified by it. "What experience suggests about itself is a genuinely objective world which enters into the actions and sufferings of men and undergoes modifications through their responses."¹¹

Philosophy, after Descartes, took a subjectivistic turn. Descartes' dualism of mind and body, together with his conviction that the mind by itself can achieve knowledge of clear and distinct ideas set the stage for an epistemological orientation that emphasized the primacy of mind. Experience from the side of *experiencing* became a dominant concern of philosophers. Dewey argues that it is true that there is no experience without an *experiencer* and *experiencing*. But there is no warrant for holding that experience is *exclusively* mutual, private and subjective. It is more than a metaphor to speak of shared experience. And the most striking fact about our shared experience is the ways in which a common and objective world is enmeshed in our experience. Experience includes both the act of experiencing and what is experienced. "Subjectivity is a pole, but only one pole within experience, which includes an objective dimension."¹²

Thirdly, the past and the present are emphasized in traditional accounts of experience, whereas for Dewey the salient trait of experience is its connection with a future. What is important, as he sees it, is not what has been or is given but rather what might be done to change what is given to further human purposes. An experimental form of experience requires

a forward look, with emphasis on anticipation rather than recollection.

Dewey is particularly critical of the British empiricists' identification of experience with the results of past observation. David Hume, for example, in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* writes: "The nature of experience is this. We remember to have had frequent instances of the existence of one species of objects; and also remember that the individuals of another species of objects have always attended them, and have existed in a regular order of contiguity and succession with regard to them In all these instances, from which we learn the conjunction of particular causes and effects, both the causes and effects have been perceiv'd by the senses, and are remember'd: But in all cases where we reason concerning them, there is one perceiv'd or remember'd, and the other supply'd in conformity to our past experience."¹³ Hume thus gives emphasis on the role of the past and the role of memory in explicating the nature of experience. But Dewey believes that when we approach experience from a biological perspective and are sensitive to what experimental science has taught us, we will see that in instances of perception or action "anticipation is ... more primary than recollection; projection than summoning of the past; the prospective than the retrospective."¹⁴ For Dewey, man is not a spectator looking into a reality or nature from the outside and who simply receives and registers past perceptions. Man is essentially an agent, an experimenter. More accurately, man is an "agent-patient" where the character of what he undergoes is affected by his activity and the character of his activity is affected by what he experiences.

Fourthly, in their view of experience the traditional empiricists are committed to particularism, to discrete sense-

data or more or less isolated states of consciousness, sensations, impressions, or ideas. This view, according to Dewey, neglects connections, relations, and continuities, supposing them either foreign to experience or dubious by-product of it. William James also argues against the excesses of particularism in nineteenth century sensationalistic empiricism, and held that these so-called empiricists were superimposing a highly abstract and artificial concept of experience on the real facts. James' plea is that we should be more radical and more empirical, that we should look more carefully at our experience. When we do this, we will see the ways in which experience contains connections, continuities, and relations. In the same spirit and for similar reasons, Dewey argues that experience contains existential connections within itself; we are not under a delusion in supposing that experience is connected, nor do we impose these connections from some independent pure reason. "An experience that is an undergoing of an environment and a striving for its control in new directions is pregnant with connections."¹⁵

Lastly, the traditionalists oppose experience to thought in the sense of inference, but for Dewey, experience is full of inference. In Dewey's more liberal conception of experience, inquiry itself has been analyzed as a mode of experience. It might appear that this way of viewing experience entails giving up all distinction between sense experience and thought, where the former is a check and restriction on our thought. But the distinction is not given up; it is interpreted in a new way. Dewey maintains that *within* experience it is possible to isolate certain types of direct experience and observation for testing hypothesis. Through inquiry we come to know exactly what types of data are necessary and sufficient for grounding and testing our hypotheses.

It is clear from the above analysis that Dewey's interpretation of experience is much more liberal and broader than the traditional interpretation. In traditional usage, "experience" is frequently used as equivalent to "being consciously aware", or sometimes as equivalent to "object of conscious awareness." Moreover, "experience" frequently connotes, or implies, a subject passively receiving sensations from an object external to it. None of these meanings or implications is intended for Dewey, for such usage presupposes divisions of act and object, of subject and object which he wishes to avoid. Thus he writes:

"Experience includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe, and endure, and *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine – in short, processes in *experiencing*. 'Experience' denotes the planted field, the sowed seeds, the reaped harvests, the changes of night and day, spring and autumn, wet and dry, heat and cold, that are observed, feared, longed for; it also denotes the one who plants and reaps, who works and rejoices, hopes, fears, plans, invokes magic or chemistry to aid him, who is downcast or triumphant. It is 'double-barreled' in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality. 'Thing' and 'thought' . . . are single-barreled; they refer to products discriminated by reflection out of primary experience"¹⁶

Interaction – between a living organism and its environment – is at the very forefront of Dewey's theory of experience. He takes seriously the fact that apart from a specific concrete environment, the individual is a sheer abstraction. And by environment Dewey does not mean only what lies immediately before us but it may also consist of very different things, for example, persons or subjects discussed, or

even toys or an experiment one is performing, or it may be just the book one is reading in which the environmental context is a certain country or an imaginary region.¹⁷ In Dewey's philosophy, experience is clearly aligned with the actual processes of life, and is located in a specific life-situation in which the self is actively engaged. And it is only within this kind of situation that the self confronts a world full of meaningful and relevant beings. Thus, through concrete, living relationships the world enters into man's life in a more intimate and internal way: "The world we have experienced becomes an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience."¹⁸ There is thus no inner static relation between the mind and the things confronting it, but rather a relation grounded in interaction. And in its more mature form, this vital commerce with other beings leads to a "complete interpenetration of the self and the world of objects and events."¹⁹

Dewey's view of experience as grounded in interaction implies a relational structure of being, but of a sort which leaves room for the individual seen as the ultimate source of what is unpredictable. As mentioned earlier, Dewey, like James, maintains that relations must be taken as seriously as things themselves, and that relations as well things are matters of direct experience. Thus we find in Dewey's thinking the desire to uphold both individuality and relations,²⁰ for Dewey not only makes the most of relations, but he also highlights the importance of the individual as "the carrier of thought" as well as "the author of action and of its application."²¹ Dewey's individual does not stand on the sidelines as a mere onlooker – he is very much a participant in an incomplete world. For each individual self acts as well as undergoes, and what he undergoes is not stamped upon him as though he were inert wax. Both undergoing and doing are essential aspects of one

balanced life, and, while inseparable, each depends for its quality on the way in which it is related to the other.

Experience, then, for Dewey, is a patterned structure in which undergoing and doing occur not in mere alteration, but in a far more integral way. For that reason, experience can be limited by all the causes which interfere with one's perception of the relations that bind undergoing and doing together. There may be interferences because of the excess either on the side of undergoing or on the side of doing. That is why, as Dewey says, "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."²² The individual never allows an experience to complete itself, for he is forever hurrying off on a new line of action, with the result that he develops a preference, conscious or unconscious, for just those situations in which the most can be done in the shortest time.

According to Dewey, experience is not something going on inside somebody's head; rather, it is one of the many things in which transactions in nature eventuate. Nature consists of a series of overlapping and interpenetrating transactions.²³ "Transaction" is the technical term that Dewey used to designate the type of action in which the components and elements involved in the action both condition and are conditioned by the entire coordination. The element of a transaction plays a functional role in the developing coordination. Dewey distinguishes three primary levels, or "plateaus" of natural transactions: the psycho-chemical, the psycho-physical, and the level of mind or human experience. There are no sharp breaks or discontinuities within nature. But there are distinctive characteristics of the different levels of natural transactions that are reflected in their patterns of behavior and in their consequences. Human experience is

natural in the sense that it manifests physical and psychophysical qualities and behavior, and even what is novel in human experience has prototypes in less complex transactions. We can study human experience from a physical or biological perspective since it exhibits such traits, but there are features peculiar to human experience such as the use of spoken language and the nature of human societies. There is no need to presuppose a complete break with the rest of nature in order to explain these features. Yet we must be sensitive to the uniqueness of human experience, just as we must be alert to the differences between organic and inorganic matter even though we do not postulate a break in nature. Experience is thus, for Dewey, all inclusive in the sense that man is involved in continuous transactions with the whole of nature and through systematic inquiry, he can come to understand the essential characteristics of nature.

To recapitulate: As we have observed, "experience", to Dewey, refers to both physical nature and the interaction of living things with their environment. Dewey's naturalism rejected the dualistic separation of humans from their environment found in Cartesian epistemology. His understanding of experience as context was dynamic. Humans acting and knowing in the world change the world, and both biological and cultural forces condition human experience as well. While he did not equate experience with knowledge, he argued that experience yields method, since for both biological and emotional reasons we make use of experience, noting its functional constancies and acting upon those constancies to refine the ways in which we draw from experience, thereby improving upon it. Thus, his was an instrumentalist view of experience that sought to control and direct experience where possible.

Experience, for Dewey, is not a solipsistic term; the word does not refer to an individual's experience solely; it includes the experiences and reports of experiences of other men, living and dead, mature and immature, normal and abnormal. Experience is thus taken in a broad and full sense; it covers anything and everything that can be denoted. Experience includes feelings, sensations, concepts, psychical events, physical things, relations, actualities, potentialities, the harmonies and disharmonies of life. Experience includes our memories and imaginations, our pasts and projected futures, our present awareness, our illusions and hallucinations; it includes truths and falsehoods, objects of beauty and ugliness, goods and evils; it includes language and events, and "death, war, and taxes".²⁴ As Elizabeth R. Eames remarks, "Experience includes all that is, has been, and has potentiality of becoming. For Dewey, experience is ultimate reality, if one chooses to use an old metaphysical term."²⁵

As late as 1951 Dewey could still say that he did not feel the need to take back any of the things he said about experience in the earlier text of *Experience and Nature*; but this statement was coupled with the declaration that "were the book that was published with the title *Experience and Nature* being written today, its caption would be *Culture and Nature* and the treatment of specific subject matters would be correspondingly modified."²⁶ Although in theory he could still see justification for his previous use of the terms "experience" and "experiential" (as distinct from "empirical"), it seemed to him that there were both positive and negative grounds for changing to the term "culture."²⁷ The negative ground for Dewey is this: in the course of history experience had become effectively identified with experiencing in the psychological sense, and the psychological has come to be thought of as the exclusively individual or the "intrinsically psychical, mental,

private", the subjective as set over against the objective. But for Dewey this account of experience has no place in the world view of empirical naturalism.

The positive ground for the proposed change from "experience" to "culture" is as follows: other historical developments in anthropology have conferred upon "culture" just the range and depth of significance of which "experience" had been progressively and effectively derived. Dewey, therefore, concluded that "as a matter of historical fact the only sense in which 'experience' could be understood to designate the vast range of things experienced in an indefinite variety of ways is by identifying its import or significance with that of the whole range of considerations to which the name 'culture' in its anthropological (not its Matthew Arnold) sense is now applied. It possesses as a name just that body of substantial references of which ... 'experience' as a name has been emptied. In addition, 'culture' names a whole set of considerations which are of utmost significance in and for the enterprise of philosophy as intellectually inclusive."²⁸ These include material artifacts and technologies, beliefs and practices, moral attitudes and scientific dispositions, the material and ideal in their reciprocal relations each upon the other. In addition, "culture" designates "also in their reciprocal connections with one another, that immense diversity of human affairs, interests, concerns, values, which when specified piecemeal are designated religious, moral, aesthetic, political, economic, etc., etc., thereby holding them together in their human and humanistic unity – a service which ... if philosophy is to fulfill its ambition to be comprehensive, is of utmost importance for its status and development."²⁹ Thus it is clear that "culture" is to do what Dewey previously hoped "experience" would do.

To conclude: Dewey's greatest theoretical contribution to philosophy in general, and to epistemology and metaphysics in particular, is his working out of the implications of taking "experience" as primarily the social experience of human communities. This, as Randall remarks, "makes 'experience' all that the anthropologist includes as belonging to human 'culture', instead of identifying it, as most philosophers still do, with the supposed fruits of an antiquated introspective psychology, based on isolated sensory 'data' ... This anthropological – and Dewey stoutly claimed, commonsense and broadly human – way of conceiving 'experience' sets Dewey's technical philosophy off sharply from the other professed 'empiricisms' of the day." Dewey's contribution lies in the fact that his *empirical naturalism* (or sometimes called *pragmatic naturalism*) does not separate experience from nature. He contends that if we understand the interrelation of experience and nature rightly, there is no philosophical problem of "getting them back together." This view was echoed in the preface to the second edition of *Experience and Nature*: "Experience is not a veil that shuts man off from nature; it is a means of penetrating continually further into the heart of nature. There is in the character of human experience no index-hand pointing to agnostic conclusions, but rather a growing progressive self-disclosure of nature itself. The failures of philosophy have come from lack of confidence in the directive powers that inhere in experience, if men have but the wit and courage to follow them."³⁰

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19. *Ibid.*, p. 19
20. See Robert C. Pollock, "Process and Experience", in John Blewett (ed.) *John Dewey: His Thought and Influence*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1960, p. 182
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23. Dewey used the word 'interaction' in his earlier writings, but the term is sometimes taken to mean that two separate entities, organism and environment, *inter*-act. This, of course, is not what he means; in order to clarify his position, Dewey, in his later writings, adopts the term 'transaction'.
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