John Dewey: Experience, Community, and Communication

by Gordon L. Ziniewicz

1. For John Dewey (1859 - 1952), experience is a key word. It goes beyond the Kantian notion of experience part of knowledge or interpretation of reality. Experience for Dewey is the undivided continuous transaction or interaction between human beings and their environment. It includes not only thought, but also feeling, doing, suffering, handling, and perceiving. Experience is the organic intertwining of living human beings and their natural and artificial environment. Thus, for Dewey, human beings are not "subjects" or "isolated individuals" who have to "build bridges" to go over to other human beings or the things of nature; human beings are originally and continually tied to their environment, organically related to it, changing it even as it changes them. Human beings are fundamentally attached to what surrounds them.

2. For Dewey, human beings are natural organisms who, in relation with their environment, have evolved and developed intelligence. Intelligence, according to Dewey, is not an innate given; it is a developed habit of inquiry, reflection, and problem-solving or adapting to an environment; it is the result of attempting to overcome problematic, threatening, and unstable characteristics of experience. Human beings, in the face of precarious situations, work out conceptual frameworks and instruments or tools in order to make these situations more stable and reliable. Intelligence is the human instrument for adapting to, altering, and refining one's transaction with the environment. Intelligence is for life and the enhancement of life; it is directed to improving the quality of experience.

3. Dewey refers to himself as a naturalistic humanist or a radical empiricist. What this means is that Dewey disavows any duality or division between non-human nature and human affairs. Human beings are not "souls," but are "organisms." They are not "supersensible" entities or pure minds or thinking things. Human beings are in nature. According to Dewey, dualism rests on the mistaken belief that there are static and unchanging metaphysical realities or "substances." According to Dewey, nothing is unchanging. All that is, is constantly changing, interacting with and adapting to an environment. Human beings are constantly changing; they are forever changing. Experience is the continually changing contexture of human beings in relation to one another and in relation to their environment.

4. Reflection or knowledge is but a small part of experience. Beneath the surface of dividing the world up into separate objects, of classifying and analyzing and thinking about things, there is a
continuum, a unitary experience of feeling, having, suffering, undergoing, doing, etc. Beneath intellectual compartmentalization and "objectifying" is our felt unity with the world. Knowledge only seems to "break up" reality, to detach objects from subjects and objects from objects. In fact, one is immediately "aesthetically" attached to other human beings and the world.

5. Experience as a whole includes all that is experienced as well as the experiencer and the way he experiences. Experience differs from person to person; each undergoes and acts differently. Each has a different "angle of vision" which touches upon a common world. There are no static categories of the understanding or static forms of perception. Experience is an individual process. On the other hand, experiences overlap. There is much that is shared, in common. What individuals have in common is this basis of culture or shared meaning. Communication is the process of revealing old common ground and creating new common ground among persons. Thus, in interacting with the environment, there are individual outcomes (consequences for the individual) as well as social outcomes (consequences for individuals together). There is no such thing as a "pure" or isolated individuality. Each human being is a complex mix of common and shared characteristics and habits as well as "private" and individual traits. Each human being is the intersection of many factors; individuality is but the personal side or the subjective polarity within experience. One cannot neatly determine where the individual ends and the natural environment or society begins. There is much in us and about us that is derived from and shared with other humans and non-human nature. For example, my habits, which I call my own, are largely learned from the fund of social custom. My speech, which I call my own, is the result of shared communication or language. What is my own is my own precisely because I have worked it out in relation to a world, not because I was born possessing all of it in detachment from the world. An experience is "mine" because I am included in it. The "my" is a function of the situation. Is the house I own purely "subjective"? Even "reason" is a learned behavior, not a given "innate" structure. Yet my thoughts are "mine" precisely because I have a role in their development, although I am not their sole "creator."

6. The totality of lived experience, an undivided whole, can be broken up into a variety of separate "experiences" or situations. These situations are set off as self-contained wholes by virtue of an immediate "quality" that pervades each situation. Qualities are not mere feelings. They are characteristics of situations themselves, which include natural events, human affairs, feelings, etc. Qualities may be - to name a few -- problematic, satisfying, puzzling, stable, precarious, etc. The quality of each situation is more "had" than felt or known. One gets into a situation and an overall quality emerges. For example, walking along the Tidal Basin in Washington when the cherry blossoms blossom is a pleasant experience. This pleasantness is not
merely a subjective feeling; it pervades the whole situation as the result of the coming together of many conditions and factors, including but not limited to the person and his subjective states. The quality of each situation is the way the whole situation fits together (or fails to fit together). An aesthetic experience is an experience of immediate and enjoyable order; a problematic experience, one requiring some investigation, thought, and action, is an experience of incompleteness, of jarring disorder (something is just not right). Intelligence grows with the continual experiment of attempting to resolve problematic experiences. In this sense, for Dewey, conflict is necessary for life; it stirs thinking about what we are about, what we are doing, and why. Inquiry arises in a situation that exhibits confusion and disharmony. Human beings attempt to bring order, through their efforts, to disorderly and unsatisfying situations. Intelligence is but one instrument in this "correction" of experience. Overt action, altering actual conditions, is essential for making situations better.

7. Community is the shared life of human beings. It means more than mere association. By virtue of their immediate interaction with one another, human beings are necessarily associated. But community means meaningful association, association based on common interest and endeavor. The essence of community is communication, the sharing of meanings through common symbols or language. Communication is the means of individual as well as social growth.

8. Thus, for Dewey, individual growth and social values are worked out together. The individual achieves his individuality in cooperative striving with other individuals, in communication with other individuals. Out of the give and take of shared experience arises and emerges the "I" and the "mine." Detachment from social concerns not only affects community, but also hinders the development of the individual. Democracy is but the ideal of community, with the encouragement of free inquiry and free communication. Dewey stresses that this ideal has not yet been attained. America is not yet a democracy, a society where human beings live and work together, cooperate and communicate. Democracy means community. Community means vital and shared experience, retrieved and shared by means of symbols -- communication.

9. We see in Dewey a return to the social values of ancient democratic Athens -- where conversation in public was considered the means of personal growth. For Dewey, the private grows out of the public; personal understanding emerges from shared communication. Education is the fostering of conditions that promote growth and enhancement of experience. Education combines the transmission of common heritage, tradition, and custom with the encouragement of individual interest and impulse. Thus, if the "end" of human life is moral and intellectual growth, and growth can only be achieved in a context that nourishes growth, then the purpose of education is to invest in this context, to improve social conditions that promote
rather than inhibit growth. Education means social reform. Education is not limited to schools; it is a lifelong project where human beings, institutions, the media, and "politicians" all play a role. Education is the uplifting of intelligence by means of social conditions and social instruments. Education, the basis of community, is therefore everyone's responsibility. One recalls Socrates.

For another (updated) introduction to Dewey's philosophy, see Experience and Nature: Individuality and Association on this site.

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