John Dewey: Experience and Nature: Individuality and Association

by Gordon L. Ziniewicz

1. According to John Dewey (1859 - 1952), human beings are organisms within nature; they are part of nature. One could compare this view with that of Descartes, who divided up reality into two parts — mind (or spiritual) substance and body (or material substance). Descartes' view, like that of medieval Christianity, downgraded non-human nature (even animals are mere machines) and upgraded human nature (insofar as it is mind or soul). Of course, the dualism of mind and body is especially pronounced in the separation between human mind (ghost) and human body (machine).

2. At the same time, Dewey intends to overcome the Platonic dualism of unchanging beings versus changing beings. For Dewey, things are constantly changing, although some things change more slowly (are relatively stable) and other things change rather quickly (are relatively unstable). In this, his philosophy bears some resemblance to the process philosophy of Heraclitus, wherein there is a continuous cycle of coming-to-be and passing-away. For Dewey, a thing is its history; it is a process of many conditions coming together and coming apart, forces cooperating and conflicting. The unity of a thing is a functional unity, a gathering together of a wide variety of energies and moving forces. One thinks of Emerson's statement that "Permanence is but a matter of degrees." (from "Circles")

3. In addition, like Nietzsche, Dewey maintains that there is no such thing as absolute certainty. Every belief or idea is an hypothesis, an approximation. One can never be sure that the most sacrosanct scientific theory will not be overturned by new evidence, by new testing. However, this is not to say that all ideas are equally useful or useless, good or bad. According to Dewey, some theories that have withstood the test of time and have been submitted to widespread personal and collective experience, have high probability or "near certainty." According to Dewey, and to other pragmatists like him, ideas are true or false insofar as they are verified or borne out by the way things turn out when those ideas are used as guidelines. Consequences (and anticipated consequences) are reasons for believing a theory to be true.

4. According to Dewey, a thing is the result of its interactions or transactions with other things. Things change because of the way they engage in a give and take with what surrounds them, with actual conditions. According to Dewey, nature as a whole is a realm where three kinds of transactions take place:

http://www.fred.net/tzaka/deweynew.html

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1. Physical-chemical transactions: These include any sort of molecular or purely chemical interactions. They apply to non-living as well as to living things.

2. Psycho-physical transactions: These include any interchanges that go on within living things, or between living things and what is outside of them.

3. Experience: This refers to those transactions that involve meanings resulting from specifically human interactions with nature and with other human beings.

5. The level of experience or human meanings is built upon and presupposes psycho-physical and physical-chemical transactions, but it goes beyond these to a higher stage. Human experience represents nature's highest fulfillment. It is not something apart from nature; it is, as Dewey calls it, the "foreground of nature." In sum, experience is the "sum total" of transactions of human beings with their environment and with one another. Collective experience (that of many persons together) is identical with culture (or tradition).

6. Experience means more than merely sensation, observation, or passive looking. It includes both active and passive dimensions (with give and take). It involves thought, feeling, doing, undergoing, handling, working -- any sort of human involvement with the world. Moreover, experience is not a strictly internal, private, or "personal" thing. It is not just subjective, nor simply an inner feeling or mood. Experience includes what is experienced and the way it is experienced, as well as the one who undergoes the experience. Experiencer and experienced are joined together in a continuum. In the broadest sense, experience means what is going on, where human beings are involved. It is hands-on contact with and manipulation of actual conditions, as well as reflection and imagination and feeling about these things. Experience is an inclusive word that goes beyond "me" and "mine" to a whole situation in which I am a functioning part. Thus, experience includes the farmer who farms, his implements, his aching muscles, his thoughts about the day, the sweat on his brow and the sun that makes him sweat.

7. We can talk about our personal experience as a whole, just as we can talk about the experience of a family or community or nation as a whole. But we can also subdivide this continuum, this whole, into separate parts or experiences (similar to the way one's whole life can be divided into situations). Experiences are continuous and connected to one another, but we can distinguish them by virtue of what we recognize as the individual quality each of them has. Each experience has its own unifying characteristic, a quality that seems to pervade the whole and give it meaning. To name a few, qualities of experiences can include: satisfying, disturbing, puzzling, illuminating, pleasant, unpleasant, secure, dangerous, calm, nervous. For example, when one
attends a job interview that doesn't go well, it is the whole situation
that seems to have the quality of disappointing, etc. According to
Dewey, what we seek most of all is fulfillment and unity and
satisfaction in experience, when things work together rather than
break apart, where there is a sense of harmony or resolution of
conflict. The point of making effort through thought and action is to
change actual conditions, so far as this is possible, so that they become
less chaotic and more unified, less inhibiting and obstructive and
more cooperative. We want to make situations better and to improve
conditions (overcoming obstacles and using resources).

8. In sum, an experience or a situation is immediately satisfying to the
extent that it has unity, order, finality, completeness — wherein things
come together and fit together more than they did before. In a word, a
satisfying or fulfilling situation is one in which things are working out
well (either through our own hard work or through no effort on our
part). Because we all experience some measure of fulfillment, we all
have some idea of how we want things to turn out. Sometimes things
turn out well by themselves; most of the time, we have to roll up our
sleeves and get to work to change conditions for the better and to
redirect energies that are at odds with our plans. As long as things are
working out well, we tend to stay on the same course or routine and
give little thought to changing anything. One gets lulled into a sort of
unthinking habitual pattern in this case.

9. But this is not generally how life works. More often than not, we
find ourselves in a problematic situation. Something is wrong; things
aren't working; the old ways of doing things are not enough. Things
come to a halt. Conditions are working against us. There is disorder
and conflict. This conflict can occur (1) among external conditions, (2)
within ourselves — among our thoughts, desires, habits, ideas, aims,
principles, etc., or (3) between our inner states and outward
conditions (and people). In other words, we experience disorder,
incompleteness, and disharmony.

10. So we stop what we are doing and think. Thinking means
problem-solving. It is an internal or mental process that starts up
when outside progress is inhibited. When we think, we do not bring
an end to activity, but we shift energy from outward to inner (mental)
activity. We keep going, but in our heads. For example, let us suppose
that we are stopped by a flat tire from our usual routine of driving to
work. In our heads, we keep going. We imagine ourselves getting back
into the car, driving, and arriving at work. We continue the drive in
our imagination; we anticipate how things might possibly turn out
(favorably or unfavorably) and we try to imagine how we might help
things go in our favor, how best to use resources on hand to solve the
problem. We imagine things turning out well (harmony, resolution,
unity of conditions) — that is what it means to envision an end or goal.
An end (or ideal) is an anticipated favorable outcome. Martin Luther
King's dream included an imaginative vision of children of all races
sitting together and working together in integrated classrooms. Integration is an example of unity within diversity.

11. But dreams are not enough. Our next step is to imagine ways out of the situation, to use our assessment of the facts and resources on hand to consider possible courses of action we might take. We try to make our deliberation realistic, in that we try to base our imaginary action on available resources despite present obstacles. When we deliberate, we imagine ourselves doing this or that, trying out this or that course of action. We try to predict, using our imagination, whether the consequences of each possible action will be favorable or unfavorable. We imagine whether each idea will work and which is apt to work the best; we are conducting an experiment in our imagination to test each theory. In the process, we use other tools as well: principles learned from experience (ourselves and others'), keen observation of the facts, and overall past knowledge. Not any action will do. We want to do what is right, what is most likely to improve the situation rather than make things worse. That there is a better or a worse plan or idea is proved by how things really end up. Some ideas (ends, plans, principles, etc.) work better than others. The model of thinking through problematic situations applies to all aspects of life, including perplexing intellectual situations and difficult moral situations.

12. For Dewey, problems are opportunities for thought. This means that conflict is necessary for life, insofar as life means intelligent handling of what is going on. Thinking means problem-solving, conflict-resolving. Intelligence, for Dewey, is not an innate and static quantity of brain-power; it is an acquired capacity, a learned capacity, to think, to learn, to imagine, to plan, to generalize, to rework principles, to adapt ones ideas and actions to new situations. Intelligence results from the habitual give and take of working things out in our own mind and with our human and natural environment. Reflecting, deliberating, judging, concluding, etc. are all part of this process. Intelligence is practical; it is an instrument for making things better, where better means conditions more unified and harmonious. Intelligence draws from experience and the fund of what is known; it isolates episodes from the past that provide guidelines for resolving things here and now in the light of what is hoped for in the future. Theories, principles, or ideas are guidelines for action drawn from personal and collective experience. They are tools more or less suited to fixing what is wrong right now. What worked before might work again. Our own usual ways of doing things (habits), as well as collective habits or customs, might help here and now. On the other hand, Dewey would agree with Sartre that situations are unique and that we have to use judgment in the present fix we are in; we have to adapt old principles or devise new ones, if the situation calls for it. Even moral principles are not absolutes or deities to be worshiped, but tools to be employed along with other tools. In this way, intelligence grows.
13. According to Dewey, all natural entities have two basic tendencies: One tendency is toward greater individuation, to concentrate at a point, to intensify a unique position. It is the tendency to be singular, to draw back into oneself, to achieve "self-fulfillment" and unique quality. In this way, each thing is and becomes unique. The other tendency is to reach out and to combine with what is outside of itself, to be a part of the whole, to seek the common and the shared — in other words, to associate. Human beings share these tendencies — to achieve unity as a self, to have a unique "center" and to find common ground and relation or unity with others. In other words, human beings strive for unique individuation or fulfillment of capacities with a unique angle of vision and, at the same time, to improve the quality of their associations and to establish new common ground in friendship and communication. Thus, each person has about him or her something unique and something common or shared. According to Dewey, each human being represents a unique, irreplaceable individuality, angle of vision or approach; but we all basically share the same old world and we work out our individual fulfillment with conditions that operate for other people as well. Even more, though every situation is in a way unique, every situation has aspects that make it similar to other situations.

14. Dewey maintains that individuality is made from the stuff of common conditions. Individuals fulfill their unique capacities by means of transactions based upon what they have in common — language, communication, meanings, experience, economic conditions, and even physical ("natural" conditions). In other words individuality and association are not mutually exclusive, but mutually inclusive and interdependent results. We become more uniquely what we are precisely by working together and speaking together with others. This runs counter to many existentialistic and subjective claims that being with others diminishes or erodes our unique individuality. We try out what we are with others. In addition, through communication, actual experience for one becomes possible experience for another. What one has done, perhaps another can do in the future. In this way, imaginative visions of new possibilities and proposed strategies for action are enhanced and furthered by talk together. In this, Plato was profoundly right.

15. Although situations have a private and personal side to them, they are usually also social. In a social situation, we share many of the same facts — including many obstacles and resources. In fact, other persons and their projects are actual conditions that we ought to take into account in our deliberation. Furthermore, our actions have consequences for others, and their actions have consequences for us. What they do may get in our way, and what we do may get in their way. In that case, getting things done becomes harder than ever. Some adjustment of our plans is therefore necessary in order to insure that we can go forward. In sum, our own individual fulfillment requires that we be socially conscious, that we pay attention to the
needs, purposes, and desires of others. Sympathy, for Dewey, does not mean pity, but rather empathy or imaginatively putting ourselves in another's place so that we can appreciate that person's angle of vision and direction of action. Empathy is required so that we can fashion our ideals and deliberations with others in mind, so that we can anticipate the full impact of the consequences of what we do as they affect others. It is not just a morally high-minded thing to do, although this is laudable too, but it is the only prudent way to make real forward progress, to grow. Because we share the same old world and we live with the conditions (obstacles and resources) that we create for others, making things better for ourselves requires making things better for others. In other words, consciousness (thinking, imagining, deciding, judging) is necessarily social consciousness.

16. Dewey presupposes that cooperation works and that conflict does not. Conditions at odds with one another, however much we might "aesthetically" like any one of them, are in fact obstacles that hold things up. A dream that does not take existing conditions into account is but a daydream, an idle fantasy. Dreams, like principles, are tools for making things better, not ways of escaping from life. Certainly, fantasy has occasional value as innocent free play, but the rest of life requires action stirred by realizable hopes, and realizable means attentive to facts — including those facts that have a human face. No human being "is an island." (John Donne) We are connected. Self-fulfillment depends upon improving the quality of human associations.

17. But it is equally true that association is meaningful to the extent that there are unique individuals associating. Individuals, by developing their unique capacities and angles of vision, have more to contribute in the give and take of shared experience and communication. In nature, events result from different elements working together. On every level, from the molecular to the human, individuals take their stand yet work together. Community is Dewey's term for the ideal of fulfilling oneself while helping others. Democracy as an ideal is none other than this ideal of community. "The imaginative vision of the common good as a 'whole,' including the unique fulfillment of individuals through cooperative and mutually reinforcing activity, within the context of nature as a 'whole,' is the moral and social ideal of democracy." (Ziniewicz, Democracy and Imagination: The Practical Idealism of John Dewey, p. 203.)
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