

Kai Alhanen

JOHN DEWEY's
Ecology of Experience



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Translated by Jonathan Kyöttinen



To Jonathan

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INTRODUCTION

This book aims to rescue the concept of experience. In our continually changing world it has become increasingly difficult to grasp the meaning of our various experiences. Although our knowledge of the world and our technical means of controlling the environment have progressed, our understanding is nevertheless compromised by the way in which the integrity and uniqueness of our experiences are undermined. As a result, our understanding of our experiences has become greatly compromised. This is largely due to the demands of economic and technological efficiency that we have allowed to control our lives. Consequently, we conform to a short-sighted mode of acting that leaves us with insufficient time and space for reflecting on our experiences and comprehending them in a more profound sense. Our hectic way of life reduces our experiences to superficial and fleeting thrills that do not connect with one another to form a meaningful continuum. At the same time, human agency is increasingly subjected to the narrow perspective of techno-scientific power exercised by experts, thus fragmenting the unity of human experience into narrow and disconnected domains. This leaves us unable to understand what is happening to us and to our environment. To counter these effects, we need to deepen our understanding of what human experience is. Only after this has been established can we even begin to comprehend the significance of our experiences within the current world situation.

American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) recognized many of the trends that led to the current

situation which now jeopardizes our comprehension of the significance of our experiences. According to Dewey, what exacerbates these problems is that Western thought is governed by a misguided notion of the very nature of experience. In fact, Dewey aimed to create a new kind of conception of human experience, which became the basis of his pragmatist philosophy.

In Dewey's view, it is particularly harmful to understand experience as a psychological and purely subjective process, and to assume that its structures and contents are separate from both the natural world and one's socio-cultural environment. Similarly, Dewey contends, we have severed experience from action, denying ourselves the understanding of what either fragments our experiences or makes them meaningful and unified. The mere accumulation of knowledge does not in itself develop our experience unless we supplement it with appropriate action and thereby grasp its consequences in practice. If we do not realize that our action thoroughly shapes our experiencing, we are also unaware of the developmental possibilities that lie within our experiences and are thus unable to deliberately affect what kind of world and human life we create through our actions.

This faulty conception of experience, according to Dewey, not only plagues philosophy, but affects all areas of life: education, morals, the economy, labor, politics, science, art, and religion. The beliefs, theories, and practices that govern society are thoroughly imbued with it. Dewey thought this was strongly evident in the ways in which new generations were educated. Western education separates theory from practice. At the same time, it emphasizes individuality and individual accomplishments

that are cut off from the physical and socio-cultural environment. Education also directs students into a two-fold mode of acting: either to pursue rigid, externally-established goals or to select educational content arbitrarily according to their own engrained habits or momentary impulses.

Dewey believed that a misguided understanding of experience and the social practices that reinforce it prevented the development of creative cooperation, or in other words, constituted a barrier to a truly democratic way of life. He made it his philosophical mission to point out and to solve the deeply rooted problems in the Western conception of experience, and in so doing to renew human co-existence. In order to achieve this, Dewey created a new conception of experience that was based on fundamental interaction between individuals and their environments, the experimental nature of human action, and the constant development of experiencing.

Upon beginning his work in philosophy in the 1880s, Dewey approached human experience from the perspective of German idealism. His original aim was to bring together the new experimental psychology with religious views on the divine and spiritual foundation of the world. He abandoned these idealistic inclinations, however, after becoming acquainted with the interpretation of human psychological functions advocated by his countryman William James (1842–1910), who emphasized the biological basis of experiencing and its continuous development in action. Dewey began to study human development as a process the core of which was man's ability to learn from his experiences. In the 1890s he worked as a professor in the recently founded University of Chicago,

gathering around him a group of talented researchers and students. This research community formed "The Chicago School" that began to develop a new pragmatist philosophy. Pragmatism was a movement based on the theories of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and William James which emphasized the testing of intellectual ideas in practical action. Dewey relocated to New York's Columbia University at the beginning of the 1900s where he became one of the leading proponents of pragmatism in the United States and elsewhere. His views on the practical nature of knowledge were discussed and debated in universities around the world.

Dewey's contemporaries in academic institutions did not, however, understand the new philosophy of experience on which his pragmatism was founded. On the one hand, he was accused of being a crude scientific "naturalist" who reduced human thought, values and ideals to objective physical and biological facts of nature. On the other hand he was labeled an "idealist" who denied the facts of nature and claimed that nature itself is merely a manmade intellectual construction. Dewey responded to both accusations by carefully explaining what he actually meant by experience. He was aware that the reason why his philosophy of experience was constantly misinterpreted was because his critics drew conclusions according to false conceptions engrained in Western thought concerning the nature of human experience. The peculiarity of Dewey's conception of experience in relation to that of his contemporaries was one of the main reasons why interest in his philosophy within academic research had become almost nonexistent by the mid twentieth century.

Dewey aimed to practice and to test his philosophy of experience in both his private and public activities of his life. For example, he fully participated in taking care of and educating his six children, which was very unusual in his social milieu. The leading principle that he and his wife, Alice, held onto in raising their children was to support their natural curiosity and to encourage them to reflect on their experiences together with their parents. In order to test his philosophy of experience in practice, Dewey founded a “laboratory school” within the University of Chicago, which attracted worldwide interest. Here he developed a form of teaching based on questions prompted by the children as they interacted with their environment, which they then resolved in experimental situations together with their teachers. The children cultivated plants, made clothes and built camps that resembled the dwellings of the original settlers in America, for example. While carrying out these activities they also familiarized themselves with physics, chemistry, biology, geography and history. The experiences that pupils and teachers gained in cooperation, and the subsequent garnering of knowledge, intertwined seamlessly in the daily life of the school.

Societal tensions and programs of political reformation also provided Dewey with opportunities to develop his philosophy of experience. He was active in many political movements that demanded economic and social justice, the protection of individual rights, and equality between genders, communities and races. His contribution to these movements was both intellectual and practical. He also presented the theoretical fundamentals of social reformation deduced from his philosophy of experience

and helped political activists to plan and carry out socio-political forays. After the First World War, Dewey's horizons broadened beyond the United States of America. He was invited to lecture and to assist with social reforms – usually in the area of education – all around the world. Reformists in Japan, China, the newly founded Soviet Union, Mexico, Turkey and South Africa, among other countries, invited him to examine their national circumstances and to present his views on the changes that were needed. The world wars also made Dewey determined to work towards achieving worldwide peace, cooperation, and justice. Behind all these intentions was his experience-based and politically radical view of democracy as a learning process that unites all people.

Perhaps the most impressive manifestation of Dewey's view of democracy came in 1937. At the age of 78, he agreed to lead an international commission to investigate the veracity of charges made against the former communist leader Leon Trotsky. After Stalin's rise to power, Trotsky fled the Soviet Union and established a home in Mexico with the assistance of artist couple Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. The accusations made by Stalin's government regarding assassination plots aroused the interest of people all over the world, and questions about their accuracy prompted heated political debate and violent conflicts. Dewey was asked to be the president of an independent commission investigating the issue. He interrupted his work on his massive book on logic in order to travel to Mexico, despite receiving death threats. After extensive investigation, the Dewey Commission proclaimed Trotsky innocent

of the charges made against him in Moscow. The task was both physically and mentally hard for Dewey, not to mention dangerous. He nevertheless saw it as his duty to ensure that Trotsky – a man whose philosophical views and political action he strongly opposed – was given fair treatment. It is acts such as this that most clearly embody Dewey's conception of democracy, with open human cooperation at its core.

Since the 1980s, a new kind of interest in Dewey's philosophy has slowly emerged along with American neo-pragmatism, especially in the writings of authors such as Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, who praise him as their philosophical hero. It has begun to seem as if many of Dewey's ideas – especially his conceptions of knowledge and scientific action, learning and education, as well as public action and democracy – were considerably ahead of their time. Despite their newfound enthusiasm, however, many philosophers who have returned to Dewey's work still shun his conception of experience. Richard Rorty, perhaps his most influential defender, has suggested that we should completely abandon Dewey's outdated conception of experience and replace it with the contemporary philosophy of language. This view has also generated strong opposition, however, and a number of researchers who have engaged deeply with Dewey's work have begun to defend his philosophy of experience. Richard J. Bernstein, Thomas M. Alexander and Robert B. Westbrook in particular argue in their broad and perceptive research that Dewey's conception of experience is a crucial and completely coherent point of departure into his entire philosophy.¹

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Dewey's philosophy of experience has come to assume a great deal of current relevance with regard to burning questions of our age and contemporary academic research. It is my belief that these two developmental paths are not separate but support one another. However, I have not written this book primarily as an academic statement on the details of Dewey's philosophy, but, on the contrary, I wish to engage a larger audience in the key ideas of his philosophy of experience.

In this book, I will therefore consider Dewey's thinking as a whole. I do not differentiate or analyze his writings case by case, but rather investigate the deeper and more fundamental levels that underlie them. In fact, I can find no finalized theory of experience in any one of his works. As I see it, Dewey develops his central conceptions of experience within the contexts of different themes, keeping his conception open and malleable to the various challenges of modern life. In order to outline his philosophy of experience more broadly, therefore, it is necessary to examine and follow several different lines of thought that run through his writings on psychology, education, ethics, politics, art, logic, the philosophy of science, and metaphysics. Dewey presents his conceptions as criticism of and responses to the ingrained philosophical conceptions of Western thought. This presents a challenge to the task of describing his philosophy of experience detached from these different contexts. While challenging, it is nevertheless possible because certain of Dewey's basic insights and analyses permeate all the above-mentioned fields. It is thus

necessary to formulate a general conception of experience in order to clearly illustrate the special characteristics of his philosophical ideas. Only in this light is it possible to fully understand how fundamental and radical a change Dewey's philosophy brought about in our ways of conceptualizing experience.

The novelty of Dewey's philosophy, even for us today, could be summed up by calling his conception of experience *ecological*, even though he never used that term himself. Because Dewey's thought is founded upon the interactive relation of dependence between a living being and its environment, its identification with ecological thought is clearly apparent. Dewey studied the development of experience from the perspective of the acting of living beings, his understanding of which was significantly influenced by biology and the theory of evolution. It must be stressed, however, that Dewey's ecological conception of experience in no way reduces human experience to biology, nor does it support a social-Darwinist interpretation of communal human life based on the dynamics of competition and struggle. Instead, Dewey's thought leads us to investigate, from multiple perspectives, what kinds of connections link human life and culture with other living and non-living beings.²

The main thread of this book is Dewey's aim to show how his new conception of experience facilitates our understanding of the ways in which human beings are connected to nature as a whole. At the same time, I will bring into relief the central idea that connects the different areas of his philosophy, namely the thought that experience evolves as a learning process in which individuals continually apply new meanings to what they

have experienced. According to Dewey, the most refined form of this process is the democratic way of life. To clarify these ideas, I will analyze Dewey's philosophy of experience step by step, starting in the first chapter by bringing together from various contexts Dewey's views regarding the modern conception of experience that still dominates our thinking and acting. This task requires delving into certain stages of the history of Western philosophy that Dewey considered pivotal. My aim here is to draw a coherent picture of how he understood and interpreted the historical development of the conception of experience.

Towards the end of the first chapter I will investigate the starting points from which Dewey formulated his own philosophy of experience. I will go on to explain the main features of this philosophy with the aim of presenting it in the broadest possible form. With this in mind, it is therefore necessary to pay special attention to the aspects that can be broadened to include all living things that have experiences. Although Dewey did not comprehensively explain his conception of experience from such a general perspective, I believe that concentrating on what connects the experiences of all living things is the best way to illustrate the fundamental basis of his philosophy. Furthermore, it also helps us to grasp Dewey's ambitious attempt to discredit the modern harmful division between nature and culture that still dominates Western thought.

The second chapter deals with Dewey's conception of what separates human experience from the experiences of other living beings. I pay attention here to the characteristics of human experience that, according to

John Dewey's philosophy is becoming extremely relevant for our times. From being one of the best-known thinkers in the world in the early 1900s, Dewey's ideas went into near oblivion for decades. Now it seems that his philosophy was well ahead of his time. Most notably, he created a new philosophy of experience that enables us to rethink our place within nature.

The main innovation of Dewey's thinking was his new way of understanding the experience of all living beings. Influenced by the theory of evolution, he understood experience as a continuously developing interaction between acting individuals and their environments. From this perspective, Dewey detected the fragmentation of experiences inherent within the modern way of life. The tools he developed to counter this are based upon learning collectively from individual experiences.

John Dewey's Ecology of Experience reveals the relevance of Dewey's ideas for our contemporary social, political and ecological crises. It creates a comprehensive picture of his thinking on human psychology, education, ethics, science, art and religion. In its conclusion, the book assesses the main theme in his political philosophy: the democratic way of life.

