

## ***John Dewey on the continuity of art and morals within the consummated experience***

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“To aesthetic experience, the philosopher must go to understand  
what experience is.”  
(Dewey 1934, p. 278)

### **The artistic experience as a consummate experience**

The artistic experience has the achievement of the culmination of the individual-environment interaction in which experience consists as an explicit objective. In the majority of our experiences that interaction does not imply integration; the emotions and the intentions of the subject are not materialized in what is done. As a result they are accompanied by dispersion or routine. However, there are activities, such as a conversation, a game, etc. Which achieve complete singularity, which are lived as complete or a culmination. According to Dewey, the function of art is to intentionally reach the culmination of experience and consequently the aesthetic theory of Dewey allows the understanding of his notion of experience, the root of his philosophy, while at the same time as dissolving some erroneous interpretations of his empiricism.

The majority of the incorrect interpretations of his instrumentalism derive from understanding it as a type of positivism that tries to turn philosophy into an experimental investigation, just as within a science. In spite of the emphasis Dewey puts on applying an investigative method to philosophy, he does not reduce thought to an instrumental activity applicable to whatever type of imposed

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purpose, given that in the philosophy of Dewey the means are inseparable from the ends, and this integration of means and ends is explicitly manifest in art.

For that reason, the publication of Dewey's *Art as Experience* surprised many who were considered supporters of his naturalism and pragmatism. Bernstein reports the reaction of one of them in this way. "Has Dewey inverted his Hegelianism in recent years? Or have I understood so little of pragmatism that I have only seen the half of it and perhaps that of least importance?" (Bernstein 2010, p. 181)

Against the abstract interpretation of experience in the empiricist and positivist tradition, as perceptions contained within an isolated and introspective conscience, Dewey refers us to the everyday experiences lived by individuals in order to analyse culminating experiences. I will follow Dewey's discourse in order to show those traits of culminating experiences which are emphasized, according to our author, within the aesthetic experience.

In ordinary language we describe culminating experiences such as "an experience", a conversation, a game or a lecture as a culminating experience if certain requirements are met. We are dealing with experiences, Dewey maintains, which stand out qualitatively from the remainder of lived experiences. They possess a singularity which makes them unique, and thus we are dealing with self-sufficient activities (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 42) In this type of experience there is an organic relationship, an integration, between that which the individual does and is subjected to, and for that reason they are experiences which do not cease but which flow towards their culmination. We are thus not dealing with a mechanical reaction to an external factor, as is the case of the hand pulling away from the fire, but that there is within the culminating experience a harmony between the distinct aspects of the individual interacting with his environment.

The singularity and unity of this type of experience is derived from the organic integration of the elements of which it is composed. The majority of everyday experiences do not culminate but cease. That is to say, there is a factor experienced as external which terminates the action. There is a lack of unity between the sentiments of the individual, his intentions and his action, and as a consequence those elements within the environment to which they relate manifest themselves as opposites.

In culminating experiences the emotions of the individual underpin and strengthen the experienced environmental elements, which are perceived as integrated. The perceived harmony is felt, the felt harmony is perceived, and intelligence and emotions combine and strengthen in this type of experience (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 44) This harmony is that which provides aesthetic quality to culminating experiences.

Dewey presents the concept of virtue from the classics as a mark of the culminating experience (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 46). Virtue is that excellence in the activity that makes it self-sufficient. Excellence derives from harmony, which is the

result of the combination of the distinct elements; emotive, intellectual, volitional, of actions, which strengthen themselves mutually. For that reason virtue strengthens and intensifies the disposition of the person and empowers growth, which is manifest and develops through activity. Thus for the Greeks there was an aesthetic quality in moral behaviour.

The reference of art to the culminating experience allows it to be related to other types of culminating experience, such as the scientific or the moral (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 45). The difference consists in the purpose of these activities, the materials worked with and the emotive, intellectual or productive dimensions emphasized. Scientific activities use symbols whereas artistic activities work directly with the qualities of the materials used. In scientific activity the intellectual aspect stands out, as we are dealing with the understanding of a question. In the case of the aesthetic experience the qualities of materials are integrated with the intentionality of the artist. Thus the emotional integration of the elements of the work is understood, that is to say the emotive and intellectual characters of the work are inseparable.

The distinction between the artistic experience and the scientific experience allows Dewey to demonstrate the meaning of the same. The artistic experience has as its purpose the realization of the culminating character of experience, and in this way expresses and clarifies the living and aesthetic character of the culminating experience. (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 53)

### **The overcoming of dualism in Dewey's aesthetic theory and continuity in art and morality.**

Dewey realigns art with experience, which allows him to integrate the productive and contemplative dimensions of artistic activity, and also analyse the mutual implication of ends and means which the work of art represents. In the modern age, Dewey thinks, the ends have been separated from the means, the first being interpreted as purely subjective, and the second as merely external. This dualism which affects artistic theory impedes an understanding of art and is the result of the disintegration of experience. Dewey's aesthetic theory is thus of capital importance as by analysing the integration of aesthetic experience it allows the understanding and recuperation of the integral meaning of the experience itself. This is essential for understanding the meaning of the ends and overcoming the purely subjective interpretation of those values which undermine the moral.

In the modern age, Dewey affirms, works of art have been decoupled from the position they occupied in the life of the community, from the forum, from temples, and have been located in museums, places specifically designated for aesthetic recreation. This concept of art is a response to specific historical conditions. Museums came about in Europe as an expression of the power of nations and monarchs; places in which the trophies of some of their conquests

were displayed. Imperialism and nationalism were factors that contributed to the new situation, and together with these and closely connected to this development was capitalism. Works of art have been severed from the activity producing them and they are regarded as “pieces” or “gems” which express the economic and social status of whoever purchases them. Dewey goes further: “Moreover, works of art are now produced, like other articles, for sale in the market.” (Dewey 1934, p.15)

However, the fragmentation and isolation of art with respect to other dimensions of human experience and life within a community is not exclusive to art, but a characteristic of modern life. Dewey points out: “Life is compartmentalized [...] religion, morals, politics, business has each its own compartment, within which it is fitting each should remain, art, too, must have its peculiar and private realm. Compartmentalization of occupations and interests brings about separation of that mode of activity commonly called “practice” from insight, of imagination from executive doing, of significant purpose from work, of emotion” (Dewey 1934, pp. 26-27).

The fragmentation of modern life has its origin in a disintegration within the practical and intentional dimension of the activity (Cf. Dewey 1934, p.12) This produces a rupture in the individual himself, of his practice and his principles, which transforms the working class into an instrument of external intention. At the same time principles, without any relationship to practice, either become futile or are violently imposed. Dewey outlined the nihilism of modern society, social conflicts and the alienated state of the worker doing work in which he is removed from its intentions and projects, that is to say from its human dimension, as did other thinkers of his time.

Dewey is widely known for considering that this fragmentation which results in alienation at work and the nihilism of values is the result of dualism and the abrupt parting of the ways between theory and practice which is present in the modern age. This theory - practice dualism began in the Greek era<sup>1</sup>. The Greeks “naturalized” social separation between the ruling class and the slaves dedicated to productive activity. This led them to believe that there was an essential natural order which ordered and integrated human life within the community.

The natural separation between directive activities, free and self-sufficient, and those of the body, productive and subordinate, led the Greeks to interpret artistic production as the reproduction of essential universals through craftsmanship. The natural essences introduced order, perfection and beauty. In that way nature was interpreted as a type of artist who directed each activity towards its own perfection, integrating each one within a harmonic, determined and finite cosmos. The Greeks possessed a wide aesthetic sense and in fact extrapolated the virtue

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<sup>1</sup>Bernstein beautifully illustrates Dewey’s criticisms of the Greek separation of production and contemplation. For a more detailed analysis see Bernstein 2010, p.181.

of technique, applying it to the moral and political fields, which they transformed into an art.

The changes in living conditions in the modern age, the developments in trade and the appearance of the bourgeoisie all led to the appearance of the individual. The human being was interpreted as being naturally independent. The rational nature of the individual allows him to direct himself, determining his own life unconditionally; that is to say removed from physical nature and society. The essences, as natural references within human life, become meaningless. The Scientific Revolution, with its Aristotelian critique of physics and cosmology, contributed towards their elimination. The conclusion is that the ends are located within consciousness, and consciousness is interpreted as having substance, that is to say independent or, in other words, introspective.

Thus Cartesian dualism introduced a separation between two types of reality, the thinking substance and that with extension; pure interiority and pure exteriority. Even the empiricists, in an attempt to regain experience as a reference for ideas, reduce them to perceptions, which they define as pure contents of consciousness.

The most notable manifestation of this dualism, which in the modern age means a rupture between the subject and the physical and social world, was the separation of means and ends within the whole range of human activity. The analysis of objective events was considered a function of science; the determination of the ends, being solely intentional, a task for the moral. The result was that science was linked more and more with technical issues and production, and the moral, directed as it was towards intentions and principals, was separated from productive activities considered to be purely instrumental. Ultimately this means-ends separation entailed the fragmentation of human life; the public and political from the private and moral, science from ethics. Art also suffered the consequences of the fragmentation of life and was separated from the rest of human experience and life in the community.

Dewey maintains, however, that art is manifest proof of the integration of means and ends within experience (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 31) The intentions of the artist are realised through those means within the environment, via perfect interaction in which all factors of which it is composed, emotions, movements of the body, ideas, converge and strengthen each other. The perfect integration of artistic experience transforms the interaction into communication and participation (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 28) For that reason the understanding of art as experience implies the recovery of the very integration of which experience consists, which at the same time allows the recovery of a vital sense of the ends and thus the continuity between art and the moral.

Finally I will move on to analyse the Deweyan explanation of the integration of perception and action in artistic production and aesthetic appreciation, and thanks to the communication between the artist and whoever appreciates the work of art, the civilizing, moral and social function of art itself.

According to Dewey, aesthetic perception and artistic production are organically linked during the creation process (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 56) The perception of the qualitative relationship between the elements that make up the work, in which imagination, sensation and intelligence concur, is what produces aesthetic taste. The integration, which characterizes the work of art, is that which produces satisfaction on its perception, and for that reason appreciation is a test that allows the calibration of the quality of a work. Without this aesthetic component the work would be merely technique. Thus the artist calibrates aesthetically the quality of the work he produces. Taste in appreciation and productive activity are mutually implied in the process of generation of the work, but also at the moment of aesthetic appreciation.

Neither is aesthetic appreciation on the part of the observer passive. For taste to be aesthetic the observer must perceive the relationship between the different elements in an integrated whole (Cf. Dewey 1934, p. 58). In this way whoever appreciates a work of art recreates his own experience. If this labour of recreation, selection and integration is not present then according to Dewey there is no aesthetic appreciation, but recognition through the work of something external to it.

Art as experience, according to Dewey's analysis, conducts and clarifies that trait which makes the experience paradigmatic and genuine, namely integration. Within artistic experience various factors from human experience are strengthened and for that reason, through art, experience is enriched and life is intensified. Art is an indispensable element for vital growth and for that reason it has a moral dimension.

Dewey considers that the fruit of this vital growth is the satisfaction which it generates, which is one of the indispensable ingredients of happiness. The contemporary separation between the productive and material from the ideal has deprived daily and business life of aesthetic qualities, which are not considered productive. In addition, and given that aesthetic enjoyment and appreciation are considered to be isolated from the conditions in which they are developed, individuals are deprived of that artistic training necessary for aesthetic enjoyment<sup>2</sup>. Dewey collaborated with Barnes, to whom his work *Art as Experience* was dedicated, in setting up the foundation which this philanthropic businessman dedicated to artistic education<sup>3</sup>.

In addition art allows the discovery and communication of values and ends, thus serving as a preamble to the moral. Art gives us the possibility to understand the vital meaning of the ends and their integration within experience, which makes possible the avoidance of adulterations in moral theory interpreted as exclusively

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<sup>2</sup> According to Dewey, the capacities, which could be developed within aesthetic enjoyment, without training, are blighted and become reduced to pleasurable excitations. The isolation of art has provoked a lack of aesthetic taste in daily life. Dewey 1934, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Dewey expresses his gratitude to Albert C. Barnes in the prologue to *Art as Experience*, which he considers to a large extent the fruit of his conversations with Barnes.

natural, as occurs in classical ethics, or as exclusively subjective, as occurs in modern ethics.

## **Conclusion**

The aesthetic theory of Dewey, the interpretation of art as experience, allows an understanding of the integral meaning of the experience itself, thus breaking with dualism. The separation of the natural as pure objectivity and exteriority from the intentional as pure subjectivity and interiority, that which dualism leads to in the modern age, has as a result the fragmentation of life and experience. On losing the reference which integrated them, the moral is separated from science and art, and retires to its own space isolated from other manifestations of communal life.

Within this state of affairs the aesthetic theory of Dewey and the reference of art to experience take on vital importance. According to Dewey art is a test of the integration between those subjective and objective aspects within experience, given that in the artistic experience, as much in its productive as in its appreciative dimensions, they appear as integrated. The intentions of the artist and of whoever contemplates the work appear integrated and expressed through the materials within the environment. Art explicitly realizes, clarifies in the words of Dewey, the integral character of culminating experience, that is to say it vitally intensifies the experience, allowing both the growth of the person and the humanization of the environment.

The interpretation of art as experience which Dewey offers allows us to circumvent the dualism which runs through moral theory, offering a vital interpretation of the ends. According to Dewey the ends are neither natural determinations, as classical moral theory maintains, nor are they purely subjective intentions, as maintained in the modern age, but through an integration of both points of view they are intentions which are expressed and refer to the natural and social media. In this way the reference to experience and the integral meaning of the same in Dewey offers us an understanding of the ends which serves as a preamble to moral theory.

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