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PATHWAYS TO INTERACTIONS IN PHILOSOPHICAL TRAINING: DEWEY'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND EMBODIED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT. This paper builds on John Dewey's views on interactions to suggest pathways for enriching the study of philosophy. Along with the notions of body-mind and organism-environment transactions, interactions are part of a philosophical project with transformative implications for education as well. The first part of the paper will contextualize Dewey's discussion of interactions with regard to his philosophy of experience and democratic theory. The second one will propose two criteria with regard to enriching philosophical training in ways that engage the mind and the body - increasing sociocultural awareness and generating integrative learning experiences – and will add a few examples of how the study of philosophy could benefit from applying an interactionist perspective.

Keywords: education, experience, interaction, philosophy, John Dewey.

1. Interactions: The normative view

In his writings on philosophy of education, Dewey searched for principles and methods that would address schools as centers of associational life. His concern that they were greatly disconnected not only from the life experience of the young, but also from the economy, science, and culture of communities prompted a lifelong inquiry into how education could enable individual growth and social connection. It is, therefore, not surprising that the topic of interactions was prominent in Dewey's philosophy prior to its specialized use in linguistics and the social sciences. His reflections on interactions are often part of theoretical and practical proposals for

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reforming educational systems, so that these should absorb what is best from the rest of society and integrate individuals capable of creative contributions back into their communities. Within this framework, there is also a more technical approach, as I will show later, but to begin with, there are two main ideas that suggest how Dewey conceived of interactions in education.

1.1. Interaction, growth and democratic values

First of all, schools should prove their relevance in terms of "enlarging and improving experience."[2] In contrast to this view stood the reality of traditional education, with its emphasis on imparting knowledge and the great values of the past, its rigid teaching and – as Dewey recounted his own efforts to supply a school with some child-friendly desks and chairs –, with school furniture made only "for listening"[3]. Information from the mature minds was planted into those of the young in ways that failed to stimulate growth, also due to the insufficient interaction between the aims of educational institutions at various levels. Dewey gave a historical account to explain the difficulties arising from "the isolation of the various parts of the school system"[4], for example how isolating teacher training schools from academic-oriented colleges compromised with both the quality of educational content and pedagogical skills. Such fragmentation reflected a division of aims, as the ideals of "moral development, practical utility, general culture, discipline, and professional training"[5] did not develop in a cumulative and unitary fashion. In the end, students found themselves deprived of experiences with educational value, and isolated from life.

In order to move beyond an "unduly scholastic and formal notion of education"[6], Dewey believed that schools should encourage experiential learning by engaging both cognition and action. He criticized the hierarchical division between intellectual and practical activities embedded in the rationalist philosophy of ancient Greece, and supported by the importance given to quietude and discipline in traditional schools. The solution, however, was not to be found only in vocational education, where children could have a grasp of history or the sciences by cooking, weaving, binding books or working with various materials.

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[2] Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Aakar Books, 2004, p. 7.

[3] Dewey, J., *The School and Society*, in *The Child and The Curriculum. The School and Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 31.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 64.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 71.

[6] Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Aakar Books, 2004, p. 4.

In his view, all forms of education should consider the importance of a philosophy of experience for individual growth. Thus, education was best understood as "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."[7] This definition is further clarified by the distinction between educative and mis-educative experiences in terms of their supporting or preventing growth. Even if traditional teaching methods are enriched, improper planning may result in mere entertainment and improvisation. Consequently, students may develop a "lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness" or simply acquire new routines that would narrow their horizons for future experiences[8]. In contrast, educative experiences should be cumulatively connected, so as to allow a conscious integration of each content and encourage further growth along a clear direction, thus avoiding the onset of "centrifugal habits"[9].

Secondly, education should enable individuals to participate fully in democratic life. Socialization is a generic aim, but Dewey was more interested in how education can reflect the quality of life made possible by democratic arrangements. The political ideals of free and equitable human relations, a variety of shared interests and modes of association, as well as a collaborative mindset were to be integrated in day-to-day educational practices. Diversity, equity and cooperation are, in this sense, normative requirements for the domain of education; just as an ideal society should provide the individual with as many and as valuable interactions as possible – through communication with like-minded and different others, through opportunities for political participation, work, leisure, welfare and aesthetic pleasures –, schools should expose students to various backgrounds, mindsets, occupations and relationships in a coherent framework for experiential learning. In contrast, social segregation, deep inequalities or elitism impoverish the quality of interactions, and have a negative impact on educational experiences.

Dewey's focus on the organic relation between educational principles and practices, and, on the other hand, democratic values, raised the standards for teachers. Anyone on a mission to respect one's students as one's moral equals and to replace bookish instruction with open (yet not haphazard) communication of learning had to change many habits of interaction that had governed education for centuries. "Giving and taking of orders"[10] is an obvious example of habit incompatible

[7] *Ibid*., p. 83.

[8] Dewey, J., *Experience and Education*, Touchstone, 1997, pp. 25-26.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 26.

[10] Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Aakar Books, 2004, p. 5.

with a democratic mindset. Similarly, education should "take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation"[11], and teachers should know their students well (the environments they come from, the limitations and habits they may have acquired, their needs, interests and capacities), so that they could "direct the experience of the young without engaging in imposition."[12]

1.2. **Interaction as a criterion of experience**

Dewey further defined interaction as a concept within his philosophy of experience. Along with continuity, interaction is a criterion distinguishing educative from mis-educative experiences. If there is continuity, each experience will incorporate something from the previous ones and develop an individual's capacity to enjoy richer experiences. This is what Dewey refers to as the "longitudinal" aspect of experience[13], and its importance is discussed with respect to the role of teachers, who should give a direction conducive to growth to the "experiential continuum". Interaction is the "lateral" aspect of experience. In this sense, Dewey writes: "It assigns equal rights to both factors in experience-objective and internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a *situation*."[14]

Loyalty to interaction as a criterion of experience implies that schools should offer learners diverse possibilities for relating to their environment, which includes all forms of intellectual and cultural heritage, nature, actual living conditions, and what one may conjure up in one's imagination. Without interaction, education as genuine communication is not possible, and, considering that for Dewey social and biological life should be seen as processes of transmission[15], the objective conditions of experience should not be disregarded for fear of empowering teachers too much and limiting students' creative input. No experience is formed only in one's mind; as Dewey wrote, "An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment […]".[16]

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[11] *Ibid*., p. 129.
[12] Dewey, J., *Experience and Education*, Touchstone, 1997, p. 40.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 44.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 42.
[15] Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Aakar Books, 2004, p. 3.
[16] Dewey, J., *Experience and Education*, Touchstone, 1997, p. 43.

Dewey's notion of transaction (Trans-Action) developed from an understanding of man as an organism having gone through a process of evolution, which justified the hypothesis that "all of his behavings, including his most advanced knowings" could be seen "as activities not of himself alone, nor even as primarily his, but as processes of the full situation of organism-environment."[17] This goes beyond stimulus-response or causal interconnection models, and establishes a more relational framework implying that our understanding of the environment depends on engaging in transactions with it. Dewey's view of organism-environment transactions offered a new understanding of adaptive action and change, and opened a broad field of possibilities relevant for education as well: rational thought is not divorced from nature; social institutions are not outcomes of an aggregation of interests circumscribed by rights in relatively predictable contexts, but rather experimental frameworks; our social selves are not divorced from our biological selves; moral judgments often reflect a socio-biological context; the arts did not develop in isolation from nature and crafts.

2. Implications for the study of philosophy

In a recent paper, Iris Laner addressed the question of reorienting contemporary educational policies towards a genuine body-mind engagement not only in domains where this conjunction has enjoyed attention, such as education in the arts, but also in domains such as philosophy, which have been traditionally considered intellectual only. Her analysis provides an instructive picture of the ways in which phenomenology, embodied cognition and enactivism have supported the ideas "that processes of learning involve both body and mind and are situated, i.e. have to take into account the learning environment".[18] The paper acknowledges John Dewey's contribution in arguing that the mind and body should be regarded as closely related in learning as well. In the following sections, I will focus on what we can learn from Dewey's views on interactions in order to enrich the experience of teaching and learning philosophy, will suggest two criteria and add a few examples.

[17] Dewey, J.; Bentley, Arthur F., "Interaction and Transaction", *The Journal of Philosophy* 43(19), 1946, p. 506.

[18] Laner, I.,"Reflective interventions: Enactivism and phenomenology on ways of bringing the body into intellectual engagement", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20, 2021, p. 445.

2.1. Increasing sociocultural awareness

Considering the centrality of Dewey's interest in the quality of human relations in schools and democratic societies, having an accurate representation of how others live and think is of great significance. If we think of moral and political philosophy, with their emphasis on values, basic institutions, and models of distributive justice, this requirement would, for one thing, imply that addressing moral dilemmas in the abstract may be insufficient. For example, the idea that in a just society the worst-off should enjoy as good life prospects as possible, which presupposes a scheme of economic distribution to protect them from political domination and secure them a range of primary goods, as developed by Rawls's Difference Principle is often analyzed only as a theoretical proposal. It is, however, questionable whether one can have a representation of Rawls's concept of a moral person and, at the same time, lack an awareness of prevalent attitudes on poverty – for example, of the view that the poor are entirely responsible for their own situation.[19] One does not have to go through experiences such as those described by Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, where the reader gets an idea what poverty may mean, how it physically influences one's sense of taste, and, in the end, one's moral judgments[20]. It is, however, important to have a representation of how poverty and affluence have been addressed in various contexts, in order to increase the relevance of a philosophical debate.

One example of how Dewey aimed to increase sociocultural awareness was the connection of the Laboratory School to Hull House, the first social settlement opened in Chicago by Jane Addams. Within Hull House, Dewey contributed to the creation of the Labor Museum (destined for adult education) which presented the crafts and traditions of the immigrants, including "demonstrations of traditional

[19] See, for example, Clark, C., *Misery and Company. Sympathy in Everyday Life*, University of Chicago Press, 1997; Nussbaum, M.C., *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Harvard University Press, 2013; and Srinivasan, A., "The Politics of Compassion", in Brooks, T. (Ed.), *Political Emotions. Towards a Decent Public Sphere, Palgrave Macmillan*, 2022.

[20] "As a matter of fact, very little of the tramp-monster will survive inquiry. […] Indeed, when one sees how tramps let themselves be bullied by the workhouse officials, it is obvious that they are the most docile, broken-spirited creatures imaginable. Or take the idea that all tramps are drunkards—an idea ridiculous on the face of it. No doubt many tramps would drink if they got the chance, but in the nature of things they cannot get the chance. At this moment a pale watery stuff called beer is sevenpence a pint in England. To be drunk on it would cost at least half a crown, and a man who can command half a crown at all often is not a tramp." Orwell, G., *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Penguin Books, Electronic Edition, 2001, pp. 239-240.

skills and occupations by neighborhood residents."[21] The museum aimed to give visitors an idea of how people used to cater to their own needs and make a living before industrial development – for example how they used to weave or work with metal –, and thus encourage reflection on the consequences that various modes of production have on the economy and culture of social groups. For Dewey, this was also a timely reminder of the public responsibility to address social inequalities in view of their detrimental consequences on political life.[22]

In terms of interactions, complementing classroom activities with visits to museums was a way of showing how changes in the modes of activities and changes in the environment are interconnected. Reflecting on how education could build on individuals' natural interests so that they should engage with the environment as participants, instead of as spectators, Dewey wrote:

> Life activities flourish and fail only in connection with changes of the environment. They are literally bound up with these changes; our desires, emotions, and affections are but various ways in which our doings are tied up with the doings of things and persons about us. Instead of marking a purely personal or subjective realm, separated from the objective and impersonal, they indicate the non-existence of such a separate world.[23]

Museums play an important part in Dewey's educational philosophy as resources allowing students to contextualize what they learn. Again, the danger of yielding to mere entertainment had to be avoided – the experience of a visit to a museum had to be a means for facilitating an experiential cycle in which students learn, expand their perception and understanding, then come back to what they learned knowing how this connects with contexts outside school[24]. The ideal school and university had to be connected with museums that would contribute to developing a "spirit

[21] Durst, A., *Women Educators in the Progressive Era. The Women behind Dewey's Laboratory School*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 105.

[22] "Social settlements, amateur philanthropists and voluntary associations, rather than professional educators, have agitated the questions of child labor and juvenile crime, of adequate recreative facilities and the wider use of the school plant, and even of preparation for making a livelihood." Dewey, J., "On Industrial Education", *Curriculum Inquiry*, 7(1), 1977, p. 53.

[23] Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Aakar Books, 2004, p. 136.

[24] For Dewey's views on the educational potential of the museums and their place within an educational philosophy based on experience, see Hein, G.E., "John Dewey and Museum Education", *Curator* 47/4, 2004, pp. 413-427 and Hein, G.E., "John Dewey's "Wholly Original Philosophy" and its Significance for Museums", *Curator* 49/2, 2006, pp. 181-203.

of inquiry"[25] and help "break down the barriers that divide the education of the little child from the instruction of the maturing youth."[26] This was particularly important with regard to the arts, which Dewey believed should be seen as developing from the work of the artisan, and acknowledged as a "living union of thought and the instrument of expression."[27]

2.2. **Integrative learning experiences**

Teaching philosophy of culture and, in particular, aesthetics, could be the first ground to test the potential of interactions for embodied learning, for example by choosing a work of art, approaching it in a contemplative mode, then creating a context to address "the students' bodily situation of being confronted with a new social or spatial experience and encourage them to engage with it."[28] Bringing the arts in the philosophy class by means of drawing or dancing in response to a topic could be a method of embodied learning, since it involves interacting with materials/ space, being aware of one's emotions in the process of creating something, as well as of one's capacity for perceiving details. Some possibilities that have been explored and could be included in philosophy classes are "role plays, enactments of moral dilemmas", performances that investigate philosophical ideas, such as, for example, confirmation bias[29] and, in a powerful way which often carries political implications, contemporary body art[30].

Another suggestion can be to complement a philosophical debate about what it means to be creative with actual exercises that unfold in one's personal process. *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, a book published in 1979 by artist and teacher Betty Edwards, is a rich guide on how visual thinking can be trained in ways that do not necessitate inborn talent. Edwards's method developed after having noticed that some of her high school students had difficulties in representing objects in space for still life studies, yet they managed very well to copy a Picasso

[25] Dewey, J., *The School and Society*, in *The Child and The Curriculum. The School and Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 79.

[26] *Ibid*., p. 92.

[27] Dewey, J., *The School and Society*, in *The Child and The Curriculum. The School and Society*, University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 89.

[28] Laner, I., "Reflective interventions: Enactivism and phenomenology on ways of bringing the body into intellectual engagement", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20, 2021, p. 447.

[29] *Ibid*., p. 458.

[30] Jay, M., "Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art", *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 36 (4), 2002, pp. 55-69.

drawing that was placed upside down. Based on Roger W. Sperry's research on brain-hemisphere functions and her teaching experience, Edwards discovered that such difficulties which discourage many people to make attempts at drawing result from the prevalence of the logical-sequential mode of thinking over the visual-simultaneous one, and that they could be overcome by training. Her method was successful not only with students, but also with professionals from various fields with specific problem-solving targets (e.g. customer relations or team efficiency). It included translating language into image by using concepts from the visual arts – for example, participants were trained to perceive the edges of a problem (where it begins and where it ends), its relationships, proportions, lights and shadows (what is known versus the unknown).

Applying some insights from Edwards's method in philosophy classes, although heuristically, may allow for creative reinterpretations of classic problems. Take, for example, the three classical ethical theories – virtue ethics, deontologism and utilitarianism – that are textbook material for exploring moral deliberation. They are usually presented in this historical sequence, uncovering their core criteria, then discussing comparatively what kind of situations each is best suited to cover, where each is insufficient and where dilemmas arise. In the end, it is assumed that one's capacities for moral deliberation are enriched, so that one would be able to better assess personal, political and organizational decisions. However, each theory has its own language which hardly accommodates the others, and this is an intuition which may perhaps be represented graphically – each theory has some edges, as some relationships between values, and some negative spaces which, as opposed to the concept of positive forms (i.e. the conceptual assets of the theory) represent the background.

Applying drawing as a second language for problem-solving may also connect with Dewey's experimentalism if we think that drawing, especially for somebody lacking knowledge of the techniques, is a search for expression that implies trial and error in an embodied and situational way. It may also include a collaborative, community-of-inquiry learning style, which presupposes not only exchanging experiences about what each chose to draw and how they felt about it, but active contributions to redefining problems. As a related consequence, drawing may provide a better sense of perspective with regard to what sometimes seems the absolute status of moral judgments.

Writing on the impact of scientific thinking upon ethical reasoning, which challenged the ultimate laws view by indicating a plurality of goods and ends, Dewey criticized the tradition which used to "subordinate every particular case to

adjudication by a fixed principle."[31] Instead of focusing on fixed ends and universal rules, reasoning in moral philosophy could be better expressed in terms of hypotheses, laws, particular cases, and specific methods. In his view,

> Action is always specific, concrete, individualized, unique. And consequently judgments as to acts to be performed must be similarly specific. To say that a man seeks health or justice is only to say that he seeks to live healthily or justly. These things, like truth, are adverbial. They are modifiers of action in special cases. How to live healthily or justly is a matter which differs with every person. It varies with his past experience, his opportunities, his temperamental and acquired weaknesses and abilities. […] Healthy living is not something to be attained by itself apart from other ways of living.[32]

Dewey's anti-intellectualist stance included criticism of "cook-book recipes"[33], of the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goods, ideal and lower ends – in which he identifies a source of political domination – and a concern for the practical meaning of each situation. By applying the experimental method, it would be possible to assess "every quality that is judged to be good according as it contributes to amelioration of existing ills."[34] This would be more fruitful than theoretical constructions separated from social problems and their historical roots. Therefore, the new philosophical terminology would include: observation, discovery, needs, conditions, obstacles, resources, plan, method, course of action, demonstration. All these encourage embodied explorations, since they refer to experiences and often presuppose trial and error of a kind that is part of the process of artistic creation.

3. Conclusions

Dewey's emphasis on the relational, collaborative dimension of life and of grounding philosophy in experience shaped an approach of interactions that underlies his normative views on democracy and education. In a general sense, interactions are essential for reintegrating educational institutions into society in terms of relevance of their curricula and methods, but also in the sense that they should provide a fair and diverse environment reflecting the quality of life in an

[31] Dewey, J., *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Henry Holt & Co., 1920, p. 163.
[32] *Ibid*, p. 167.
[33] *Ibid*, pp. 169-170.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 172.

ideal democratic society. Interaction is also one of the two criteria of experience presented as part of an argument for a philosophy of education understood as reconstruction of experience.

Within this framework, the paper initiated an investigation in broad strokes into how the study of philosophy can generate more sociocultural awareness and learning experiences that engage both the mind and the body. One direction recommended by Dewey was connecting schools and universities to museums. In terms of experiential learning, museum education can bring sociocultural awareness due to exposure to environments no longer replicable (because the class structure has changed, occupations have disappeared, etc.) In addition, it nurtures imagination, which Dewey believed to be an important capacity allowing us to assimilate something of somebody else's experience in order to be able to communicate our own.

Another idea, related to Dewey's critique of the body-mind dualism and of intellectualism in education, is to integrate the arts[35] in the philosophy class in ways that stimulate students' sensory-bodily engagement and situated learning. Edwards's method of right-brain drawing could be such a way, as it was also successfully applied for problem-solving in professional contexts. In the case of philosophy, where the use of a jargon can sometimes obscure the complexity of the problems, formulating a problem by drawing it using concepts from the visual arts may reorient understanding, stimulate creativity, and, in the long run, help establish a view of multiple and dynamic human intelligence.

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[35] For an inquiry into bioart and biotech art and some suggestions of the moral dilemmas that could be addressed in a philosophy classroom, see Papuc, I., " Bioart – A New Challenge in Contemporary Art", *Studia UBB Philosophia*, vol 64 (2019), Special Issue, 141-170.

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