

## **The Experience in the Existential World, According to Dewey**

**Leoni Maria Padilha Henning<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Universidade Estadual de Londrina (UEL), Londrina/PR – Brazil

**ABSTRACT – The Experience in the Existential World, According to Dewey.** This bibliographic study aims to clarify Dewey's understanding of existence as a natural instance where the experiences of organisms found there in a permanent transaction occur. Natural existence is the world of fragility, unpredictability, contingencies, due to the conflict of opposing forces, whose energy sustains the conservation or deterioration of life, reason for the unworthiness of experience. Among the elements that make up nature in the scope of life are humans, who, having the ability to develop investigative and reflective thinking, and favored by their plastic nature, can rise to the level of improvement in social existence, particularly through education.

**Keywords: Existence. Experience. Life. Nature. Education.**

**RESUMO – A Experiência no Mundo Existencial, Segundo Dewey.** Este estudo bibliográfico tem por objetivo explicitar a compreensão de Dewey sobre a existência enquanto instância natural onde ocorrem as experiências dos organismos ali encontrados em situação de transação permanente. A existência natural é o mundo da fragilidade, imprevisibilidade, contingências, devido ao conflito de forças opostas, cuja energia sustenta a conservação ou deterioração da vida, motivo do desmerecimento da experiência. Dentre os elementos que compõem a natureza no âmbito da vida se encontram os humanos que, por possuírem a capacidade de desenvolvimento do pensamento investigativo e reflexivo, e favorecidos pela sua natureza plástica, podem alçar ao patamar de aprimoramento na existência social, particularmente pela educação.

**Palavras-chave: Existência. Experiência. Vida. Natureza. Educação.**

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper suggests the effort to understand *the experience of existence* in Dewey, since the concept of experience is nuclear in his thinking, it needs to be clarified to distinguish it from that pertaining to other authors who make it unique in the theoretical context adopted. In Dewey's case, we warn, in principle, that it is *natural experience*, that is, that which occurs in nature, being part of a vast constellation of elements necessarily rooted in life. The concept is originally structured in this primary level of relations, extending to the social, educational and political scope.

Although the term existence may refer us to the very philosophical thinking of the twentieth century, especially that flourished in the period after the Great World Wars, more specifically, from the 1940s, Dewey used this concept to typify the conceptual basis of his theory outlining the theoretical framework of his philosophy driven by the discussion of naturalism that thrived in the previous century. Thus, unlike other approaches that focus on existence, the author did not treat the concept with the same perspective as those who emphasized the individual aspects of singularity, subjectivity, loneliness and existential abandonment, personality as opposed to fixed and unchanging essences, and so on, even though in some cases it may come very close to the debate that emphasizes the fleetingness and fragility of the existential world. Dewey criticizes the philosophies that operated on the basis of dualisms, making them sources of gaps present in the arguments of his time and producers of harmful damages to culture, in general. This is precisely because they disregard the primary source of the articulated experiences with nature and life, seeking in another level – higher – the absolute and definite meanings of existence. For him, the world in which we live, therefore being configured as the place where we carry out our experiences, is essentially that of the natural, concrete and real existence where we operate in every way.

In his emblematic work *Experience and Nature* (1926), the author is dedicated to clarifying what he understands by *existence*, naming centrally three chapters with the term. But it is in chapter two of that work, entitled *Existence as precarious and as stable*<sup>1</sup>, that we seek to find the fundamental particularities of the concept, having taken this as the main task of this article, considering the other chapters for further study. Existence, for Dewey, concerns the most fundamental thing in reality, since it constitutes the level in which the real experiences resulting from the contact established in the network of the elements present in the world occur, in what, finally, occurs in life, and which abundantly highlights the contrasts and contradictions of reality. Contrary to a supposed superior sphere or what would be proper to a perfect reality, according to the author, constitutes exactly what is good and what is bad at the same time, the strong and the weak, the necessary and the contingent. Reality is therefore by definition problematic, thought provoking, provocative.

Therefore, since there is no guarantee in the primary dimension of life in the world of life for an absolutely safe and successful future, it is up to each to help develop democratic and educational institutions to live in this real and natural context of existence, operating in reality with intelligent method of action and investigation. Thus, when we refer to reflective experience or democratic experience, we are dealing with exquisite spheres of human experience, but never detached from those that give it meaning and origin, the primary or gross experience of the world of life and nature in the event of such detachment from the primary natural realm, such experience could not even be recognized as such. Research is imperative in the process of humanization so that we do not constitute ourselves dragged, blindly or passively, by the permanent change proper to reality.

In this regard, individuals must accompany the perennial movement of the world and its transformations, avoiding discontinuity and chaos, spontaneous and diffuse movement, but instead driving the game of growth of themselves and the world. Hence the author's commitment to construct a *theory of experience* by recovering its value in philosophical production, trying to combat mistaken positions and the pernicious dualisms that, because they are in the theoretical opposite, place experience – because it is contingent, fleeting and unpredictable – as an element detrimental to human knowledge in general, leading men, in some cases, to seek a sure, unchanging, true reality that they will never find. Or, worse, such guidelines mislead the men of the world of elementary experience, the source of meaning and indispensable for healthy individual and social growth, preventing them from reacting to the forces present in nature as active participants in the process of reality transformation.

In this venture, Dewey publishes *Reconstruction in philosophy* (1982) in which he suggests to Philosophy the use of the problematizing scientific model to revise its own principles, since, in face of the crises generated in the interwar period, it would be necessary to identify the new problems with an investigative attitude connected with the reality from which such concerns emerge. Thus, the author takes a critical position on the traditional philosophy loaded with precepts and formulas contained in the model of eternal truths, surpassed by the problematizing model that science proposes in valuing experience. For him, this parallel shows how damaging the dualist attitude is in classifying the dimensions of reality being accessed, for example, by almost disjointed theory and practice, since man-made modalities for understanding them would come from different sources, the mind *versus* the body, etc.

Experience does require consideration of the *principle of continuity*, since our actions move because of the consequences they produce in connection with past experiences, and such actions must be guided by respect for the context, in relation to the environment emerge, doing so intelligently, underpinned by the new logic of inquiry and reflective thinking. Assuming that experience has the subjective aspect with respect to dreams, desires, imagination, needs, purposes, feelings, etc., it

also manifests effects on objective conditions, operates changes, and at the same time, draws lessons, enjoyment of using instruments and tools, and so on found in the *situation*, which likewise results in effects on itself. Thus, we observe that the continuity of the experience must occur at the same time as there is the interaction of the agent with his environment, which is composed of other people, material and immaterial objects, natural environment, that is, the general context in which he is involved. An individual's experience does not occur in isolation.

The subject in *situation* operates *transactions* because he is active and reactive, and the context implies a multiplicity and complexity of composition. Considering *the principle of continuity*, individuals, when experiencing the various situations proper to the composition of reality, learn from them and change them, which may result from this variety of interactions a personality integrated or not. In the latter case, in fact, the *principle of continuity* has been disrespected. In this sense, the strength of an educator is in control, direction, selection, regulation, etc., with regard to objective conditions, equipment, teaching materials, tone of voice, treated subjects, proposed activities, and so on, which can ensure that his initiatives result in an educational experience in the school environment, the understanding of an unfractionated world in disconnected situations. As said, in the first stage of reality, where we are close to everything that exists in nature, adversities and difficulties arise in the imbroglio of the transactions that happen there continuously. Such contradictions, when observed by a reflective mind, are transformed into *problems* which, if well understood through methodical mechanisms and advanced cognition, allow intelligent intervention in the stream of transformations. In fact, it is primarily a matter of survival in nature among the other organisms involved in the movement of reality, and secondly, it works for the betterment of the world.

Faced with this finding and interested in equipping man well to face the *situation* in which he finds himself, the author, for example, defends the history of philosophy (Dewey, 1971), because it shows us how the problems were apprehended at a certain time and space and how they were solved, offering the vitality of thinking, showing them not as dead things. This way of understanding the history of thought prevents ideas from being crystallized by systems and tradition which are often imposed on us as Truth. However, if we have an investigative attitude from the careful search for the origins of ideas and their circumstances, the logical structure of thought presented by a philosopher, the resources and methods used, perhaps we can reuse these contributions by adapting them to the present at the same time that we will be investing in the autonomy of thinking and enhancing development or growth, which is procedural. Once again we can perceive the perspective of continuity of experience, triggered in the historical process. This comprehensive exercise boldly impels us to the gnosiological search in the face of the wonder of the world, filled with difficulties, becoming an environment that creates doubts and provokes intelligence by changing unpredictably. Thus, having different approaches to reality, science

contributes to factual verifiability by testing ideas and hypotheses, while philosophy, co-participating in this endeavor, seeks to grasp the meaning of human experience, its purposes, intentions and involved values. In fact, it is the same basis that dictates the problems and inspires the investigative movement. There is therefore a false separation between the areas of human activity, making art, for example, to be seen as a dimension totally distanced from others. Notwithstanding the specifics of the fields of knowledge, the plateau of life and experience is the same substrate, often unrecognized by the unnatural divorce of the spirit (Dewey, 1969, p. 123).

### **Nature, Life and Experience: an indispensable trilogy for understanding education**

Especially in Chapter 7 of *Experience and Nature*, entitled Nature, Life, and Body-Mind, Dewey shows us the life manifest in the intricate transactions of organisms in nature and their unreliable relationships that occur there and are continuous with each other in the environment. In this context of nature, the author clarifies:

Activity is psycho-physical, but not 'mental', that is, unaware of the meanings [...] life is a feature of events in a peculiar condition of organization, [...] so the 'mind' is a property added, assumed by the sensible creature when it reaches that organized interaction with the other living creatures that is language, communication (Dewey, 1926, p. 258).

In a first attempt at approach, we refer to life as that which relates to the living being as the holder of physical, real and concrete existence, during which the extension and diversity of the experience of an organism, individual or species occurs. Change is, therefore, natural to nature. In this sense, “[...] a living being is one who dominates and regulates for the benefit of his incessant activity the energies that would otherwise destroy him” (Dewey, 1952, p. 19). In the following, the author better clarifies what life would be “[...] a process that renews itself through action on the environment”, resulting in the natural experience of the organisms that live there.

The approach to life and nature points us to a productive route to understanding Deweyan naturalistic ideas, but the complexity of the concept of nature adds other concerns. It is in nature that life unfolds, in which context it feeds on what it needs to sustain itself; using what is there, it transforms what is important for its conservation, development and growth. But, after all, what do we find in the world of natural existential reality, in a situation of permanent dynamism?! Firstly, there is the realm of the physical or material world in which bodies are less resistant to bargaining their energies and perpetuating themselves in the game of forces present there, in whose sphere the psychophysical elements that already present better conditions of interaction and ability to react to the actions of the environment about itself in relation to

the first ones. We also find some organisms that have a mental dimension that allows them not only to be able to act and react with greater impact on the interaction agents with whom they relate, but are able to control their responses because they achieve, with their intelligence and method, the consequences of their own actions in activity with the other organisms. We also have in nature a dimension that broadens the phenomenon of the primary transaction into the open ocean of social relations, allowing men and women to organize themselves in the enjoyment of their achievements in view of an ever-widening shared common interest. It is the social dimension of experience where the educational experience is intended to achieve democratic experience that, in fact, can already begin as a *way of life* and should gradually expand to other sectors of society.

We thus know that individuals and species do not possess in themselves an eternal self-preserving force, naturally disappearing, while, however, in the scenario of life there are other manifestations of struggle against the obstacles encountered by creatures that can survive by changing their own environment. It is, therefore, a “[...] continuous readaptation of the environment to the needs of living organisms” (Dewey, 1952, p. 20). Living is a struggle for our continued existence, which can only be guaranteed by renewal, and life is a process of permanent self-renewal (Dewey, 1952), a process shown in the development of an organism during its ontogeny and in phylogenic evolutionary transformations, to use current terms.

As we have seen, there is the realm of mental and social life, that lived by individuals in the community / society to which they belong. Notably, this is not just a matter of physical life, but intelligent and social life, namely the presence of ideas, beliefs, events, records and interpretations of the elements that are conducive to a time lived with victories and frustrations, etc., and which is so renewable and continuous as the physical life presented above. We talk here about the revitalizable experience, as the customs, ideas and beliefs that continue and change in the experiences performed by the group, even with the collapse of one of its components over the years. But bringing human experience to its natural roots within the brute experience does not solve all the problems. Why? Dewey points out that there is the individual mind distinct from the mind *in* individuals, since individuals, according to the second case, are subject to a system of beliefs, meanings, patterns, etc. instituted by the tradition or valid customs of a time. This factor also makes observation problematic because it is imbued with a “[...] complex apparatus of habits, accepted meanings and techniques” (Dewey, 1926, p. 219). Therefore, in his work he shows us the original point for the development of thought: doubt, perplexity, problem, born in a curious mind in the face of the changeability and contradictions of the precarious world of life, triggering the construction of hypotheses, observation, verification or obvious evidence regarding the hypotheses. This exercise takes precedence over the simple world of empiricism because it replaces repeated and simply observed coincidences with a

safer method of searching for a single explanatory fact about the previously observed conjunction.

The term *experience* can be interpreted either with reference to the *empirical* attitude, or with reference to the *experimental* attitude. Experience is not a rigid and closed thing; it is alive and therefore grows. When dominated by past, custom, routine, it often opposes what is reasonable, what is thought. But experience also includes reflection, which frees us from the surrounding influence of the senses, the appetites, the tradition. Thus it becomes able to accept and assimilate everything that the most exacting and penetrating thought discovers. Indeed, the task of education could be defined as emancipation and broadening of experience. Education takes the individual as relatively plastic, before isolated experiences have crystallized him to the point of making him hopelessly empirical in his mental habits (Dewey, 1959, p. 199, author's emphasis).

Social life necessarily requires education for the preparation of immatures that emerge on the scene, which, through transmission and communication, ensures the continuity of the suggested *social existence*. The author teaches us that “[...] every human experience is ultimately social, that is, it involves contact and communication” (Dewey, 1979, p. 30), and that the life of the group goes on and on naturally, even though each individual disappears, requiring ever more educational efforts so that the intergenerational distance produced by the most complex societies can be hindered. “To educate is [therefore] a matter of necessity” (Dewey, 1952, p. 22), since even for the confrontation of *elementary material existence* human beings are born weak / incomplete and require the teaching of the most basic things for their survival. What about the most complex things then?! The work of the school is urgent. Therefore, teaching and learning are indispensable – behaving a need - for the continued existence of oneself and society. Of course, school is an important means of transmitting / communicating the social framework offered to younger people. It is necessary, however, to select the accumulated padding, to improve the ways of operating educatively to assist in the continuous adaptation of individuals to the permanent flow of transformations, not as a passive, but actively and reactively participatory being. It is therefore urgent that communication between members of a social group broaden their experiences, while ensuring that all are aware of their equal interests, governed by explicit and clear emotional and intellectual strategies, and avoiding this by mere routine or imposition. Hence the transmission and communication education, but in terms that can broaden the more general experiences of individuals, stimulating their imagination, inciting a sense of responsibility when communicating, and translating as a shared social practice, that is, a form life and not just as a group of people *living together*<sup>2</sup>. It is only in society that we have the opportunity to evaluate their own attitudes, beliefs and elaborate knowledge. And this effectively contributes to the

enhancement of one's own experiences. By insisting on more palatable ways of teaching the most immature, we can improve the experience to be conveyed, making it more meaningful. The mere change provoked in someone does not translate into effective experience if we do not consider that this, to be understood as such, must present the active and passive aspects of the action, ensuring continuity, that is, provoking the intellection in obtaining meanings, which will guarantee the continuous movement by the permanent residual accumulation in the organisms, proper to this process. As we see, for Dewey, the immaturity, as well as the dependence and plasticity present in human nature, allow educability and adaptation to the continuous change of reality, not constituting negative aspects. If we were not, we could not glimpse a growth process based on reflection, invention and initiative. On the contrary, we would have to be indispensably led by the already developed adult who would exclusively determine the process of formation in preparation for life.

In the broad sense of experience, we can reaffirm that “[...] a community or social group is sustained by continuous self-renewal and that this renewal is effected through the educational growth of the group's immature components” (Dewey, 1952, p. 31), thus configuring themselves in a permanent process: some disappear, but the group's life is renewed by those who remain in it and the others who enter it. The social group in which an individual is a part can engender favorable conditions, to varying degrees, for his or her educational conduct by sharing one's associated life – which can be caused by indirect education which is, as said, a necessity. But, we know, this is not always so.

Social factors are thus determining as a guide to action for one, for, “Just as the senses require sensible objects to stimulate them, our faculties of observing, remembering, and imagining do not function spontaneously, but are driven by the demands imposed by usual social occupations” (Dewey, 1952, p. 40). Considering the institutional forms of the most complex societies, when entering a school, the individual may be better oriented, in order to better develop their skills, when faced with professionals who select the best factors brought from the more general social environment in which they live. It also offers other elements favorable to its development. In addition, the school has a duty to coordinate the influx of the varied experiences to which the individual is at the mercy of social life, namely, the codes proper to each sector of society: church, media, family, street, etc., integrating, debugging them. In the context of school experience, we can say that the most elementary social experience continues in the process of operation of human beings, who, by definition, being *action beings* in the context in which they live, present in the school environment the same aspects of primary experience. The action, characteristic of life, can be improved at school, making young people realize the meanings that are produced in these relationships. It is ideally a two-way street!

Understood, the terms experience and education are not equivalent, so to recognize an experience as such requires the necessary con-



tinuity of the process of experiencing more and better, promoting the process of growth. We observed the importance of school education, but despite its value, it may incur errors in the treatment of experiences carried out in its instances. Dewey cites some of these difficulties, for example, promoting the distancing of the school experience from the student's world of life. Also, the subjects presented in the school curriculum can divide the world, abstract the facts too much, select events and classify them into different school contents according to principles often unreachable to the student's understanding. Moreover, the logical organization adopted by adults often contrasts with the child's mentality, since the infantile world is marked by the unity and integrity of their own experiences that simply happen and make sense in their entirety. Also, the psychological (rather than purely logical) dimension in children allows their vital affections to unite their social experiences by giving meaning and identity to the group to which they belong, while the school world, by artificially preparing the environment in which the experiences take place, can offer a fullness of casuistic and non-sense experiences. This is where the risks lie that what happens there is not truly formative. The experience that does not allow the development of the human being, often making him obliterated and deprived of freedom for action, is not educational, but uneducative, and can still be considered as an insipient experience, for it is not cumulative in the sense of propelling the individual toward his or her *end-of-sight* with more effective means. On the contrary, it promotes setbacks in its action. It is equivalent in the social sphere to the most elementary level of life, in the sense of nourishing only the minimum necessary of existence for the survival of its agent.

### **Peculiarities of Experience in Human Existence**

We understand that an experience itself cannot produce insensitivity in the individual to the challenges that life presents; it cannot generate routine, carelessness, demotivation, disinteresting the individual to acquire new and better experiences in relation to the control of their future; it cannot yet provoke disconnection in the process of experiencing by generating dispersive habits and making it impossible to master and understand the continuity process. In the words of Dewey (1979, p. 25-26):

[...] every experience changes who makes it and goes through it, and the change affects, whether we like it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences, because it is somehow the person who will go through these new experiences [...] the principle of continuity of experience means that each and every experience takes something from past experiences and somehow modifies subsequent experiences.

We enter the scope of already controlled and judicious experiences that should be carried out by school institutions where actions are

characterized by their intentionality and human growth is based on the use of reflective thinking, since “The continuous reorganization and reconstruction of experience through reflection is the most particular characteristic of human life since it emerged from the purely animal level to the mental or spiritual level” (Teixeira, 1965, p. 17). We gain educational experience when we learn to control, predict, and evaluate the consequences of our planned actions, practices, and / or activities. The resulting reaction does not scare us because we are curious to grasp the meaning generated therein; we have control strategies; we respect the process, after which we grow and become different as all involved will be.

It may be pointed out that, unlike other philosophers who have relied on the notion of continuity, Dewey seeks empirical and non-metaphysical continuities, which reveals his attraction to the theory of evolution on which his subject has been devoted to his reflections and work. In this sense, we must first consider that it is in the sphere of life, fundamentally linked to nature or the environment, that experiences occur in general, and human in particular. Societies contribute to the organization of social life through education, first indirect, then formalized and intentionalized, whose experiences, when disjointed, are considered *uneducational*, as already shown. Although beings of experiences that we are, as educators we must be committed to selecting those experiences that are produced in the present, offering and disposing those that lead to the subsequent enrichment of the learners. For every experience lived presupposes an immediate aspect of gaining pleasure or disgust, and also the aspect of leading to which subsequent result it may attain, preparing for the future. In the first case, we can consider the experience felt by the students to be significant, but, if properly analyzed, we can notice that it is disconnected from the past and the future, not being cumulative, capable of generating accommodation and carelessness, for example. It is urgent that we look at these aspects that reveal the real *quality of experience* that must be well evaluated in order to be placed on the educational agenda that really aims to *educate by experience*. It is therefore the experiential *continuum*, important to Dewey, which we have tried to emphasize in the present text. Thus, any theory of education, especially when it comes to the philosophy of education, loses its meaning if it does not favor an effective educational plan, in other words, what and how this or that should be done.

As a pragmatist, Dewey does not rule out the action of pedagogical theory. In the preface to his book *Experience and Education* (1979) in relation to the specific task of the philosophy of education, he says that “It means the need to introduce a new order of concepts that leads to new ways of practice” (Dewey, 1979, p. 16). We note that the criteria for validating an idea must be based on the results produced and observed following an action taken, for, “Every experience is a force in motion. Its value cannot be judged except on the basis of what it moves to and from” (Dewey, 1979, p. 29). Moreover, following Deweyan thinking, we realize that there is no effort to elaborate a Theory (with capital T), since

if the world is change and we are beings of experience in interaction and transaction in the changing context, we must, on the contrary, escape from dogmatism and absolute truths, and yes, to conduct a permanent critical examination of the theoretical foundations held in esteem on one occasion, to promptly undertake corrections and evaluations of their fundamental principles and results.

Concerned with proposing a theory that somehow corrects what is happening, the distancing of thought and life, Dewey points out that the dominant dualistic habit has reinforced such separation in all spheres of culture, whether in philosophy, science, art, in education, and so on. Faced with the events of his time, the author also criticizes the unsatisfactory relationship of moral progress and the economic achievements resulting exclusively from the physical sciences; it is also concerned with the development of the method of knowledge associated only with technical and economic issues, as well as the spread of diseases alongside the increase in medicine. Faced with philosophy, as an intelligent substitute for common sense to guide conduct, the author asks about the importance of the arts (Dewey, 1982). And, it explains the reason for his concern. Firstly, contrary to what has happened in the sciences in general, "It is hard to imagine any significant development of fine art except where there is a curious and loving interest in the forms and movements of the world regardless of any use to which they may be placed" (Dewey, 1982, p. 152). Just there is an excellent contribution of the arts to the world, because the scientific attitude, markedly practical and strengthened by the rapidly advancing economic vision, has been aggressive towards nature "[...] unfavorable to aesthetic enjoyment in relation to the world" (Dewey, 1982, p. 152), In the face of which Dewey claims a reconciliation between the sciences and the arts, namely, the practical perspective of the former softened with the contemplative aesthetic attitude of the latter in its positions before the world. The emphasis on the first attitude does guarantee a greater mastery of natural facts, but without the second, man can become "[...] a race of economic monsters, tirelessly driven to haggle [things] difficult with nature and each other, bored with leisure, or able to use it only in ostentation and extravagant dissipation" (Dewey, 1982, p. 152).

This sharp criticism put by the author brings us to another concern that is in relation to his pragmatism, pointed by some as a mere philosophy of action, simply characterizing knowledge as instrumental. But the author assures us that his instrumentalist approach to knowledge merely means that "[...] knowledge is instrumental in enriching immediate experience through its control over action" (Dewey, 2010, p. 496). In this sense, Dewey's philosophy is not content with defining itself by action alone, for on the one hand it considers the thought that serves as the guide for action, and on the other the feeling that identifies the consummation it has come to. The experience must reach an outcome, a feeling of self-sufficiency, the consummation of the process that takes place in its accomplishment. The emotional character of an experience reveals the internally organized bonds to the outcome of

which we speak. Even in the field of morality, it is no different, because as a practical activity, if integrated and dedicated to consummation, it presents an aesthetic quality. This differs from morality which merely foists efforts on mere obedience to duty.

Dewey argues that no intellectual inquiry gets rid of the elements addressed and present in an experience or *integral event*, because it gives this experience a quality - aesthetic - guaranteeing the closure, the conclusion of a thought. "To sum up, aesthetic experience cannot be sharply distinguished from intellectual, since the latter must exhibit an aesthetic seal to be complete" (Dewey, 2010, p. 114). On the contrary, unaesthetic experiences are those that are ordinary, careless, inconclusive, those that disregard what came before and what comes after, are composed of disintegrated actions, are superficial and can never be characterized by true singular experience. Once again we can observe the author's demand for the *principle of continuity* of experience to be genuine and educational. Dewey's aesthetic theory gives school experience the opportunity to be experienced as something precious, insofar as in experiencing something in this context we may ascribe an immediate, genuine, irreplaceable, recognizable quality to it as *that* experience which gives meaning to the process of knowing. Certainly, *that* experience is what will bind the learner to school, but will do so primarily through affective, emotional, human, as well as specifically cognitive ties.

Such notion of human experience that occurs in existence allows us to understand the author's expressive phrase, *education is life*, denying the belief that education would fundamentally prepare the individual to only later experience life, to enter the real world, when authorized. On the contrary, education is required primarily for the immediate maintenance, conservation and renewal of social life, and is therefore developed *pari passu* with the natural life. Nutrition, a vital natural aspect, is therefore for physiological life in the same proportion as education is for social life. It is therefore a natural and social imperative.

Considering, as we have seen, that there are uneducational experiences, in what more enlightening terms can we say that the educational experience is necessary for individuals? In principle, because education is entangled with life in the context of existence, resulting in the phenomenon of permanent conservation and renewal, becoming a socially constructed and increasingly sophisticated process for facing the unpredictable, fleeting, precarious world, without, however, denying it. This principle extends to the idea that in social existence education is considered a sociocultural necessity because the experiential process operates in the same format that sustains it in the world of life. In other words, education is an instrument of the continuity of social life allowing the renewal of social groupings, enabling the continuation of the group's life, even with the disappearance of the depositaries of the experience accumulated by the group of individuals, which, hopefully, have progressed collectively towards democracy building,

that is, avoiding an undesirable society “[...] which internally and externally creates barriers to the free exchange and communication of experience” (Dewey, 1952, p. 141). It is part of the empirical humanism he speaks of. The school environment produces educational experiences as it engenders democratic relations as a condition of growth. The experience of *growing up* in a democratic school environment can extend to the wider society as a *way of life*. To truly educate is to conserve and strengthen the connections of the experiences offered to the individual in life, so that it may improve, collaborating with the group of individuals living in society. Education is worth, it is worth a lot, but if it really drives individuals!

What good will it be to gain the ability to read and write, to gain a certain amount of prescribed information from geography and history, if in the struggle one loses one's soul, one loses the ability to appreciate life, to realize the relative value of things, if the desire to apply what you have learned is lost, and if, above all, the ability to draw from your future experiences the lesson that lurks in all of them is lost (Dewey, 1979, p. 43).

When it comes to school education, it is necessary to operate to enrich these vital connections in view of the growth of all - which is not always the case. Thus we highlight the passage from the individual to the social aspect, expanding to the crowning of the author's reasoning, namely, his defense of democracy and the importance that school education plays for its achievement.

### **From Naturalistic Empiricism to Progressive Education**

As we can see, the Deweyan expression *education is life*<sup>3</sup> consisting of the two terms, although aligned, does not help us, immediately and by itself, in grasping their meaning. People, faced with such a phrase, can certainly explain it in different ways, because besides the concept of education has a polysemic profile and, therefore, requires care in its treatment, the term life can also put us in several difficulties depending on the perspective from which we start. *É a vida! É bonita e é bonita*<sup>4</sup>, invites the Brazilian poet to repeat the chorus. Is the Deweyan meaning close to this statement? Could life be defined, in Dewey's terms, as the exalted place of beauty?

Almost unknown is the poetic side of Dewey who in his compositions<sup>5</sup> It confirms the profoundly problematic and contradictory reality described in his philosophical texts, the beauty of which could be exemplified there: “There no beauty grows save when watered with tears / Of haunting babies naked in the cold / Pruned by women with scissors [...]” (Boydston, 1977, p. 57). Nothing escapes the impacting, conflicting features of existence! It is, therefore, at this elementary level of existence that we find all the elements in transaction performing the struggle of their own and which branch out into all human paths whose spectrum of actions departs from this primary ballast to reach the broadest and

most remarkable experiences that man has. can undertake, as is the case with education, interpreted by Teixeira (1965, p. 17) as “[...] direct phenomenon of life, as ineluctable as life itself”. Indeed, the learner does not operate in a detached way with learning on the one hand and life on the other. But in learning, he lives; and vice versa. It is the lesson that every school must, on principle, consider, but unfortunately, this does not always happen!

One aspect of the author’s thinking related to the case that gives us productive clues to the understanding of the phrase *education is life* is the association he makes of life with nature, already alluded to. The vital force and energy expended in nature for the conservation or destruction of each transacting organism requires action by humans that can be enhanced so that they do not undermine the environment. Thus, it must be emphasized that experience itself is different from *mere activity*. It is centrifugal, dispersive and fleeting; but also, experience diverges from mere blind, spontaneous, unreasonable impulses. Experience is cumulative and its value is measured by the meaning produced in the action linked to the perception of its consequences, which guarantees its meaning, learning something, discovering relationships between things, retrospective and prospective association between what we try to do and its result in us (continuity relationship, moment in which the intellectual and cognitive aspect of the experience arises). Therefore, from a true experience we come out different and, likewise, we add to what we achieve with our action.

In the most complex world of the human, the *action* triggered by an individual indicates the active aspect of the experience<sup>6</sup> - and, instantly, the triggering of a reaction, configuring itself in a complex and continuous process of an integrated and inclusive unit - thus enabling the apprehension of meaning, generating change in the agent itself, in the environment and in the other, depending on the forms of control adopted in the process. Intelligent tactics for change can be generated on a more complex level of experiences which are operated by investigative and reflective thinking, which provokes the effective learning of something.

In the first level of the primary experiences of living beings there is renewal, resistance, change and the conversion of natural energies into beneficial factors and attentive to the protection of the existence of elements present within nature, there may be in this process the collapse in the preservation of the existence of something, because it is an instance of unpredictability and contradictions. However, considering the *principle of continuity of experience*, we understand that the curious phenomenon of life presents an unsuspected continuity of its expressions, manifested in the experience of the various forms of existence, in the actions that trigger a movement process in proportion to its capacity to support and react, configuring a game of losses, gains, reconstruction and renovation. Such a process in the human world reveals itself as a naturalistic empiricist, with the expectation of permanent participa-

tory activity of individuals in the process of experiencing. According to this view, man is not considered as a *flat slate*, but is merely the recipient of environmental affections on himself. But it reacts and operates on the controlled routes of an action. Therefore, the importance of education in the human world, since it can prepare in the intervention of this process, enabling the overcoming of the routine attitude in view of the construction of a posture based on reflective thinking, understanding and controlling of the process.

Consideration of the *principle of continuity of experience* and respect for the context of actions favor the formation of democracy, as a *way of life* engendered in broad social relations, and in the cracks and edges that may be present in human desires for individual and social development, that is, investing in the idea of extended growth. When the experience is educational and widely shared, democratic, *growth* is understood as a process constituted by a means necessarily coupled with an end-in-sight that, coming to the end, becomes another medium associated with another desired end, accompanying the changes. In this case there is no possibility of establishing a projected absolute end for growth to be met within a possible range of its apex, as it is a continuous process.

In order to build the proper educational experience, it is necessary to recognize that it is in the environment that the individual finds the right conditions or not for their growth, because the elements present in the environment “Indicate the particular *continuity* between [this] and one’s own active tendencies” (Dewey, 1952, p. 32, author’s emphasis). All this because “[...] life does not mean mere passive existence (if such a thing is supposed to be possible), but a way of proceeding and acting - the environment or environment means that which influences this activity as a condition for it to be performed or inhibited [such activity]” (Dewey, 1952, p. 33, parentheses of the author). Exactly at this point is pointed out one of the most important tasks of the educator, whose work should not be reduced to directly teaching content to the pupils, or worse, leave them in a *laissez-faire* situation to guarantee them freedom and initiative, but, on the contrary, it is the educator who actively organizes, controls, directs, selects the elements present in the environment as a fundamental condition for learning to occur. Thus, experiences do not occur in a vacuum and therefore would not be especially subjective things. “There are sources outside the individual that make it appear. And these springs constantly feed it” (Dewey, 1979, p. 31) – concerning to the things and factors generally present in the world that are there and in a certain way, owing much to the human activities themselves already performed, and which are therefore in the process of continuity in existence. We have received a world and certainly offer an altered reality to future generations and thus continually. As indicated, one of the teacher’s responsibilities in this regard is to know how to filter the best factors of the objective conditions that will contribute to provide the *input* to growth, as well as to awaken the awareness of these links with the environment and with others.

In carrying out the activities, man finds himself in an environment marked by astonishing contrast. He often feels doubtful, insecure, frightened and even amazed. It is from there that we orient ourselves to a broader understanding of what *existence* is in Dewey, by whose words it enlightens us:

The visible is defined in the invisible; and in the end, what is not seen decides what happens in the visa; the tangible rests precariously on the untouchable and unreachable. The contrast and potential maladjustment of the immediate manifested in the phase of things noticed and focused, with those indirect and hidden factors that determine the origin and course of what is present, are characteristic of any and all experiences (Dewey, 1926, p. 43-44).

Therefore, the contradictory and therefore contrasting factors of experience - even fearsome ones - are the first most obvious and elementary data present in the universe of life and nature. It was in the face of the uncertainties of the world that man found magical formulas for operating in reality, later creating science and technique, and also fun as an agency to escape the frightening reality. However, “[...] the risky character of the world has not been changed, much less eliminated [...] and our achievements are merely devices to obscure the unpleasant acknowledgment of a fact rather than the means to change it” (Dewey, 1926, p. 44). In defining the world by its character of uncertainties, weaknesses, unpredictability and precariousness, the author asserts that he is referring to metaphysics and not morality, namely, refers to the “[...] nature of the existential world in which we live” (Dewey, 1926, p. 45). Bernstein (1961, p. 5) characterizes and defines such a perspective as a “Naturalistic Metaphysics [which is] the study of generic features of existence”, adding that it is a [...] “descriptive, empirical and hypothetical” resource”. We understand that the apprehension of existence, in Dewey’s terms, directs us through naturalistic metaphysics in a plunge, even hypothetical, to a dimension common to all and which gives us meaning as beings of experience, from which we draw the conscious future of the previous processes of human activities and the consequences of what each of us does in life. Education as a necessity turns to human actions that can be enhanced for the common good.

We find that the existence considered as we have seen so far, in a mixture of rule and dissolution, determination and indetermination, etc., does not inspire, however, a pure pessimism according to Deweyan theory. Quite the contrary, the author is situated in a sphere of pedagogical optimism according to which the bets of social renewal and reconstruction are, as a creed, aimed at education as a strong ally in the construction of a *democratic way of life*. From experience, Dewey teaches, we grasp the character of reality that can be described thus:

We live in a world that is an overwhelming and overwhelming mix of sufficiency, narrow completeness, order, recurrences that make prediction and control possible, and the singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibili-



ties, processes that lead to even indeterminate consequences. These factors are mixed, not mechanically, but vitally, like wheat and the tares of the parable. We can recognize them separately, but we cannot divide them, because unlike wheat and chaff they were born from the same root. Qualities have defects as necessary conditions of their excellence; the instrumentalities of truth are the causes of error; change gives meaning to permanence and recurrence makes novelty possible. A world that was entirely risky would be a world in which happiness would be impossible, and only a lived world can include death (Dewey, 1926, p. 47-48).

As we have seen, it is in the real and objective world that our existence finds itself in this way, but nevertheless inferior to an alleged ideal reality that could guarantee us certainty, truth or undeniable value. Dewey clearly and extensively shows us the classical Greek view in which the innovative and creative individual manifestations that occurred in the experiential world of existence revealed strangeness to that culture prone to superior form, idea, fixed whole, since only through the devices present in the ideal world could individuals obtain support, meaning and *raison d'être* for their purposes. We perceive a way of thinking in which physical, material and natural states and processes are hypostasized while real experience is reduced to a mere expression of the entities that offer them meaning and even possibility of expression (Dewey, 1926). Such an understanding of the world has extended into our culture by emphasizing the unquestionably fixed standards, the appeals to the tradition and direction of the elders, and thus needing the control of those who try to vary, diverge, or stray too far from the established order. However, the author warns us that a few centuries ago a movement of valorization of the experience was started, in order to establish its validity in the making of ourselves and in the composition of the knowledge of the world and in the installation of progressive educational models.

Recognizing, on the contrary, that we are fundamentally beings of experience, whose condition we cannot abdicate, Dewey guides us to chisel out our own, developing the *controlled experience* that comes from contact with the real world, but permanently performed by the research method so well oriented by the scientific perspective, by the problematization of the reality, indispensable nutrients to the reflexive thought. School education, for the author, is the privileged *locus* for this formation, from whose environment this more sophisticated way of thinking can be extended to other social sectors.

## Final Words

It is up to us at the end of the work to deal with the Deweyan naturalist philosophy, a difficult expression in the face of the fact that it is framed within the scope of empirical naturalism or naturalistic empiricism, striving to find the founding level of humanity, hence it is also designated as naturalistic humanism (Dewey, 1974, p. 161). Insistent on

his effective perception of the contingent and precarious reality of the world - which has led traditional metaphysics, in his view, to the clear disregard for experience, and thus making efforts to grasp the perfect and complete Being -, Dewey intends to establish a *theory of experience*, showing that we are necessarily beings of experience living in an existential world consisting of the aspects already addressed. According to him, “[...] thinkers have relegated the uncertain and the unfinished to an unpleasant state of being, regarded as unreal, while they have systematically extolled the secure and complete to the post of the true Being” (Dewey, 1926, p. 52).

With these notes he also intends to show that the aspects of the uncertainties and contingencies constituting reality were left by the thinkers on a lower level, such as illusion, appearance, mortal finitude, etc., denoting one of the two realms of being, which must be overcome by knowledge of the true Being. In many cases, religious thought has imprinted a kind of dualism shaped on the one hand by the distance between supernaturalism, eternity, transcendence, and perfection located in the upper sphere, in contrast to the naturalness, finitude, immanence, and change, placed on the lower level from the real world experiments. There were even moments in the history of philosophy, for example, when mathematics represented the world of absolute necessity *versus* the fragility and powerlessness of the intelligible natural world.

Dewey reinforces his arguments, based on the valorization of the natural experience and, consequently, on the overcoming of the above mentioned dualisms. For him, then, “[...] [due to] the intricate mix of the stable and the precarious, the fixed and the unpredictably new, the secure and the uncertain, in existence, the love of wisdom is established for humanity, which constitutes philosophy” (Dewey, 1926, p. 59).

I close the explanation on the subject, remembering that in the core of the Deweyan philosophy we find the accommodated experience, settled and closely linked to the natural existence, according to the terms presented. Also called physical and material, existence engenders other aspects of life. When social, it becomes a source of educational communication, enabling the intelligence to lift the primary experience to the stage of problematization, systematic experimentation and reflection before reality, enabling the control of the consequences of action. Therefore, it is not enough just to experiment, but in society we can and must grow together in a process of permanent educability and learning in view of the collective construction of a shared, democratic living environment.

I don't know if we can follow with the Deweyan spirit the verses of the Brazilian poet who insists on the beauty of life - as indicated at some point in the text. What we can assure is that the American author encourages us to recognize that “It is from the very essence of life the struggle to continue living” (Dewey, 1952, p. 28). This is where the strength for its conservation follows from the enormity of the various factors in transaction and in opposition in the world, and why not, this could not be configured as its beauty either!

## Notes

- 1 *Existence as precarious and as stable*, designating the contradictions and contrasts proper to reality (all Portuguese translations of the works cited in the References and which do not indicate the official translation are the responsibility of the author).
- 2 Dewey calls *indirect education* the spontaneous way of educating (See: Teixeira, 1965, p. 20). It is socialization as a way of life based on the simple transmission made by adults to younger people. Therefore, informal education can be linked to the notions of *cultivation*, *food*, etc. It can still be linked to the idea of driving, steering, lifting, and even modeling immatures into desirable shapes by a group. The idea of *growth* seems to be able to underlie all of this since the conditions proper to the growth of individuals can be established in these proposals, not physical growth but the cultivation of ever higher ideas and interests. However, in modern societies formal educational spaces have been built intentionally committed to formative purposes in view of the shared experience of democratically associated life.
- 3 This is a principle espoused by progressivists and ‘escolanovists’ in particular, and one that is opposed to one more in line with conservative and traditional educational models, *education as preparation for life*. Both are widely found in major publications on philosophy of education or pedagogical theories. In the above case, this is an expression that has been worth mentioning by naming chapters or parts of publications that aim to characterize Deweyan thought, such as Teixeira’s text, Dewey’s Pedagogy, which is found in the book *Vida e Educação* (Teixeira, 1965, p. 81).
- 4 From Gonzaguinha’s musical composition *O que é, o que é?*
- 5 John Dewey’s poems were published - when discovered after his death in 1952 - by Jo Ann Boydston (1977), an admirer and scholar of the author and recognized professor of *Southern Illinois University* in Carbondale-Illinois, former longtime director of the internationally renowned *Center for Dewey Studies* of this university, among many other honorable professional activities.
- 6 “Every genuine experience has an active side, which somehow changes the objective conditions under which the experiences take place” (Dewey, 1979, p. 31).

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**Leoni Maria Padilha Henning** is a professor of philosophical subjects offered by the Philosophy and Education area of Universidade Estadual de Londrina Department of Education, in Paraná. She has a degree in Philosophy from Universidade Federal do Paraná and PhD in Education from Universidade Estadual Paulista, with Post doctorate in Philosophy from Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8004-2371>

E-mail: [leoni.henning@yahoo.com](mailto:leoni.henning@yahoo.com)

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