
Elisa FRAENFELDER, Maura STRIANO, Stefano OLIVERIO
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pedagogia. Prospettive interdisciplinari*

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- 1 Interdisciplinarity plays a major role in the multifaceted thought of John Dewey. His theoretical interests cross the traditional academic boundaries in the name of improved research and teaching, and his works could be seen cumulatively as a systematic approach consisting of different interdisciplinary perspectives each intertwined with the next. On this issue, the essays gathered in *Il pensiero di John Dewey tra psicologia, filosofia, pedagogia. Prospettive interdisciplinari*, edited by Elisa Frauenfelder, Maura Striano, and Stefano Oliverio, importantly contribute to sharpening the precise role interdisciplinarity plays in Dewey's work. The anthology, which has its roots in a series of seminars held at the University of Naples Federico II between January and June 2009, that is, the 150th anniversary of Dewey's birth, brings into focus Dewey's thought from different perspectives. In particular, through a broad discussion of the function that psychology, philosophy, and pedagogy have had as heuristic hinges in Dewey's speculation from early to late works, the book seeks to develop a fruitful reflection aiming at inquiring after the potentiality of crossing the traditional academic

boundaries of epistemological research which in our time face complex and problematic social, political, and educational situations.

- 2 As the editors argue in the introduction, Dewey saw himself at the intersection between modernity and post-modernity, in so far as the American thinker felt the need to overcome both the ostensible cultural divisions and the separation between practical and theoretical reason (p. viii). From this perspective, the wealth of Dewey's interdisciplinary approach seems to be due to the fact that his philosophy evades the epistemic errors of modernity, assuming, on the contrary, the role of "link-discipline" between different areas of knowledge as a *general theory of education* (ix). Dewey has, in fact, always been related to the ideal of democratization of knowledge and has considered the school as the main condition of growth of democratic ideals. His main purpose was to switch from reason to reasonableness, the last being a form of practical reason linking the transforming values of *poiesis* with the central role of *praxis*. From an interdisciplinary perspective, psychology was seen by philosophy as a theoretical source equipped with both content and method, and philosophy, for its part, was seen as the highest form of human self-comprehension. As Striano argues in her contribution to the volume, interdisciplinarity for Dewey is fundamental to the realization of an inquiry into the various fields of human experience, focusing upon the possible heuristic uses of knowledge as a way of exploring reality (64). Hence, this perspective involves the essential connection between philosophy, psychology, and education in an epistemological framework in which each discipline contributes to knowing the complex texture of events, facts, situations which form the universe.
- 3 The volume is composed of four sections which gather contributions of scholars from different fields of interest. The essays of the first and fourth sections offer the theoretical framework for the reflections in the second and third sections, which address the actuality of Dewey's philosophy and psychology. In what follows, I will present several contributions I consider to be exemplary of each part of the volume regarding the different aspects of Dewey's interdisciplinary thought, sketching some brief considerations about a couple of contributions, the first of which is J. Garrison's *L'indagine interdisciplinare di Dewey: superare le scissioni della modernità e gli eccessi della modernità*. In this essay, Dewey's theories of mind and education are compared with modernism and the post-modernist approach to reality, as well as possible forms of relationship with contemporary theories of mind. Garrison's contribution is dedicated to pointing out both Dewey's overcoming the mistakes of modernity as well as his preventing slippages into the excesses of post-modernity. According to Garrison, Dewey showed us the way to overcome both the barrier to interdisciplinary discourse inherent in Kant's formal divisions of culture, and the barrier between practical and theoretical reason: "which often leaves those in professional schools such as law, engineering, education, and medicine out of the conversation" (14). As Dewey teaches us, rather than compartmentalizing value spheres, we need to realize that science, ethics, and aesthetics inter-penetrate each other. We can then distinguish between immediate goods and genuine goods by using the mediating tools of inquiry, and, most important:

[...] we must recognize the role of existential doing and making in all three value spheres, which allows us to avoid Kant's hypostatization of the true, the good, and the beautiful. (15)
- 4 As Garrison puts it, Dewey's insistence about the entanglement between ethics, science, and aesthetics intermingling expresses his rejection of the canonical interpretation of

modernity. He did not seek consolation in transcendental ideals. On the contrary, he seeks to recover philosophy for everyday functions, aiming to overcome the loss of intercommunication and mutual criticism between separated domains of inquiry. However, whilst Dewey believed that philosophy, like literature, “is a comment on nature and life in the interest of a more intense and just appreciation of the meanings present in experience” (LW 1: 304), he was not a precursor of post-modernism. Dewey preserves the distinction between science and literature while showing why interdisciplinary studies are necessary. He considers universals as logical falsifiable tools defining operations for the construction of something. On the contrary, post-modernists such as Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault, according to Garrison: “are nominalists about universals. That makes it easy for them to think that everything is simply a text and that there is nothing outside of texts” (19-20). Actually, I have to confess that it is not clear to me how correct it is to define almost all these thinkers as nominalists in such a negative way. Lyotard’s interest in Kant’s analytic of the sublime, Rorty’s constructionist reflections against any sort of logical ‘rigidity’ and his reference to language as behaviour, and Michel Foucault’s search for an ‘archeology’ of cultures show, in my opinion, that their ‘nominalisms’ were consonant with Dewey’s seeking to overcome an over-specialization of field researches, in order to combat the risk of sacrificing intercommunication and mutual criticism between separated domains of inquiry. From such a perspective, according to Rorty, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, their differences notwithstanding, literature, poetry and aesthetic experiences have to be considered as tools which help us to grasp the significance of the many vectors within rapidly changing situations.

- 5 In the contribution that follows Garrison’s essay, Larry Hickman highlights Dewey’s interdisciplinary perspective on pedagogy as rejecting the idea that experience exhibits any sorts of structural gaps that are fixed and final, emphasizing, on the contrary, the continuities in the constructions of things and the restoration of continuities as one of the most important functions of education. He writes:

Things come to us in pieces, and even once constructed they tend to fall apart as a result of the incessant pressures of time and circumstance. Continual analysis, reconstruction, and renewal of continuities is, in Dewey’s view, one of the most important functions of education. (24-5)

- 6 In particular, in his deep analysis of Dewey’s pedagogy, Hickman brings to light the ‘discipline’ at the core of Dewey’s theory of education, stressing on the one hand Dewey’s critique of rigid disciplinary rules and the specialization of curriculum that characterized the traditional American school; on the other hand highlighting Dewey’s emphasis upon the difference between what he distinguishes as ‘study’ and ‘studying’, the first consisting in “a definitely aggregated body of subject matter isolated from others and treated as a unit by itself”, the latter being “interdisciplinary by definition”, consisting in: “many things not contained in the narrow precincts of the textbooks” (LW 6: 79). Studying, or, the act of studying, was for Dewey not a luxury, but a social necessity. The curriculum of the University of Chicago Lab school was hence designed to be instrumental to real learning. As Hickman argues, Dewey’s pedagogy served “as a tool to introduce the students to analyses of the processes by means of which they were learning to learn” (29). In this pedagogical context, philosophy must assume the most important role; it: “must speak the language of many disciplines, interacting with them both horizontally and vertically, as it were” (31).

- 7 Giuliano Minichiello presents some interesting insights on the possible form of relationship between the vast field of the philosophies of mind and Dewey's approach to a general theory of thought. More precisely, Minichiello characterizes the Deweyan position as having two aspects, that is, the 'mind' considered as process, and the concept of 'transaction' which clarify the concept of experience in indicating a holistic context within which: "knowledge, inquiry, and the mind itself are not reduced to 'parts', to mechanisms that are dots on an unspecified whole" (35-6). Then, appealing to Dewey's concept of 'transaction', Minichiello distinguishes in Dewey's theory of thought three stages that are strictly intertwined: the *experienced* stage, corresponding to a set of processes that create meanings and norms in a random universe; the *thought* stage to which correspond processes of transaction and stabilization of symbols, and the *linguistic* stage, which corresponds to the established structures of symbols, culture, and values. This linguistic level blends itself into the experienced level: "consciousness is the critical emergence in evolution and from it descend reflective thought in a strict sense and ethics" (39). According to Minichiello, Dewey's preference for the transactional perspective, that he preferred after a first use of the concept of 'interaction', is the element that distinguishes his theory of thought from the most mature mentalistic perspective, namely, the enactive model. His non-reductivist theory of mind considers 'reflexive thinking' as:

[...] an explanation of ontological conditions as constructions included in the process of inquiry useful in translating the obstacles that it meets into configurations that are accessible to a rational analysis. (40)

- 8 A further in-depth analysis of Dewey's preference for transaction perspective is traceable in Svend Brinkmann's contribution to the second section of the volume dedicated to Dewey's works on psychology. Brinkmann, in fact, addresses his contribution to the transactional approach of Dewey's psychology, which the author defined as his 'neglected psychology'. As he argues, in *Experience and Nature* Dewey referred to his own position as *empirical naturalism* in the sense that the: "living subject is *in* and *of* nature, and everything experienced is equally part of reality" (126). Through a presentation of the overarching Deweyan framework as one of *transactions*, and a discussion of Dewey's meta-psychology, namely, the practices of psychology as historically and socially situated, Brinkmann presents a synthesizing view of key psychological themes from Dewey's writings, advancing the suggestion that:

[...] although the transactional perspective was introduced in name only late in his career, it was always an implicit part of his psychology that we have much to learn from today". (126)

- 9 After all, Dewey's contributions to psychology were not secondary to his contributions to philosophy and pedagogy. It is true, however, as David Patton Barone argues in his paper that follows Brinkmann's, that Dewey's direct involvement in psychology was briefer and mainly devoted to providing him "a means of making philosophy less remote and of inquiring into concrete human experience" (89).
- 10 The third is the main section of the volume, and it addresses Dewey's philosophy. It is composed of two main contributions, those of Stefan Neubert and Ramón del Castillo Santos, and four replies. In his contribution, Neubert compares Dewey's pluralistic approach with constructivist perspectives and, focusing upon the defence of constructivism in philosophy, Neubert considers Dewey's pragmatism well suited to defend constructivism. The main reason for that claim is that, according to Neubert, Dewey's works present some sort of ambiguity that, if correctly interpreted, would be

useful to interactive constructivism. This is because pluralism seems to be deeply rooted in Dewey's conception of experience, permeating its whole philosophy from epistemology to politics and education. However, according to Neubert, in order to evaluate Dewey's pluralism, it is necessary to avoid all references to linguistic expressions such as 'social engineering' or 'social mechanism', which call upon metaphors which tend to obfuscate his thought. Once again, the concept of 'transaction' is here recovered, and it aims to highlight the social 'co-constructive' origin of methods and cultural identities.

- 11 In his comment on Neubert's contribution, Roberto Frega argues that, in giving voice to a constructivist epistemology of practice – that of the Köln constructivism – Neubert offers too much relativistic interpretation of Dewey's thought, referring to the meaning of social progress and its possible link to scientific methods. On the contrary, according to Frega, more compatible with Deweyan pragmatism is a social constructivism conceived according to a modest form of pluralism – as opposed to a radical account of it. In this perspective Dewey's epistemology seems more compatible with a mild relativism which requires a realism (see his papers on naïve vs. presentative realism) which binds our discursive practices and limits them.
- 12 Giovanni Maddalena's reply to Neubert also challenges the Rortyan interpretation of Dewey as chevalier of democratic pluralism, arguing that, "if we really want to use Dewey as a defender of pluralism, we better have to look at his logic and at his metaphysics" (211), according to which 'reality' is independent of what any number of people think about it. However, this does not mean independent of any thought, but independent of subjectivistic perspectives (207). Particularly interesting is Maddalena's highlighting of Dewey's attempt to avoid nominalism pragmatically intended as an unsound gap between the real object and mind as the most inspiring part of Dewey's insight in view of a pluralistic society. Against Neubart's interpretation of Deweyan experimentalism as construction, deconstruction, and continual reconstruction of a diversity of flexible methods for resolving diverse and changing problems, Maddalena argues that Dewey's experimentalism "is just the last part of a more complicated account of experience" (208).
- 13 The second contribution of the section on philosophy is Ramón del Castillo's *Una grammatica dell'esperienza. John Dewey e le lotte culturali*. Through a deep and well-documented analysis of the difference between Habermas' and Dewey's approaches to the issue of the democratic value of communicative practices, and their differing accounts of the normative level of social and political practices, del Castillo advances the thesis that Dewey contributed to our understanding of how experience could still be used to reconstruct a political grammar. In particular, del Castillo points out that, in the contest of the debate between communitarians and liberals around the role 'experience' plays in public political debates, Dewey's ideas reappear as an opportunity to rehabilitate the notion of *experience*, but also "a chance to set out a different idea of *reason*" (214). And this is because articulated social interactions as expressions of political thought, are grounded, for Dewey, in a moral psychology and a description of pre-political commitments that precede communicative rationality. Social experiences lie beyond the act of adopting a communicative stance and imply a "mutual engagement within a situation whose features require much more than a cognitive interest to be handled" (239). Against an interpretation of Dewey as instrumentalist, del Castillo argues that he was also a philosopher who grounded human action in the world

of human experience, reinterpreting the interplay between reason and experience, mediation and immediacy, and that grounded democratic procedures on habits, customs, tradition, and experiences as contingent structures of moral concern. In her comment on del Castillo's paper, Rosa Calcaterra focuses upon the notion of 'experience', pointing out Dewey's emphasis upon the foundational role of 'essential traits' of human experience as the proper ground of the positive relationship between cultural politics and political culture that Dewey tried to support. Calling attention to Dewey's distinction between 'experience had' and 'experience known', Calcaterra claims the need for rethinking at the political and social level of Dewey's overall approach of the concept of 'experience known' in light of the problem, which is an integral part of contemporary multicultural societies, of a democratic management of different religious beliefs and practical attitudes.

- 14 What is also of particular interest in del Castillo's paper is his interpretation of Habermas. Contrasting those critics of Habermas' excessive rationalism, del Castillo points to the image of Habermas as someone who never denied that communicative rationality depends upon cultural pre-communicative resources. According to him, Habermas seems to have a more naturalistic approach to legitimating the normative pattern of socialization that renders communicative action implicitly valid for every member of society, and that communication is displayed in moral practices as the highest state of the evolution of moral development in modern societies. However, del Castillo admits that this does not mean that Habermas has become more and more 'Deweyan', for he continues to sustain the priority of linguistic communication in the process of socialization. As he argues, Habermas' 'pseudo-naturalistic' turn is not part of a really Deweyan and Hegelian switch. I sympathize with del Castillo's lecture. However I think also that a better understanding of what he calls the Habermas' pseudo-naturalistic turn would be possible by paying more attention to the influence Mead's theory of gestural communication has had upon his theory of communication (as well as it has had upon Dewey's theory of human nature and conduct). In particular, the reference to Mead's theory of the progression from gestural to symbolic language as the product of a bio-social process would shed new light upon Habermas' perspective on pre-linguistic communication. This would, in my opinion, offer also an element that would cast new light upon the comparison between Dewey's and Habermas' approaches to communication.
- 15 The fourth and last section of the volume addresses to Dewey's pedagogical thought and it begins with Franco Cambi's rethinking of Dewey's pedagogical thought as the organic synthesis of modern and post-modern Western thought. Particularly praiseworthy is Stefano Oliverio's *Democratic Community of Inquiry vs Bund: Dewey, German Sociology, and the Americanization of the Soul*, in which the author compares Dewey's new individualism and his idea of community of inquiry with German *Radikalismus*, which yearned for community (*Gemeinschaft*) and rejected scientific and technological modernity. According to Oliverio, the quest for community (Jackson Wilson, 1968) is not disconnected from the quest for a new individualism. Whilst the longing for community both in America and in Europe usually went hand-in-hand with a vigorous denunciation of individualism, in Dewey the reconstruction of individualism (contrary to the rugged and rapacious sense it had had in modern times) and the reconstruction of community are one and the same undertaking.

- 16 *Il pensiero di John Dewey tra psicologia, filosofia, pedagogia. Prospettive interdisciplinari* is an anthology of particular interest especially because many of its contributions offer original and unorthodox approaches to the thought of John Dewey, testifying to the theoretical and methodological contribution that his theories still offer in various fields of knowledge. It also represents an example of how profitable an interdisciplinary approach would be faced with the complexities of questions and problems in reference to which no sharp lines are traceable between the different fields of research employed to approach them.
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