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Nature as Event: A Study on John Dewey's Naturalism

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John Dewey's naturalism requires viewing nature and experience from the perspective of holism, emphasising the continuity between these two. To Dewey, nature is not a fixed entity, but an event in an ongoing process of unfolding. The temporality of an event can meet Dewey's requirement of constructing a philosophical notion about change and development. The event has a relatively stable structure. The continuity between living things and non-living things becomes possible because of the characteristic transactions of events, and experience thus becomes something emergent in nature and actively intervenes in its unfolding. The emergence of human intelligence and the application of language has lifted nature to a controllable and operable plane, making experience a crucial guide for the unfolding of nature.

Keywords: event, naturalism, experience, John Dewey

INTRODUCTION

Naturalism is among the most widely discussed issues in recent Anglophone philosophy (Shook 2011: 1–17; Bernstein 2019: 527). By the early 20th century, John Dewey had become one of the most influential American naturalists. According to Richard Bernstein (2019), the present discussion of naturalism may seem chaotic at first glance, but its development has confirmed his initial intuition that the core of Dewey's naturalism remains a source of inspiration.

Dewey called his philosophy 'empirical naturalism' or 'naturalistic empiricism' (Dewey 1981: 10). He opposes the separation of nature and experience, and advocates the continuity between experience and nature instead. Some scholars, however, do not think that Dewey's effort is a success. They think that Dewey uses two sets of terminologies in his discussion: the phenomenological set, used to describe the characteristics of experience, and the realistic one, referring to the features of nature (Bernstein 1961; Garrett 1973; Dewey 1977a). Some scholars argue that Dewey's naturalism lacks piety for nature itself and thus denies the stability and neutrality of nature because of its overemphasis on human experience (Santayana 1925; Cohen 1940).

In our view, all the scholars who hold a critical attitude towards Dewey do so on the common premise that experience and nature are incompatible in Dewey's view, or at least that Dewey's argument for the continuity between those two is unconvincing. As a result, some scholars have concluded that Dewey's empirical naturalism is a variant of idealist philosophy dealing with only that experience related to man (Santayana 1925; Westbrook 1991), while others incorporate experience into nature by expanding the latter, making experience an attribute of nature (Sleeper 1992), and still others expand experience to encompass nature, making it an earlier stage in the process of experience (Shook 2000).

This paper holds that nature in Dewey is an event continuously moving from potentiality to reality and constantly unfolding. Scholars often fail to accept Dewey's view on how experience permeates nature and claim that there is a continuity between it and experience to be simplistic and unconvincing. One has to grasp the key concept of the 'event' and the naturalisation of intelligence brought about by eventualised nature if he wants to understand the vertical and horizontal continuity in Dewey's thought. Intelligence comes out of nature and, as an experiential activity, reaches nature in turn, directing nature's unfolding.

THE STRUCTURE OF EVENTS

It is clear that the principle of continuity plays a crucial part throughout Dewey's philosophy in the handling of questions concerning nature and experience, body and mind, and nature and society. The fundamental reason why the relationship between experience and nature can be treated in this way is that Dewey regards nature as an 'event' rather than an 'entity'.

Dewey denied the existence of the absolute entities. 'There are no Platonic realms where self-predicating beings lie, and there are no kinds which do not transform as the situation requires' (Johnston 2010: 463). Dewey's term 'event' implies a philosophical view of process and development. It assigns importance to change and growth, and negates all philosophies that regard entities as their basic category. Dewey believed that 'every existence is an event' (Dewey 1981: 63).

For Dewey, many schools in the history of philosophy have been biased in dealing with the world's mixture of stability and instability. Expecting only completeness, readiness and certainty, and believing that the world is good in essence and governed by a perceivable set of operational principle. 'We live in an "unfinished universe". This is what Dewey felt that the various traditional schools of philosophy, i.e., realism, idealism, rationalism, and empiricism, overlooked' (Garrison 1995: 106). Once those philosophers perceived the experiential world to be incomplete and flawed, they would simply call it 'unreal' so as to explain these characteristics away. As such, they do not hesitate to split a thing into two separate parts, and it seems that that which is certain can be found in reason. 'Classic *philosophy* says so *much about unity and* so *little about* unreconciled diversity' (Dewey 1981: 46).

In Dewey's opinion, contingency is deeply rooted, and volatility is as normal a feature of the unfolding world as stability. Such a recognition of a volatile but stable world can change the assumptions of dualism and the theoretical contradictions brought about by the quest for permanence. Change (process or variation) is no longer interpreted as a sign of defectiveness or inferiority, but seen as a feature of reality. Volatility and certainty are organically mixed, and one cannot accept the good side of the world only while turning a blind eye to the bad, calling the former inevitable and the latter contingent. Stability, always bounded by temporality, is temporary, nor does volatility always prevail. Law and balance are present in events, but not fixed or eternal; likewise, events would be unknowable or inoperable if they were purely

fluid, because cognition depends on stability. Cognition is possible precisely because events are both stable and unstable. Without instability, problems would not arise, but without stability, it would be impossible for knowledge to exist. All things are ephemeral and momentary, nothing more. What matters is 'measure, relation, ration, knowledge of the comparative tempos of change' (Dewey 1981: 64).

Dewey chose to describe existence as an 'event' because this term can encapsulate both of the aforementioned characteristics. Events can be sorted into two categories in general: 'structure' and 'process.' Here, the term 'structure' is used to refer to events that exhibit stability which are like constants in mathematics; in comparison, the term 'process' refers to events that change rapidly or occur irregularly and unpredictably. Dewey believes that understanding structure from the perspectives of functionality and eventualisation can help avoid the endless debate between idealists and materialists. Both camps make the same basic mistake, namely holding that structure is something both fixed and absolute. On the contrary, Dewey holds that no structure can be isolated from events, and the separate study of structure has nothing to do with things themselves.

Dewey here bears some resemblance to Aristotle, who regarded substance as a combination of form and matter. But unlike Aristotle, Dewey does not seek any decontextualised form, for it is precisely this temptation that drove Aristotle to regard the absolute form as ultimate substance (see Dewey 1981: 78). According to Dewey, a structure is always the structure of one or a series of events. A structure is a feature of that event, rather than something that can exist independently. Whether it be a house or an appointment, the event itself is the fundamental existent, while structure and matter make sense only when they are involved. It is an event that makes structure and matter possible, not the other way around. Each occurrence of events is a transaction, i.e. a 'concurrence'.

In a word, Dewey believes that events are basic existents, and that forms have meanings only when events are involved, lacking any independent ontological status. The separation between form and matter is a serious mistake which can be traced back to the misunderstanding of relationships between organisms and their environment, non-living and living things, and experience and nature. Establishing continuity among all these levels by means of events is the very basis of nature's self-unfolding (see Boisvert 1988: 130, 139).

THE NATURALISATION OF INTELLIGENCE

In Dewey's doctrine, nature unfolding itself through eventualisation requires the role of 'transactions' in two senses: the naturalisation of intelligence and the realisation of potentiality.

An event is a concrete existence conditioned on time, and at the same time an outcome in the process of transaction. Dewey classified natural things as existing on one of three levels: physical, psycho-physical and mental. Transactions at these three levels show a trend of progressive complexity, and produce events with new characteristics. The three do not represent three 'entities': physical or material things are characteristics of events at a certain transactional level, while the psychic or psychological things are a feature emergent at a more complex transactional level. It can be said that Dewey held 'emergent naturalism'. But we also need to know that each of the three levels of nature has its own unique emergent characteristic even though they are coherent with one other. 'Dewey's project, then, is to relocate experience within nature without thereby reducing it to merely material processes' (Trotter 2016: 29). Therefore, it is a mistake to try to transform one level into another, or to reduce a highly complex level to a less complex one.

Nature that turns out to be an event negates the view that human beings are intruders upon it, and should submit to it as an unknowable Other and repent for their own actions. At the same time, however, this understanding of nature also rejects the idea that nature is something physical and mechanical, and that the human mind is another kind of being existing in a higher dimension and therefore incapable of associating with nature. Dewey claims that anyone who respects scientific research accepts the fact that experience is a highly conditioned occurrence requiring a well-organised organism, and that there is never evidence of experience's occurrence; it is, however, equally undeniable that, once it occurs, experience 'enters into possession of some portion of nature and in such a manner as to render other of its precincts accessible' (Dewey 1981: 12). Experience permeates nature organically and functionally. 'We need to consider the rootedness of human experience in our natural situation – a rootedness that applies to all aspects of human experience' (Campbell 1995: 77).

Nature as an event maintains maximal continuity with experience. A naive view of nature holds that it does not contain any human component – that it is something that is there already. This perspective makes nature 'thin' and, in light of traditional empiricism, renders communication between man and nature fragmentary. In Dewey's view, such a starting point is neither possible nor necessary, for it seems to assume that humans 'can bracket millions of years of biological development from primitive to complex organisms, and hundreds of thousands of years of human cultural development, in order to go back to primitive sensations' (Hickman 1990: 33).

Furthermore, a new experience will be seen as a part of nature when it becomes fixed. 'Nature is intelligible and understandable.' (Dewey 1984b: 168). Nature itself has nothing to do with rationality when the human elements in it are left aside. Dewey argued that such a presupposition assumed human beings to be the onlookers upon nature, who could only passively observe nature and thereby lose their initiative and creativity. Dewey could not accept such 'limited' naturalism, for he believed in a naturalism that fully liberated human activities, something that facilitates the development of nature itself through the transaction between man and environment.

In Dewey's opinion, the main features of human life are indicative of outstanding features of nature itself – of centres and perspectives, contingencies and fulfillments, crises and intervals, histories, uniformities and particularisations (see Dewey 1984a: 75). There is no doubt that experience plays an important part in the unfolding of nature. A human as an organism is not a bystander outside the world, but an actor within the world, which 'embodied, situated in a particular time and place, dealing with our surroundings' (Boisvert 2012: 109). Firstly, experience is the thing to 'do' as since its very beginning, the organism does not stand by, passively expecting something to happen. For the continuation of life, the activities must be continuous and at the same time adapted to the atmosphere in which they take place. 'Where there is experience, there is a living being. Where there is life, there is a double connexion maintained with the environment' (Dewey 1980b: 7). Secondly, experience is fundamentally 'experimental', an effort for the purpose of alteration. This means that there should be some inspiring future objective so as to guide one to have new experiences. Experience thus becomes 'constructively self-regulative' (Dewey 1982: 134). And it is necessary to establish a sequence between an action and the enjoyment or dissatisfaction arising from this action. In this way, 'doing becomes a trying, an experiment with the world to find out what it is like' (Dewey 1980a: 147).

Intelligence can perform such experiential experiments. The foundation of the naturalisation of intelligence lies in the 'eventualisation' of nature. Life activities are temporal activities alternating between equilibrium and nonequilibrium; the more complex an organism is, the more complex the environment it faces, and the more effort it has to make in handling problems. The organism's inquiries inherently depend upon environmental conditions and energy. When natural transactions intervene in and guide the process of change, the said process takes on a new dimension. This additional transaction is intelligence.

Dewey turned nature into an event so that intellectual activities could actively intervene in the unfolding of nature. Organisms live and think in a natural environment, and this is itself a natural event. The reason that man can successfully adapt to the environment in which he lives is that he can use his practical intelligence to correctly identify, discern and modify various factors in the environment. According to Dewey, no connections are given by a supernatural mind; they are instead obtained by experience itself. This process involves no move from reality to non-reality: it is always the process of experience.

In this way, the term 'intelligence' should substitute for 'reason'. The latter refers to the transcendental and intrinsically unchangeable order of nature (see Dewey 1984b: 170), while practice and judgment are linked with intelligence; these are about existential, about fulfilling predictable ends by selecting and arranging the effective measures that can achieve outcomes. 'We re-direct our course of action by reconstructing whatever we once took as 'given', 'immediate', 'habitual' or 'marginal' in light of a problematic context' (Cherlin 2015: 206). Intelligence inside of nature means liberation and expansion, while reason external to nature implies fixation and limitation. Intelligence is applied to nature, 'the observation necessary to knowledge enters into the natural object known' (Dewey 1984b: 171). Intelligence enables nature to actualise its own potential and attain a fuller and richer development of events. The 'original' nature has changed, and after giving up the theoretical understanding of natural principles, the intellectual activity as an operation in the process of nature becomes alternative. 'In the evolutionary flow of experience, both subjectivity and the objects constituted through inquiry and our practice-laden perspectives continuously emerge' (Pihlström 2009: 3). In this way, the division between mind and the world disappears, and the gap between knowledge and action is bridged.

Nature is not unintelligible, but can only be understood through an operation occurring inside nature; 'Nature has intelligible order as its possession in the degree in which we by our own overt operations realize potentialities contained in it' (Dewey 1984b: 172). Human beings are part of nature, and at least at this stage, the skills of human intelligence represent the acme of the development of nature. Although the existence of anything is an event, experience undoubtedly holds a more important place among events. Nature has its structure and is constantly unfolding; its structure and unfolding need to be found in the experiential activities of human beings.

THE UNFOLDING OF NATURE – FROM POTENTIALITY TO REALITY

Another consequence brought about by the transactions of events is the transformation of nature from potential to reality. According to Dewey, events are concrete existences conditioned on time, and temporality implies change and development. It should be pointed out, however, that Dewey emphasises that development is not aimed in a given direction isolated from contexts, but rather is the fulfillment of potentiality through transactions.

Dewey rejects the idea that development is an unfolding of latent elements. In his view, while the development of potential does require the possession of potential power within a certain period of time before its occurrence, 'powers are not unfolded from within, but are called out through interaction with other things' (Dewey 1988: 109). Thus, it belongs to the category of uncertainty in the transactions between individuals and others. Potential does not become reality until it has met others and performed certain operations, becoming endowed with new properties that constitute the characteristics of a certain specific thing. 'As things are brought by new procedures into new contacts and new interactions, new consequences are produced and the power to produce these new consequences is a recognized potentiality of the thing in question' (Dewey 1988: 110).

An individual might not realise its potentiality because it may not yet have experienced a transaction with certain other things. According to Dewey, an individual is a temporal being, constantly developing in time, and therefore also a creative being. The individual will lose its freedom once it is imprisoned by routines and falls to the mechanical level. It is worth noting that while we may make the claim that all things may potentially transact, that does not indicate that all things may engage in successions, because the latter refers to causal continuity in the scientific sense. Thus, the potential to engage in causal successions is not one that is generic to existence, but the potential to engage in a serial transaction, however, is one that is universal (see Cherlin 2020: 314–321). Dewey further points out that in order to control and then guide the direction of potential unfolding, it is necessary to be centred on human experience because individuality is exemplified in the living organism and especially in human beings (Dewey 1988: 102). What Dewey pursues is living experience, the liveliness and vitality of which needs to ultimately be fulfilled by specific individuals.

Human experience emerges in the developmental course of nature, and its difference from other natural things is merely that it is a controlled process of change, whereas the others are uncontrolled. It can be regarded as 'an emergentist version of non-reductive naturalism: subjectivity arises from nature as a natural development of certain kinds of organisms and their interaction with their natural environment' (Pihlström 2009: 1). Intelligence grasps and rearranges the connections between natural things, giving these materials properties and meanings that they did not have before and clarifying the relationships between meanings. Man, for his own survival, must adapt himself, to a certain extent, as a part of nature to the rest. This process, in turn, helps us to update our control over nature, stimulate new ways of learning about it, and provide unique pleasures in doing so.

Therefore, experience is also a natural event with a structure. An empirical event is something to be directly mastered, possessed and enjoyed, which Dewey called 'primary experience'. Primary experience also has its structure, but it is a direct experience and therefore cannot be described or defined. According to Dewey, to consciously grasp structure one needs to reflect on experience, and the concrete approach to this is intelligence. Intelligence can grasp structure to a certain end by an appropriate means, but the grasping as such is something relative and contextualised: 'One cannot leave out conditions as opportunities nor yet unique ways of responding to them' (Dewey 1988: 111). A structure is selectively constructed in the context of a specific topic.

Besides, for Dewey, the grasp of structure is not permanent (see Dewey 1981: 64–65). A structure is the stable order of change, lasting and orderly change. By comparing classical physics with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Dewey pointed out that the so-called general

laws are statistical in nature, and that physicists do not view natural laws as properties of natural entities, but rather as tools for understanding interrelated changes in nature.

According to Ralph Sleeper, Dewey held to a 'transformational ontology' that sees 'the object of knowledge as both real and as transformed through the very process by means of which it becomes such an object', and that points out that 'the use of language in communication is the art of transformation' (Sleeper 1986: 120). Dewey did not deny 'the existence of things temporally prior to human experiencing of them' (Dewey 1977b: 167). An intellectual sign denotes that a thing is not taken immediately but is referred to something that may come in consequence of it (see Dewey1981: 105). Experience intervenes in the unfolding of nature through transactions by making use of natural objects and the meanings contained therein.

The unfolding of experience towards nature is not limited to this; purely physiological activities are contingent, while the emergence of language brings the transaction between man and environment to a new level and achieves a qualitative leap. Language can be called a 'miracle' of nature. After the emergence of language, things can be referred to even when they are absent; they 'are liberated from local and accidental contexts, and are eager for naturalisation in any non-insulated, communicating, part of the world. Events when once they are named lead an independent and double life' (Dewey1981: 132). The potentiality of nature and the abundance of its meanings can be operatively revealed by means of language. Language liberates people from the overwhelming pressures of other events, allowing people to live in a world of meaningful things. It turns out to be a means of enriching human life, and due to the role of language, 'meanings having been deflected from the rapid and roaring stream of events into a calm and traversable canal, rejoin the main stream, and color, temper and compose its course' (Dewey1981: 132).

The emergence of language turns everyone's activity into an experiment. Language is not an entity, but an important tool for handling the contexts of problems, and what it represents are the relationships between things. Language shapes ideas in the mind. Human activities always require the working of ideas because they predict the possibility of another course of action. This possibility is actualised by reasoning and inference, which make clear the relationship between ideas and ideas, and meanings and meanings. Experience is always the transaction between man as a part of nature and the environment as the rest of nature. In the end, therefore, ideas need to be verified and improved in practice, and when the operations as such are fixed as orders and relations, they become an intellectual means for helping us to guide events to their intended conclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

In Dewey's view, it is meaningless to talk about 'pure' nature because any knowledge and experience of nature turns out to be experience in human beings. But this does not mean that experience is another kind of thing independent of nature. In the methodological sense, the object of experience exhibits itself as it is experienced, and experience is the only way for man to grasp nature. In the ontological sense, once we accept the eventualised view of nature, we will not regard experience as something external to nature; on the contrary, experience exists in nature and is itself restricted by its transactions with the other parts of nature. Experience is about nature, and nature enters into transactions with experience. We experience nature directly. Experience implies transaction with nature, not just a certain connection or

force externally imposed on it. Dewey argued that philosophy needed a new 'Copernican Revolution'. In his view, in philosophical research, just as the earth revolves around the sun, 'the new center is indefinite interactions taking place within a course of nature which is not fixed and complete, but which is capable of direction to new and different results through the mediation of intentional operations' (Dewey 1984b: 232). Nature is intelligible, and the intentional operation in nature is realised through the individual experience formed in transactions. It is necessary to grasp the operational dimension of nature by empirically examining individuals' transformation from transactional potential into transactional reality. Dewey regarded nature as an event characterised to a certain extent by both stability and intelligibility despite its simultaneous changeability and instability. In his view, therefore, a methodology emphasising experimentation and manipulation is feasible. Intelligence handles these universal and regular relations and act on the realm of existences through empirical activities. Nature unfolds itself as an experiment.

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Gamta kaip įvykis: Johno Dewey natūralizmo tyrimas

Santrauka

Johno Dewey natūralizmas reikalauja žiūrėti į gamtą ir patirtį iš holizmo perspektyvos, pabrėžiant tęstinumą tarp jųdviejų. J. Dewey gamta nėra fiksuotas darinys, o įvykis vykstant išsiskleidimo procesui. Įvykio laikiškumas gali atitikti J. Dewey reikalavimą sukurti filosofinę kismo ir raidos sampratą. Įvykio struktūra gana stabili. Tęstinumas tarp gyvų ir negyvų daiktų tampa įmanomas dėl būdingų įvykių transakcijų, o patirtis tampa kažkuo iškylančiu gamtoje ir aktyviai įsikiša į jos raidą. Žmogaus intelekto iškilimas ir kalbos taikymas perkėlė gamtą į valdomą ir operuojamą plotmę, todėl patirtis tapo esminiu gamtos sklaidos vadovu.

Raktažodžiai: įvykis, natūralizmas, patirtis, Johnas Dewey