

# JOHN DEWEY'S PRAGMATIC CONCEPTIONS UPON AMERICAN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S TRANSCENDENTALIST CONCEPTIONS ON AMERICAN LITERARY THEORY (A COMPARATIVE APPROACH)

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**Abstract:** *This paper represents a comparative approach from the pragmatic and transcendentalist perspectives upon the American Progressive Education, respectively American Literary Theory, illustrated in John Dewey's and Ralph Aldo Emerson's writings, starting with the concept of experience, child - as the central part of both conceptions, continuing with individuality, rejection of the past, emphasising the importance of action, activity, culture and language in both cases.*

**Key words:** *progressive education, transcendentalism, experience, child, culture, language.*

## 1. Introduction

Emerson's writings reveal a compact and unified movement of thought. He was focused on the universal creative intelligence as the source of all things (Dumitriu, 1985). Matthew Arnold revered Emerson as the best prose writer of the 19th century (Matthew, 1961).

Ihab Hassan considers Emerson's essays a good sample of ecstatic criticism. Their power is mainly of emotional nature (Hassan, 1987). Hyatt H. Waggoner in "*American Poets from the Puritans to the Present*" (1968) points out that "Emerson is the central figure in American poetry, essential both as spokesman and as catalyst, not only the founder of the chief line in [American] poetry" (Waggoner, 1968).

John Dewey's pedagogical theory was considered to be the most suitable for fulfilling the task of connecting education to the new realities imposed by the progress of American society during his period. If at the beginning of the twentieth

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century progressive education was considered a reaction against the traditional school, in the second decade of the twentieth century, the term became accepted as Dewey's pedagogical theory. Dewey's work is one "of the most profound and comprehensive theoretical syntheses developed in this century" (Stanciu, 1995).

## **2. Experience**

Above all, "*the concept of experience*", the centre of John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy is the organism's interaction with the environment.

Within experience we distinguish two aspects: action and knowledge. The first leads to the change of the environment and the second to a behavioral change. To reach certainty, it is necessary to interpret ideas in terms of experience.

Above all, the concept of experience is a fundamental and unifying concept. Each experience is based on "*the interaction between subject and object, between self and its world; experience is not only either physical or mental, regardless of the way one factor or another prevails*" (Dewey, 1958a).

### **2.1. Experience – A continuous process dependant on the situation**

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson any "transcendentalist" is frowned on imitation and repetition and this is nothing more than what in John Dewey's view means that the changes prevail permanence. According to J. Dewey (1958a), experience is a transaction, a situation in continuing development, in which an organism is adapting to an environment that it transforms. The situation represents the context of an experience. In the American philosopher's view, we never have experiences and we never issue judgments about isolated events, but only viewed in a whole context. Any experience involves two types of conditions: objective conditions and internal conditions. Together they form a situation. Experience is continuous, taking into account that the human being interacts permanently with the environment. Objects of experience have a dual status as both individual existence, and parts of a continuity of interactions.

### **2.1. Experience and Nature**

Dewey rejects metaphysics. His philosophy focuses on the analytic research of reality, experience representing the human side of reality, and nature, the non-human side of it. The two sides coexist in a report of continuity as they are not separate from each other.

For Emerson, like for all other transcendentalists, to be in contact with a Divine Power means to transcend the experience of the senses, to transcend reality, to be prepared to understand what a transcendentalist like Thoreau says:

"I hear beyond the range of sound,  
I see beyond the range of sight." (Thoreau, 1965)

The transcendentalists, therefore, endeavoured to transcend, that is, to pass beyond, the range of human senses and experience.

### 3. Nature

#### 3.1. A Bipolar Universe

In "*Experience and Nature*", Dewey (1958b) enumerates some polarities whose union creates the quality of life: structure and process, matter and energy, permanence and flow, continuity and discontinuity, tradition and innovation, law and freedom. Change is the essential feature of nature. For Dewey, life is a continuous alternation of loss and restoration of balance. Permanent change and the dialectic relationship between polarities characterize Dewey's philosophy. Notice that pragmatism is replacing here the subject of classical philosophy, which is the permanence of reality and truth, leading to the changing character of reality.

Emerson philosophically considered, the universe is bipolar, composed of Nature and the soul, both nature and art, all other men and human body must be ranked under the name nature (Emerson, 2000). He viewed nature as a counterpart of the soul (Dumitriu, 1985). Emerson emphasized this correlation of nature and the soul in most of his essays. It is the human mind to which the basic dichotomy, nature and the soul are referred. There are three relationships, nature / the soul Emerson will replace the soul by the all – encompassing term the Over Soul man / the soul, man / nature. Over-Soul is regarded as the unifying principle of the universe. The relationship man/nature makes the universe meaningful to man. Starting from the assumption that nature is the projection of the Over-Soul in the unconscious, man is the projection of the same unifying principle in the conscious, Emerson sets nature before man as the most important object worthy of his contemplation (Dumitriu, 1985).

What made nature so instrumental was its capacity to reveal "the unity in variety". In Emerson's view, the particular was always related to the general.

"A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole. Each particle is a microcosm and faithfully renders the likeness of the world" (Emerson, 2000). Despite his great indebtedness to Plato in acknowledging the primacy of the spirit over nature, Emerson was emphatic about taking nature as the foothold of truth (Dumitriu, 1985).

At the beginning of Dewey's work, "*Experience and Nature*" experience is supposed to belong to nature and to take place in nature:

"There is no experience that is lived, but there is nature – rocks, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, and electricity and so on. The things that interact in certain ways are experiences; they represent what is experientially lived. Linked in different ways to another natural object – the human organism – they represent the way things exist" (Dewey, 1958b).

### 3.2. Synthesis between subject and object

Dewey declares a detachment from Hegelianism, he acknowledges in Hegel "*a permanent presence*" in his thinking:

*"The synthesis made by Hegel between the subject and object, between matter and spirit, between divine and human, was not a simple intellectual formula; it operated as a huge relief, as a liberation"* (Dewey, 1962).

Experience includes knowledge, and "*knowledge means understanding the connections within an object, which determines its applicability in a given situation*" (Dewey, 1972). Knowledge means understanding the permanent connection that keeps all objects and events in a whole.

Ideas, as elements of knowledge, represent a way of thinking about objects, but at the same time they are considered "*mental objects*", hypotheses which transform reality. Appearance of ideas takes place during experience, closely related to the observation of facts, their instrumental character considered to be eloquent. Ideas have a function consisting in creative reconstruction of existing elements in a new combination.

Union between subject and object in experience is also present in Schuts' phenomenology. Significance, in its forms, is nothing else but stages of experience in Dewey's theory.

### 4. Child – Center of Education

The Progressive school, especially in the third decade, focused on two fundamental theses from Dewey's theory, namely: the child and his interests are placed in the centre of educational activities and the rapid pace of social change.

The child's instincts and tendencies could be traced down to the environment in which the child lives.

In the old pedagogy, immaturity was seen as a deficiency. For Dewey, immaturity represents a positive force. As long as immaturity exists, development is possible, which in turn could potentially lead to growth. Dependency and plasticity are two characteristics of immaturity. The child needs long term support from the adults to reach the ability of acting independently and differently, depending on the situation. Plasticity being one of its characteristics, the child acquires the ability of learning to learn. The learning capacity should continue in adult life too, without disappearing after childhood. In John Dewey's view, growth represents the ability of learning, forming habits and readjusting activity to new conditions. The action that promotes the cultivation of the ability to learn is education; therefore, "*education is one and the same with growth*" (Dewey, 1972).

In his experimental school of Chicago, education was focused on the child's needs – food, shelter, clothing – placing the child in the position of being able to satisfy one's needs. Children were taught cooking, carpentry, and tailoring skills. During these

activities they obtained knowledge of arithmetic, botany, geometry, chemistry. Knowledge, acquired in this way, became a tool for solving new problems that were about to occur during other experiences.

Within the learning by effort, it is considered that positive results in the moral field are obtained only by will force, while in the learning based on interest it has been demonstrated that work without interest becomes a real drudgery for children. The method promotes the student's intrinsic motivation and spontaneous interest, and it provides the conditions necessary for undertaking an activity towards fulfilling that interest. The student mobilizes his/her effort to overcome the obstacles that may occur. *"I think that continuous and careful observation of the childhood interests is the only mean by which the adult can penetrate into the child's life and explain what kind activity he is ready for and to which subject he/she may devote more promptly and with more progress"* (Stanciu, 1995). A subject may become interesting for a student to the extent that it will be perceived as an instrument through which he/she will reach his/her goal.

Capable of enjoying the closest intimacy with nature, the child was most favored by Emerson more precisely the child's eye.

Sight as insight was possible to the extent the eye kept its freshness intact. For one thing, the emphasis upon the naive eye helped Emerson find an answer to the question he asked at the beginning of "Nature". Being naïve is nothing more than what J. Dewey understood by immaturity. "The philosophy of insight" Emerson was offering was entirely built upon rejection of tradition. Man was called, to see the world afresh as for the first time, and nothing was allowed to interpose between it and child's eye (Emerson, 2000).

In "Self-Reliance" Emerson started from the assumption that intuition was the way to truth. The break with the past is possible by discarding "tuitions", in favor of "intuition" (Emerson, 2000). He places the entire responsibility of achieving the original relation to the universe upon the individual mind the individual is the focus of his interest. J. Dewey admits that the teacher should direct the developmental process of the young people guided only by the idea of respect for individuality.

## **5. The Rejection of the Past**

Self-Reliance gives further support to the conviction that man is the ultimate goal of Emerson's philosophy (Dumitriu, 1985). More importantly, it is man's involvement with the present. The act of seeing can be contained only in the-moment NOW (Emerson, 2000). It also contributes to detaching the attachment to the past, represented by Europe. Americans did not need any longer to look to Europe.

The progressive school dismissed any and all authorities, did not study the past, and it was rather concerned with the present and the future, did not involve strict planning, but rather occasional teaching, the link between education and individual experience being reaffirmed once more: "Education is a development through and for experience" (Dewey, 1972).

## 6. Action and Activity

There is an organic relationship between education and experience, education being based on the processes of experience, both in educational theory and in practice.

According to Dewey's theory, ideas are true only during action and to the extent to which they could be useful.

Only through direct experience can genuine knowledge be achieved; qualities of things are perceived and receive a meaning only through activity. Thinking appears within experience during a certain activity, so Dewey considers that "*experience includes knowledge*" (the student learns by doing), achieving unity between action and knowledge.

There is a prejudice that pragmatism turned action into the purpose of life, but it must be stated that action is seen only as an intermediary by pragmatists. Concepts cannot obtain a meaning, according to pragmatic theory, unless they can be applied in daily existence and only if they can be verified through action.

Dewey remarked in his work, "*Democracy and Education*": "The social environment consists in all the activities of a group, involved in the activities of each of its members" (Dewey, 1972).

## 7. Culture and language

Transcendentalists insisted on the importance of culture, on "plain living and high thinking". For John Dewey culture apart from nature is a product of language. Language is the means by which information, skills and habits are kept and transmitted to future generations. The world for man is *par excellence* the world of the word.

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, words are needed to complete the process of the mind. Without them, seeing, leads nowhere. From Coleridge Emerson learned the most precious lesson. He praised the fresh perceptions of the child, but he definitely valued the poet as superior. The poet is superior for, apart from accuracy of his vision, he possesses the inspiration by which he can give precise expression to his vision. "By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer or language-maker" (Emerson, 2000). Emerson has the conviction that action is the great power behind language. He claimed attention for the language of the ordinary man. The ordinary man is akin to the poet for he too stands in close relation to the world of things; while the poet reaches it by imagination, the ordinary man is involved with it in more physical sense.

Emerson's ordinary man is capable of speaking a language freshness unimpaired (Dumitriu, 1985).

## 8. Conclusions

In spite of the differences between the perspectives of approaching, respectively, transcendentalist and pragmatic conceptions, John Dewey and Ralph Waldo Emerson tackled the same topics and surprisingly with slight differences reached the same conclusions. The only difference is in the way they perceive experience. If Dewey rejects metaphysics and his philosophy focuses on the analytic research of reality, experience representing the human side of reality, and nature, the non-human side of it, for Emerson, like for all other transcendentalists, to communicate with a Divine Power means to transcend the experience of the senses, in fact to transcend reality.

In other cases both reached the same ground.

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson any "transcendentalist" is frowned on imitation and repetition and this is nothing more than what in John Dewey's view means that the changes prevail permanence.

At the beginning of Dewey's work, "*Experience and Nature*", experience is supposed to belong to nature and to take place in nature: "There is no experience that is lived, but there is nature" (Emerson, 2000).

Emerson emphasized on taking nature as the foothold of truth Nature was highly rewarding because when it was made an object of right contemplation,

For Dewey the child and his interests are placed in the center of educational activities. Capable of enjoying the closest intimacy with nature, the child was also favored by Emerson.

R.W. Emerson places the entire responsibility of achieving the original relation to the universe upon the individual mind. The individual is the focus of his interest. J. Dewey admits that the teacher should direct the developmental process of the young people guided only by the idea of respect for individuality. Self-Reliance gives further support to the conviction that man is the ultimate goal of Emerson's philosophy. More importantly, it is man's involvement with the present. The progressive school dismissed any and all authorities, did not study the past, and it was rather concerned with the present and the future

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