

THE PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENCE
AND SITUATIONS IN DEWEY'S *DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION*

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ABSTRACT. In this essay, David Hildebrand connects *Democracy and Education* to Dewey's wider corpus. Hildebrand argues that *Democracy and Education's* central objective is to offer a practical and philosophical answer to the question, What is needed to live a meaningful life, and how can education contribute? He argues, further, that this work is still plausible as "summing up" Dewey's overall philosophy due to its focus upon "experience" and "situation," crucial concepts connecting Dewey's philosophical ideas to one another, to education, and to democracy. He opens the essay with a brief synoptic analysis of *Democracy and Education's* major philosophical ideas, moves on to sections devoted to experience and situation, and then offers a brief conclusion. Some mention is made throughout about the surprisingly significant role art and aesthetics can play in education.

INTRODUCTION

How should we live? What makes life meaningful? While almost inconceivable to imagine today, these profound philosophical questions are the main quarry of John Dewey's 1916 textbook for teachers, *Democracy and Education* (hereafter *DE*).¹ *DE's* answers not only supersede classic educational proposals (from Plato, Rousseau, and others), but they provide justifications grounded in then-current biology, psychology, epistemology, sociology, and pedagogy. Moreover, all these were set into accounts of human intellectual history (especially the development of science) and the larger purposes of philosophy — which developed along these lines into even later, more mature views.

Dewey's own opinions about *DE* are, by now, well known. In 1916 he wrote to Horace Kallen that "*Democracy and Education* in spite of its title is the closest attempt I have made to sum up my entire philosophical position."² In his 1930 autobiographical "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," he wrote that *DE* was "for many years [the book] in which my philosophy, such as it is, was most fully expounded."³ Does *DE* still sum up or expound Dewey's overall philosophy now, one hundred years after the initial publication? In many ways, the answer is yes.

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976). This work will be cited in the text as *DE* for all subsequent references. All references to Dewey's works will be to the multivolume series comprising *The Early Works, 1882–1898*, *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, and *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston and published by Southern Illinois University Press. Volumes in this series will henceforth be cited as *EW*, *MW*, and *LW*, respectively; for example, the citation "*Democracy and Education* (1916), *MW* 9, 21" indicates that this work appears in *Middle Works* from this series, volume 9, and the discussion or quotation cited is on page 21.

2. Letter to Horace Kallen, July 1, 1916, American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati Campus; quoted in *DE*, 377.

3. John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" (1930), *LW* 5, 156.

DE leaves little central to Dewey's corpus neglected, presenting detailed criticisms of key dualisms in philosophy alongside positive accounts of key claims about psychology, educational theory, and philosophy.

If we consider the main philosophical lines advanced, the answer is clear: his pragmatism is here; his instrumentalism is here; his radical empiricism is here; his ethics and account of the social self are here; his theory of democracy is here; and his metaphilosophy is here. While much would be expanded or treated separately in subsequent years (for example, intellectual history, metaphysics, logic, aesthetics, and philosophy of religion), *DE* unquestionably expresses most of Dewey's core beliefs, the spine of his philosophical *Weltanschauung*.

This essay's charge was to "examine *Democracy and Education's* connections to Dewey's wider corpus." I have selected two elements most necessary to answer *DE's* larger question about how to go about creating meaningful lives. After much painstaking research, I am convinced that two philosophical notions clearly stand in the foreground: "experience" and "situation." These two fundamental pivots connect Dewey's philosophical ideas to one another *and* to education and democracy. They are the existential nexus of meaning making in all spheres of life.⁴

My plan in this essay is as follows. To set the scene (and sketch the conceptual web in which "experience" and "situation" function), I offer a brief synoptic "thread" of *DE's* major philosophical ideas (each a "bead" on the thread). Then, there are two main sections on experience and situation.

DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION'S PHILOSOPHICAL THREAD

Because *DE* is a long book, replete not only with philosophical ideas but also with histories and facts of many kinds (including all major aspects of education), it can be difficult to see what is the philosophical spine or "thread" running through the book. Here is one way to thread *DE's* philosophical "beads," from the most elemental to the most complex.

EXPERIENCE

The *first bead* on the thread is *experience*. In *DE*, as in Dewey's corpus, experience is of signal importance. Because the term is much misunderstood (and maligned), *DE* explains how and why experience has been mischaracterized before advancing an account of (a) what experience is and (b) why it is significant

4. "Growth" is a third concept that, as is well known, has a similar, paramount importance. I set growth aside to allow for a more granular focus on those concepts that remained particularly integral to Dewey's lifelong (and often more technical) philosophical writings — including his work in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and logic.

for human beings — especially children. “Experience” functions for Dewey by replacing dualisms (such as mind/body, reason/emotion, individual/society) with continuities that more closely resemble our actual lives. The larger aim is to shift the onus of responsibility for living meaningfully squarely onto human shoulders; select continuities advance this aim because they undermine dualisms with a pretense to “ultimacy,” an authority (supposedly) beyond experience, which can be appealed to for criteria (guides, aims) regarding truth, goodness, beauty, and so on. *DE* explains how experience can be self-sufficient and the implications that has for those practices we call ethics, knowledge, aesthetics, religion, politics, and especially education.

SITUATION

But experience doesn’t just occur randomly or in a homogeneous flux. Rather, experience is had in situations. *Situation*, then, is the *second bead* on the thread. The importance of “situation” to education cannot be understated; more familiar to pedagogues as “teachable moments,” the creation of certain kinds of situations is the primary way learning (of all kinds: skills, theories, facts, values, and so on) advances. In *DE*, Dewey is clearly developing the metaphysical and logical importance of situations as he applies it to education.

MINDS AND THINKING

One element comprising every situation of teaching–learning is, of course, the people involved. Such people, we typically say, have *minds* and are *thinking*, and one cannot presume to educate without a reasonable sense of what those terms mean. The nature of minds and thinking is the *third bead* on the thread. *DE*’s challenge regarding “minds” and “thinking” is daunting, since our use of these terms (as noun and as verb) already (and quite unconsciously) reinscribes a very old set of assumptions — of, for example, the mind as a cabinet; of knowledge as contents; of thinking as a set of logical operations. *DE* argues that thinking itself is a form of experience, and that mind is not a thing (substance or possession), but rather a catch-all label for the many active ways in which we observe, forecast, and respond to circumstances. While such metaphysical and psychological matters seem out of place in an education textbook, *DE* makes the connection: we have built vast educational apparatuses upon inherited and mistaken models of mind and thinking; so, in order to reconstruct the former, we must understand the latter. *DE* utilized momentum generated by Dewey’s earlier work (for example, in psychology, instrumentalism, and education) to create new solutions for contemporary educational dysfunctions *and* to advance these as philosophical conceptions for subsequent development.

INQUIRY

While there are many purposes for a thinking mind, problem solving has proved remarkably important for survival and growth. *Inquiry* is Dewey’s name for thinking’s regular and organized response to problematic situations, and is the

fourth bead on our thread.⁵ As in both earlier and later works, Dewey provides an instrumentalist account of knowing as a kind of activity, concepts as tools, and truth as provisional validation for a fact, theory, or strategy proposed to solve a problem. *DE* details the generic pattern of inquiry and the variety of habits and practices (including communication, imagination, emotion, facts, logic, and so on) functioning in it. The instrumentalist account of inquiry — especially the emphasis on future action — is probably the most identifiably “pragmatist” element in *DE* (continuing the line established by C. S. Peirce, William James, and other pragmatist predecessors), but Dewey’s use of the concept also anticipates future elaborations, particularly in his 1938 work *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.⁶

SOCIALITY AND NORMATIVITY

Pausing to consider the “beads” threaded so far, Dewey’s vision should be plain: a school is where students and teachers *experience situations* that invite, even demand, *thinking minds to inquire*. It must be underscored that these activities are done *together*. In contrast to many long-held assumptions (especially philosophical ones), inquiry is neither an isolated nor a purely cogitative process. By and large, inquiry is both *social* and *normative* (or *value-laden*). The social and normative nature of inquiry forms the *fifth bead* on our thread. These considerations, combined with the situated and experiential nature of thinking, propelled *DE*’s claim that schools must reflect the wider community while *being* a miniature community. Only in a communal setting can inquiry, including moral inquiry, be realistically practiced and developed. The school-as-community is a natural site of moral and democratic education.

INSTITUTIONS: “EDUCATION,” “DEMOCRACY,” AND “PHILOSOPHY”

The ultimate aim of education, according to Dewey, is the growth and enrichment of experienced meaning. Once it is understood that there can be no measures, aims, or values that transcend experience, the problem becomes how to find, make, or sustain what works for individuals and communities. This burden, to put it colloquially, “takes a village,” and so the larger mission of “education” cannot be confined to schools, but must inform the objectives of many social institutions. Thus, the *sixth* and final *bead* on our thread is *DE*’s reconstruction of the meanings of three major *institutions*: *education*, *democracy*, and *philosophy*. Dewey’s analysis of these forces — especially their interrelationships and practical import — achieved new levels of profundity, and he formulated many views that he would develop, but not contravene, over the coming decades.

With this overview in mind, we move now to a focused examination of experience, the first pivotal concept in *DE* with profound connections to the rest of his corpus.

5. A “problem,” it should be noted, already marks a phase beyond what is initially a muddled and “indeterminate” situation. *DE*’s discussion of good aims in chapter 8 lays this out.

6. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), LW 12.

EXPERIENCE IN *DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION*

Perhaps the most important philosophical chapter in all of *DE* is chapter 11, "Experience and Thinking," which provides a fundamental account of experience and its profound importance for education. By misunderstanding experience, education has, by and large, misunderstood children's psychology, creating systems that too often skirt their social, emotional, and intellectual needs. Drawing upon earlier works, such as the seminal 1896 article "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,"⁷ *DE* devotes *many* pages to experience, a notion of pivotal importance for the remainder of Dewey's career.⁸

In germ, "experience" is Dewey's attempt to revise philosophy's way of seeing our relationship to the world — and to one another. It was, if you will, an evolutionary and ecological rebuttal to a tradition obstinately committed to categorizing and ordering — univocally, ultimately — the main elements of being (including substances, properties, relations, subjects, and objects). Experience offers a different approach: "Experience ... is not a combination of mind and world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but is a single continuous interaction of a great diversity (literally countless in number) of energies" (*DE*, 174). One look at how science advances shows that experience is never merely transcribed as a report passively received from radically external, worldly objects; rather, experience reflects the engagement of inquirers already enmeshed, selecting among competing ways that they may take the data and, hence, interact with their environment.

Experimental science means the possibility of using past experiences as the servant, not the master, of mind. It means that reason operates within experience, not beyond it, to give it an intelligent or reasonable quality. Science is experience becoming rational. The effect of science is thus to change men's idea of the nature and inherent possibilities of experience. (*DE*, 233)

While it is tempting to write an essay just on "experience" in *DE*, here I choose three aspects Dewey develops: (1) experience as experimental,

7. John Dewey, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896), *EW* 5. In this article, Dewey criticized psychology's reflex-arc framework for explaining behavior by artificially segregating sensory stimulus, central nervous system response, and action as "a patchwork of disjointed parts, a mechanical conjunction of unallied processes" (97). This analysis misdescribes how live creatures actually interact with their environment, according to Dewey. Following William James's *Principles of Psychology* (which characterized experience as a continuous stream rather than a series of isolated perceptual impressions and relations), Dewey argued that conduct, too, can be seen as a continuous stream. In place of the reflex-arc model, Dewey proposed that organisms subsist in a continuous circuit of coordination with their environment. Instead of starting analysis of behavior with *this* "stimulus" or *that* "response," we start with the act-in-context. Rather than a "seeing" then "reaching," we consider an agent (a child, say) already active in an environment (a living room with a candle) who acts (for example, seeing-for-reaching). "The real beginning is with the act of seeing; it is looking, and not a sensation of light. ... What precedes the 'stimulus' is a whole act, a sensori-motor co-ordination" (97 and 100). Compare this analysis with Dewey's account of the infant in *Democracy and Education* (280).

8. Experience features prominently in many of Dewey's works, including *Experience and Nature* (1925), *LW* 1; *A Common Faith* (1934), *LW* 9; *Art as Experience* (1934), *LW* 10; *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), *LW* 12; and *Experience and Education* (1938), *LW* 13.

(2) experience as direct or reflective, and (3) the significance of “present” experience for education.

EXPERIENCE AS EXPERIMENTAL

Rejecting the philosophical and psychological currents of his day, Dewey argued that experience is *not* primarily the cognitive contents of consciousness; rather, experience involves alternation between acting and being acted upon, “an active–passive affair” (*DE*, 147). That is, experience may be considered a deliberate attempt to control future events using available resources (physical and conceptual). Different from Heraclitus’s flux, experience exhibits phases of doing (or trying) and undergoing; these phases become “experimental” once an agent relates what is tried with what happens (cause and effect). The process of understanding those specific relationships (and continuities) can create, eventually, “knowledge” that makes future action significant.

Mere activity does not constitute experience . . . Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something. (*DE*, 146)

An experience, then, becomes meaningful — it “sheds light” — when it connects things, people, events, and so on, and provides greater control over future experience. (An “epiphany” describes an especially productive experience of this sort.)

Conventional education, as Dewey saw it, was ignoring people’s basic need to have meaningful experiences, ones engendering connections between “doing” and “undergoing.” Too often, educators devised pedagogy following the old-fashioned stimulus–response psychology. But Dewey’s “Reflex” article showed that little can be learned about conduct with an ultra-narrow focus. Only by expanding the view of conduct’s more extensive continuities (including ongoing activities) can the meaning of any isolable action be appreciated. Applying this lesson about context to the dynamics and challenges on the educational scene, *DE* argued that as experiencing beings, children are engaged in a continuous circuit of activity; their lifeworlds precede and exceed the classroom. Because education is not just observing but teaching children, it is incumbent that educators incorporate some appreciation of the rich context already constituting students as individual persons. The alternative was the status quo: frustration and failure to create experiences that engender meaningful, educative connections.

A word here about aesthetically meaningful experience: *DE* presents aesthetic activity, especially art making, as a model for educators. Because aesthetic experience fluidly incorporates thinking, feeling, and making, it can produce experiences of the *most* meaningful sort. While enjoyment of these experiences is valuable in itself, such experiences are also valuable pedagogically because they can show students (via a direct experience) how good experience can and should be. The idea that such meaningful (“aesthetic”) experience does exist and that it could come to qualify a far greater portion of daily life is perhaps the primary point of Dewey’s

Art as Experience. But in *DE*, we already see him explicating aesthetic experience as a central part of what schools must do!⁹

Play and recreation, as aesthetically meaningful experiences, play a large role in *DE*, their function shown to be natural by the connections forged between education, happiness, and growth. Art's role here is integral: "Education has no more serious responsibility than making adequate provision for enjoyment of recreative leisure; not only for the sake of immediate health, but still more if possible for the sake of its lasting effect upon habits of mind. Art is again the answer to this demand" (*DE*, 213).

EXPERIENCE AS DIRECT OR REFLECTIVE

In addition to the experimental aspect, *DE* highlights the importance of what Dewey calls "direct experience" (in contrast to "indirect" or "reflective" experience). Much experience, Dewey emphasizes, is not reflective; it is *had* (undergone) rather than *known*. This distinction can be found (in varying forms) both earlier and later in his corpus; "had" experience shows up as "direct," "immediate," "undergone," or "primary" experience. What is always true, regardless of label, is that such direct experience is characterized by minimal reflection or regulation; it is qualitative, felt. Indirect experience, in contrast, is variously "indirect," "known," "mediated," "reflective," or "secondary." Indirect (or knowing) experience abstracts away from direct (or had) experience, and how it abstracts is always selective and purposeful, seeking out certain connections or relations.¹⁰

DE explains *why* direct experience is crucial to learning and growth. Educators mistakenly believe that learning can take place if one presents students (a) with information along with promises of (b) an external reward or punishment. But such stratagems of indirect experience, Dewey argues, are ineffectual. Genuine learning occurs best through engagement ("genuine situations") that motivate with interests already present in students. Contrasting different methods, Dewey notes that

9. The following passage from *Democracy and Education* completely prefigures the main message of the (much later) *Art as Experience*: "This enhancement of the qualities which make any ordinary experience appealing, appropriable — capable of full assimilation — and enjoyable, constitutes the prime function of literature, music, drawing, painting, etc., in education. They are ... the chief agencies of an intensified, enhanced appreciation. As such, they are not only intrinsically and directly enjoyable, but they serve a purpose beyond themselves. They have the office, in increased degree, of all appreciation in fixing taste, in forming standards for the worth of later experiences. They arouse discontent with conditions which fall below their measure; they create a demand for surroundings coming up to their own level. They reveal a depth and range of meaning in experiences which otherwise might be mediocre and trivial. They supply, that is, organs of vision. Moreover, in their fullness they represent the concentration and consummation of elements of good which are otherwise scattered and incomplete. They select and focus the elements of enjoyable worth which make any experience directly enjoyable. They are not luxuries of education, but emphatic expressions of that which makes any education worth while" (*DE*, 246–47).

10. While the distinction appears in many of Dewey's works, one might begin with "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism" (1905), *MW* 3; "Qualitative Thought" (1930), *LW* 5, especially 211–12; *Experience and Nature*, especially 26–27; and *Logic*, especially 74–75. Dewey puts the point nicely in "In Reply to Some Criticisms" (1930): "Things that are *had* in experience exist prior to reflection and its eventuation in an object of knowledge; but the latter, as such, is a deliberately effected re-arrangement or re-disposition, by means of overt operations, of such antecedent existences" (*LW* 5, 212).

direct experiences (especially projects involving group inquiry) possess “urgency, warmth, and intimacy” while indirect experiences (as found in textbooks, maps, formulae, and other symbolization) possess merely a “remote, pallid, and coldly detached quality” (*DE*, 241). It is not that indirect (representative) experience has no pedagogical role — clearly, there are many recondite things one eventually needs to learn; but what is crucial is the timing of their introduction: “Before teaching can safely enter upon conveying facts and ideas through the media of signs, schooling must provide genuine situations in which personal participation brings home the import of the material and the problems which it conveys” (*DE*, 242).

Again, Dewey directs educators to take note of the more engaged, direct, and personal methods used by artists. Artistry, done well, ensures that personal interest is imbued in the activity’s end and that means and ends are codependent (see *DE*, 113). *DE* proposes that if teaching could become more artistic — by adopting artists’ flexibility and creative initiative — educators might avoid the anesthetic extremes of teaching by ready-made recipes or by quixotic, personal caprice.¹¹

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “PRESENT” EXPERIENCE FOR EDUCATION

Teaching with direct experience brings us to the third aspect of experience Dewey developed in *DE*. This approach is not just a pedagogical but a *moral* obligation, an acknowledgment of the real dignity of the *child present now*. As a living creature, a child “lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. ... [L]iving has its own intrinsic quality and ... the business of education is with that quality” (*DE*, 56). Dewey lambastes those who portray children as *incomplete*, as undergoing a “merely transitory” stage; such denial (of the child’s actuality) provides a pretext for the adult world to superimpose *its* perspectives and values (*DE*, 73). (This, Dewey notes, is an eschatological move, as it simply transposes the Christian view — of earthly life as merely preparatory for the afterlife, as not inherently meaningful — onto children living now [see *DE*, 59].) While education *does* need to prepare children for the future, the danger is that this requirement obliterates awareness that *the child’s present is now* and the future is still to be made — with much of that task falling to this child.¹²

11. Regarding art as a model for teaching: “Flexibility and initiative in dealing with problems are characteristic of any conception to which method is a way of managing material to develop a conclusion ... the method of teaching is the method of an art, of action intelligently directed by ends... The assumption that there are no alternatives preparation between following ready-made rules and trusting to native gifts, the inspiration of the moment and undirected ‘hard work,’ is contradicted by the procedures of every art” (*DE*, 177).

12. About education’s tendency to displace the present for some future (often utilitarian) goal, Dewey comments, “The mistake is not in attaching importance to for future need, but in making it the mainspring of present effort. Because the need of preparation for a continually developing life is great, it is imperative that every energy should be bent to making the present experience as rich and significant as possible. Then as the present merges insensibly into the future, the future is taken care of” (*DE*, 61). Dewey, influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and George Herbert Mead, wrote often about the “present,” in both earlier and later works. In some cases he distinguished the *lived* from the *specious* present; in other cases the aim was to rescue history from irrelevance and reconnect it

Two further connections between direct experience in *DE* and Dewey's corpus should be noted. The first concerns its analyzability. While we can devise occasions producing direct experiences, we cannot fully analyze or explicate what has been arranged. "It is not possible," Dewey writes, "to define these ideas except by synonyms, like 'coming home to one,' 'really taking it in,' etc., for the only way to appreciate what is meant by a direct experience of a thing is by having it" (*DE*, 241). This remains a deep and important claim, and Dewey adduces additional grounds for it in works written over subsequent decades.¹³

The second aspect concerns direct experience's connection to moral instruction. As with others kinds of development, acquiring what we might call "moral knowledge" (or character development) begins in the crucible of direct knowledge. Dewey writes,

[I]t is knowledge gained at first hand through the exigencies of experience which affects conduct in significant ways. In truth, the problem of moral education in the schools is one with the problem of securing knowledge — the knowledge connected with the system of impulses and habits. For the use to which any known fact is put depends upon its connections. (*DE*, 365–66)

Because all choice involves a comparison of a *better* or *worse*, "morality" involves potentially all our acts. Because deliberation is humanity's constant burden, Dewey rejects a rigid dualism between "moral" and "nonmoral" acts (or characters). As sites of action, then, schools are necessarily tasked with (at least part) of students' moral education. The operative question becomes *how* this should be done. Here again, direct experience is integral because that enables us to assimilate and sympathize with another's experience. This happens by communicating and by stretching imagination to grasp meanings as seen from another's perspective. Words alone cannot create this, for "meaning depends upon connection with a shared experience" as we engage in "joint activity by the *use of things*" (*DE*, 19, 33). The need for direct experience in moral education buttresses the imperative that schools create community, since only an interacting community can provide the situations necessary to develop moral character.

SITUATION IN *DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION*

Let us now take up the notion of a "situation," the second pivotal concept in *DE* with profound connections to Dewey's corpus. As with "experience," "situation" is a term Dewey uses in both ordinary and philosophical ways. After briefly reviewing how "situation" appears in *DE* and elsewhere, I focus upon how *DE* uses the notion. *DE*, as we will see, deploys situations to address student interest and motivation, the sources of aims and criteria in problem solving, the

with present needs. For examples of the former, see the following essays: "Emerson: The Philosopher of Democracy" (1903), *MW* 3; and "Experience, Knowledge, and Value: A Rejoinder" (1939), *LW* 14. On history, see *DE*, chap. 16, "The Significance of Geography and History"; "Experience and Objective Idealism" (1906), *MW* 3; and "Some Comments on Philosophical Discussion" (1924), *MW* 15.

13. See his discussion of this point, for example, in *Experience and Nature*, 18; and *Logic*, 74–75.

nature of thinking per se, and morality (including habits, values, judgments, and theorization).

One of Dewey's earliest philosophical uses of "situation" is in connection with Gottfried Leibniz's monads;¹⁴ much more relevantly, it also appears in 1891's "Moral Theory and Practice." There, Dewey is already telegraphing much later works (such as his 1930 essay, "Three Independent Factors in Morals") by denying the usefulness of grand moral nouns (Justice, Love, Truth) in favor of adverbial modifiers about how acts must respond to the "whole situation" (justly, lovingly, and truly).¹⁵ "Situation" is used extensively in 1910's *How We Think*, in *DE* (of course), and then appears regularly in later texts.¹⁶ The most conspicuous appearances — those doing most to develop the term philosophically — are in *Experience and Nature*, *Art as Experience*, and *Logic*.¹⁷

What is a situation? While *DE* is not a metaphysical book, and there are no extended analytical treatments of situations, the term appears often and diversely enough that we learn a lot, nevertheless. "Situation" is paired with numerous modifiers, depending on a given discussion's broader purposes. Such modifiers include the ontological (*whole* situations, and also *concrete*, *actual empirical*, *real*, *genuine*, *life-*, *complex*, *complicated*, *novel*, *new*), temporal (*developing*, *changing*), psychological (*reflective*, *intellectual*, *practical*), inquiring (*incomplete*, *indeterminate*, *uncertain*, *doubtful*, *confused*, *perplexing*), social (*social*, *inclusive*, *common*, *joint*, *shared*), normative (*significant*), and sociological (*industrial*, *out-of-school*).

What is the job of "situation" in *DE*? Mainly, it provides educators with a justification (logical, psychological, pedagogical, and moral) for reconstructing curricula and methods to be more radically experimental, interpersonally caring, and socially relevant to actual students. Nevertheless, as we will see, much of what *DE* says about situations advances earlier thinking and prefigures later developments.

STUDENT INTEREST

Teaching typically poses problems for students to solve. The timeworn challenge has been how to inspire and sustain interest. Often, students are blamed for lack of interest — they are labeled "lazy," "distracted," or "unmotivated."

14. John Dewey, *Leibniz's New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding* (1888), *EW* 1.

15. John Dewey, "Moral Theory and Practice" (1891), *EW* 3, 101 and 105ff; see also "Three Independent Factors in Morals" (1930), *LW* 5.

16. John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910), *MW* 6.

17. See, for example, Dewey's discussion in *Logic* of the primary ontological place held by "situations" and especially how "a universe of experience" is the precondition and controlling presence of "a universe of discourse" (74). Dewey's discussion of situations in "Qualitative Thought" is similarly instructive, not least because this article displays a similar tension between Dewey's declaration that situations cannot be made explicit and his willingness to discuss their "internal complexity" and "permeating qualitative unity." See "Qualitative Thought," 246–49, *passim*.

Sometimes, lack of interest is medicalized and prescriptions become an integral part of the “learning strategy.” The timeworn answer for interest has been some form of conditioning (a mixture of carrots and sticks) that is institutionalized (grades, ranks, awards, and so on) so as to buttress the structure’s authority, long term.

To a great degree the problem lies not with students, but with educators’ ignorance about the origins of interest. The remedy is not to fault students or to invent more powerful carrots and sticks; rather, educators must understand that “the stimulus resides in the situation with which one is actually confronted” so they may seek “objects and modes of action ... connected with [students’] present powers” (*DE*, 54 and 133). This means the creation of *whole situations*, informed by some knowledge of the student’s personality, background, tastes, and emotional makeup. Such whole situations “are not, however, physical affairs. Intellectually the existence of a whole depends upon a concern or interest; it is qualitative, the completeness of appeal made by a situation” (*DE*, 206). In such situations, the teacher’s focus is not mainly upon the subject (which they must know, *cold*) but “upon the attitude and response of the pupil” according to his or her “present needs and capacities” (*DE*, 192).

This point is especially salient today. No technology that merely states an idea — whether live lecture, book reading, interactive computer program, etc. — can match the efficacy of genuine, shared situations. Dewey writes,

Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does [the student] think. When the parent or teacher has provided the conditions which stimulate thinking and has taken a sympathetic attitude toward the activities of the learner by entering into a common or conjoint experience, all has been done which a second party can do to instigate learning. (*DE*, 167)

Creating genuine situations requires profound care; the conditions established must take into account the participants’ individuality or the pedagogy will fail. For various reasons (driven especially by economics and class), there is precious little opportunity for this kind of education. As a result, conditions become more alienating: students become more inured, teachers suffer a loss of autonomy (to standardized tests, administrators, bureaucracy), and they even, Dewey says, lose their sense of humor!¹⁸ Similar forces, Dewey argued, were at work in the art world, a point he would expand in his 1934 *Art as Experience*.¹⁹

18. “But in instruction and discipline, there is rarely sufficient opportunity for children and youth to have the direct normal experiences from which educators might derive an idea of method or order of best development. Experiences are had under conditions of such constraint that they throw little or no light upon the normal course of an experience to its fruition. ‘Methods’ have then to be authoritatively recommended to teachers, instead of being an expression of their own intelligent observations. ... The effect of this situation in crippling the teacher’s sense of humor has not received the attention which it deserves” (*DE*, 175, 345, and 346).

19. *DE* discusses at length the underlying historical inheritance shackling both artists and educators, namely economic class divisions (between “leisure” and “laboring”) that have permeated daily life and are responsible for much suffering and injustice. Dewey sees, in both the arts and education, a valuable

AIMS AND CRITERIA IN PROBLEM SOLVING

Let us assume that a teacher *has* created a genuine situation and students are engaged in problem solving. Here, the skeptic asks, "Where do the *means* for the solution come from? Mustn't the teacher *show* the students the means? Isn't education all about the methodical revelation of already understood connections between means and ends?" Dewey's response is that while such rehearsals have a place, consider the *originary* situation that gave birth to the problem and ask "How did *those* inquirers find *their* clues?" The answer, again, is that *the situation* is the source of the means, criteria, and clues to problems. Any problem happens at a novel point in time and is always to some degree unique. Strategies relying solely upon rigid custom or random guessing neglect empirical attention to the actual situation; it is unsurprising, then, that they prove ineffectual over time.

Consider this illustration of the point. In many fictional murder mysteries, one clue (a suspect, a motive, a proposed sequence of events) is overemphasized; this myopia sidelines the detectives until they realize that they need to revisit the initial situation (the crime scene, for example) anew.²⁰ (Of course the audience has been screaming for this move for some time!) The point is that, in all these cases, the *source* of the missing clues, relevant means, and live possibilities is the initial problem *itself* — it is "the perplexities of the situation [that suggest] certain ways out" (*DE*, 154; see also 175). Dewey's earnest advice (to go back to the situation) applies to all inquirers, whether they are in education, the sciences, and especially philosophy.²¹

THINKING

"Situation" is fundamental to grasping Dewey — and *DE* — for another, perhaps elusive, reason. Education is supposed to be, as Dewey put it in an earlier book title, "how we think." But without problematic situations —

opportunity to reconstruct these divisions: "To split the [educational] system, and give to others, less fortunately situated, an education conceived mainly as specific trade preparation, is to treat the schools as an agency for transferring the older division of labor and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class, into a society nominally democratic" (328). It is also worth noting that Dewey's critique of museums in *Art as Experience* (where he called it the "museum conception of art") is already fully present in *DE*.

20. In his 1938 work *Logic*, Dewey discusses overemphasis on a single object or event (in the context of logical objects): "What is designated by the word 'situation' is not a single object or event or set of objects and events. For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole. This latter is what is called a 'situation'" (72). We tend to forget the "contextual whole" and for that reason Dewey reminds us that "[a]n object, logically speaking, is that set of connected distinctions of characteristics which emerges as a definite constituent of a resolved situation and is confirmed in the continuity of inquiry. This definition applies to objects as existential" (513). Even the distinctions that provide the criteria for an object's boundary conditions are *themselves* rooted in situations: "Distinctions and relations are instituted within a situation; they are recurrent and repeatable in different situations" (74).

21. Those wanting to follow this a bit should look at Dewey's discussions of the "denotative method" in *Experience and Nature* (see especially 19, 61, and 386). The "denotative method" is, in effect, Dewey's *DE* recommendation of "genuine situations" directed, in this case, at philosophers.

formed from an initially indeterminate situation — there is no thinking! To see why, apply the *organism-in-environment* model to thinking as the *way-we-get-along-in-the-world*. Thinking is not something done *apart* from circumstances but *within* them, in response to them. I may describe a “situation I am *in*” but “*in*” means “amidst.” I am doing-and-undergoing-amid-things, and *one* aspect of my doing is thinking. In the same way my breathing involves the atmosphere, my thinking involves whatever perceptual, conceptual, and physical elements are in play. Just as there is no chess without a board and opponent, there is no “thinking” without some kind of problematic situation. All creatures are *organisms-in-environments* and all thinkers are *experiencers-in-problematic-situations*.²²

We can also think *about* thinking. To do that, I reflectively survey the various situations I have experienced; I notice patterns, apply labels. Wearing a psychologist’s hat, I call certain experienced patterns “thinking” and others “emoting”; wearing a logician’s (or ontologist’s) hat, I am disposed to call some patterns “objects” and others “relations”; my ethicist’s hat is worn as I label “goods” and “evils”; and so forth. There is nothing wrong with this reflective surveying, abstracting, and labeling of experience; indeed, these are all inquiries, and they can prove useful. But the ability to distinguish and label does not change what is basic: the situation.²³

MORAL HABITS, VALUES, AND JUDGMENTS

As explained earlier (in connection to direct experience), education has a vital role to play in moral development. However, this is not, as *DE* points out, a special section of the curriculum requiring special methods but is integral

22. As Dewey puts it, “To say that thinking occurs with reference to situations which are still going on, and incomplete, is to say that thinking occurs when things are uncertain or doubtful or problematic. Only what is finished, completed, is wholly assured. Where there is reflection there is suspense. The object of thinking is to help reach a conclusion, to project a possible termination on the basis of what is already given. ... Since the situation in which thinking occurs is a doubtful one, thinking is a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating” (*DE*, 155).

23. Situations are, if you like, founts of what we call reason, emotion, and will but these are not originally separated. While this sounds counterintuitive to anyone who is habituated to everyday psychological terms, it is just *not* the case that the “intellectual,” “emotional,” and “volitional” aspects of our conduct are somehow real apart from the functional use we make in calling them such. They are all created by abstracting from situations in which they exist, so to speak, intermixed with everything else. (This is why we often feel something intensely without *knowing* what we feel. It is not just that we don’t have a name for it, but that we have not yet finished deciding what to designate and characterize in our experience!) As Dewey puts it, “Interest and aims, concern and purpose, are necessarily connected. ... While such words ... indicate an attitude of personal preference, they are always attitudes toward *objects* — toward what is foreseen. We may call the phase of objective foresight intellectual, and the phase of personal concern emotional and volitional, but there is no separation in the facts of the situation. ... [T]hey are always responses to what is going on in the situation of which they are a part. ... They are literally bound up with [a situation’s] changes. ... Instead of marking a purely personal or subjective realm, separated from the objective and impersonal, they indicate the non-existence of such a separate world. ... Interest, concern, mean that self and world are engaged with each other in a developing situation” (*DE*, 131 and 132).

to education's mission to empower the discovery, making, and sustaining of meaningful experience. "Morals," as Dewey puts it, "concern nothing less than the whole character" (*DE*, 366). This happens interactively, via created situations. To be "in charge" of children — say, in a mathematics or language or biology class — is at once to be responsible for their development as human beings; this is true regardless of whether particularly controversial "ethical" dilemmas or principles are selected for special attention and discussion.

Morality is taught as a general consequence of the teaching of habits. "All habits," Dewey writes in *Human Nature and Conduct*, "are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self."²⁴ A student may have certain habits or attitudes, such as compassion, that contribute to growth; in that case, the school can put them to work in projects (or "occupations," as Dewey calls them) that reinforce and connect them more delicately to other habits. Some habits, in contrast, may be destructive of growth; again, the school's task is to reconstruct these habits so they contribute to growth.

Habits are not like personal property, exclusive to a self. A habit is transactional — it comes from and is ingredient to situations: "Habits enter into the constitution of the situation; they are in and of it, not, so far as it is concerned, something outside of it."²⁵ I may have a habit of eating sweets after dinner, but this habit isn't isolated; my body's chemistry, the family who joins in, and the properties of the food all contribute to the habit. This transactional relationship between self, habits, and situation means that education of habits — including those we would call moral habits or character — requires schools and teachers to pay careful attention to whether or not they are creating genuine situations for their students.

A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information are calculated to develop social insight and interest. (*DE*, 200)

As mentioned earlier, exercising that responsibility means helping students understand the meanings of different kinds of conduct by helping them grasp the potential implications of that conduct. But a true grasp of those implications cannot come from a lecture or (in a religious context) a sermon; genuine knowledge can only be created through situations, which is why schools must create and function as communities.

VALUES AND VALUATION

DE offers an account the nature of values and valuation (value judgment). These support Dewey's practical proposals about moral education, and again "situation" plays a crucial role. One profoundly mistaken notion is that values are somehow independent of everyday conduct. From that assumption, education

24. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), *MW* 14, 21.

25. John Dewey, "Brief Studies in Realism" (1911), *MW* 6, 120.

erroneously takes its challenge to be inducing (persuading, cajoling, coercing) students into following moral codes or rules. *DE* argues that moral values (and aims) are often the result of inquiries that themselves emerge from (and return for application to) problematic situations. Even a child given two pieces of candy in the presence of a sibling with none can face a problematic situation; “ill at ease,” they have to think about what to do. The situation is “indeterminate,” a quandary. They may, of course, apply the rule (or value) handed down from their parents that says “Always share.” But while this solution provides one route (from indeterminacy to determinacy), it requires neither personal investment nor perspicuous analysis of the “actual empirical” situation (as Dewey calls it). The solution lacks authenticity. An authentic solution involves *inquiry* — observation, hypothesis, reflection, testing out — which, in its generic logical form, is a continuous behavior no different in kind from other situations not singled out as “moral.”²⁶

The situational account of values in *DE* also yields the conclusion that there is not, and cannot be, an ultimate hierarchy of ends or values: “In the abstract or at large, apart from the needs of a particular situation in which choice has to be made, there is no such thing as degrees or order of value” (*DE*, 248). This rejection of a hierarchy of values (or, for that matter, of virtues) is present in both earlier and later works.²⁷

MORAL THEORIES

Finally, *DE*'s moral account (incorporating experience, situation, and inquiry) significantly advances Dewey's argument against a range of ethical theories, such as those staked either upon “motives” (for example, Immanuel Kant's) or “consequences” (for example, John Stuart Mill's) or “character” (for example, Aristotle's). Dewey criticizes these theories' “sharp demarcation of the motive of action from its consequences, and of character from conduct” (*DE*, 356). Such monocausal approaches stem from a tenacious dualism between mind and activity.²⁸ Dewey's criticism of traditional theories' reification of traits of conduct

26. In language closely prefiguring the 1938 *Logic*'s extensive use of “indeterminate” and “determinate” situations, Dewey writes in *DE*, “A person who does not have his mind made up, does not know what to do. Consequently he postpones definite action so far as possible. ... There is not first a purely psychical process, followed abruptly by a radically different physical one. There is one continuous behavior, proceeding from a more uncertain, divided, hesitating state to a more overt, determinate, or complete state” (357).

27. On ends or aims, see *DE*: “Foreseen ends,” Dewey writes, “are factors [for control] in the development of a changing situation. ... They are subordinate to the situation ... not the situation to them. They are not ends in the sense of finalities to which everything must be bent and sacrificed. They are, as foreseen, *means* of guiding the development of a situation” (182). On values, see, for example, Dewey's 1915 essay, “The Logic of Judgments of Practice”: “I do not believe that valuations occur and values are brought into being save in a continuing situation where things have potency for carrying forward processes” (*MW* 8, 34); for a later discussion of this point, see the 1938 *Logic*, 169.

28. Dewey writes, “Since morality is concerned with conduct, any dualisms which are set up between mind and activity must reflect themselves in the theory of morals. ... The first obstruction which meets us is the currency of moral ideas which split the course of activity into two opposed factors, often named

is remarkably mature in *DE*, but it finds expression later as well, most notably in his 1930 essay “Three Independent Factors in Morals.”

CONCLUSION

By all accounts, John Dewey lived a meaningful life that integrated philosophy, education, and politics. In many ways, *Democracy and Education* provides a handbook sketching how these elements can sustain one another. Democracy, we learn, is more than political machinery — it is a “mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (*DE*, 93). Education helps shape the habits (intellectual, emotional, and imaginative) necessary to this mode of life, while philosophy’s role is critical and hypothetical: “defining difficulties and suggesting methods for dealing with them,” and discovering a “more comprehensive point of view” especially when there is “need of integration in action of the conflicting various interests in life” (*DE*, 336).

But while philosophy may help education and democracy imagine new perspectives and directions, *DE* makes clear that *philosophy needs education* for its reality checks. The “educational point of view” — called, in *Experience and Nature*, the “denotative method” — is for philosophy what the “genuine situation” (described throughout *DE*) is for teachers and students: the experiential starting point where rubber meets road: “The educational point of view enables one to envisage the philosophic problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance or rejection makes a difference in practice” (*DE*, 338). Because change is the only constant, each generation must reinvent democracy to respond to novel conditions, needs, and challenges. While *DE* states that education’s job is to “liberate the young from reviving and retraversing the past,” education serves a similar function for philosophy (*DE*, 79). For philosophy’s vitality as *philosophy* rests on its continued relevance to a changing social democracy; it must find *new* ways to intercede, constructively, in the many realms that comprise culture. Education is philosophy’s trainer — it commits philosophy to the practical regimen needed for vitality: “Education is the laboratory in which philosophic distinctions become concrete and are tested” (*DE*, 339). More than anything, perhaps, this last statement helps us to see why education and philosophy were not merely intertwined themes for Dewey, but were the symbiotic organs energizing the body of his thought.

respectively the inner and outer, or the spiritual and the physical. ... In morals it takes the form of a sharp demarcation of the motive of action from its consequences, and of character from conduct. ... Different schools identify morality with either the inner state of mind or the outer act and results, each in separation from the other” (*DE*, 356).