

# John Dewey

Kjetil Egelandstal<sup>1</sup> and Ingunn Johanne Ness<sup>1</sup>

(1)Centre for the Science of Learning & Technology (SLATE), University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

**Kjetil Egelandstal (Corresponding author)**

**Email:** [kjetil.egelandstal@uib.no](mailto:kjetil.egelandstal@uib.no)

**Ingunn Johanne Ness**

**Email:** [Ingunn.Ness@uib.no](mailto:Ingunn.Ness@uib.no)

## Abstract

The American philosopher John Dewey and the tradition of pragmatism is often connected to the concept of experience. This entry explores John Dewey's pragmatism with a particular emphasis on experience as transformative events based on two main principles – continuity and interaction. In relation to this we discuss how experience is linked to imagination and seen as a transformative source. Experience can be perceived as a creative process in which the meeting of different experiences creates new ideas and new understandings revealing what is possible. Consequently, experiences do not only form the basis for what we can do and understand, but also what we can imagine and create. Despite the positive and educative associations to the concept, experience is not always an educative phenomenon and Dewey realized that some experiences can also be harmful. Thus, in order to understand the complexity of the concept we also elaborate on educative and miseducative experiences, and the relationship between experience and moral judgement.

**Keywords** Pragmatism - Dewey - The possible - Experience - Imagination

## Introduction

In this chapter, we will focus on how we, through our interaction with our environment, undergo experiences and change through these experiences. The focus is especially directed on how our experience opens the possibilities for what we can learn, think, and understand, how we see ourselves and the world, what we can imagine, and how we act. This is done in light of the philosophical tradition of pragmatism and the American philosopher and educator John Dewey.

We start by presenting the pragmatist view of knowledge and Dewey's conception of experience as transformative events that are based on two principles: the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction. Further on, we discuss Dewey's concept of experience in relation to imagination and the possible, before moving into experiences as educative and miseducative, and finally, their relation with interpretation and moral judgment.

# Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that originated in the USA around 1870. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), and John Dewey (1859–1952) are considered the most central pragmatists. In recent times, philosophers like Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and Robert Brandom are also regarded as representatives of this tradition.

The term pragmatism comes from the Greek word “pragma,” which means action or practice, and what characterizes pragmatism is precisely the emphasis on practice and humans as acting beings. This emphasis on action is associated with the idea that the consequences of our actions determine whether an idea or practice is acceptable or must be rejected. From a pragmatic point of view, for example, it is reasonable to claim that knowledge and ideas are best understood considering their practical uses and functionality. In this lies the fact that “truth” is closely connected with our experiences of “what works.” This is why Dewey ( [2008](#) [1938]) uses the term “warranted assertions” when talking about knowledge. The reason for this is that we can potentially always make new experiences that challenge what we already know. In other words, it is when our ideas and knowledge are tested and we experience their consequences that we realize whether and if they are usable or must be rejected or revised. It is important to note that even when an assertion is confirmed, it remains a “warranted assertion.” This implies an openness to the fallacy of what we believe is true. This is why pragmatists often argue that the goal of research is to be useful (James [2000](#); Johnson and Onwuegbuzie [2004](#); Noddings [2007](#); Feilzer [2009](#)). From such a perspective, the value of knowledge is assessed through its use, i.e., knowledge is primarily a tool for exploration and practice that needs to be tested.

## John Dewey

John Dewey (1859–1952) was born in 1859 in Vermont, USA, the same year as Charles Darwin’s *The origins of Species* were published, and Dewey’s philosophy is clearly inspired by these naturalistic currents. However, this is not reductionistic naturalism attempting to explain the human condition through narrow scientific methods and concepts, but a naturalism that considers humans as agents who interpret and acts in their environment through their experiences, intentions, and values.

When reading Dewey, we soon realize that experience is a key concept, which is highlighted in the titles of his works: *Experience and nature* (1921), *Art as experience* (1934), and *Experience and education* (1938). With his concept of experience, Dewey presents a nondualistic understanding of reality that rejects traditional distinctions between theory and practice, thinking and action, facts and values, etc. Instead, he considers human thoughts as “tools” for expectations, problem-solving, and action, and rejects the idea that the function of thoughts is to describe, represent, or mirror an immutable reality. For Dewey, our thoughts and ideas are inevitably used in our actions, and our experiences of the consequences of when we act change our ideas based on how they work. In this way one can say that the human condition is to be in a continuous interaction process with the environment around us – where both our understanding and the environment change in light of what we experience.

# Experiences as Historically Conditioned and Transformative Events

Dewey ([1997](#) [1938]) considers experiences as transformative events that change those who undergo them as well as their ability to make new interpretations. The concept of experience is therefore related to the phenomenon of understanding and this affects how new insights, attitudes, and moral judgment are formed. Experience is according to Dewey ([1997](#) [1938]) based on two principles: *the principle of continuity* and *the principle of interaction*. We will first look at the principle of continuity. This entails that process of experience always connects the present and the past because past experiences affect how future experiences become. The other principle, the principle of interaction, is about new experiences arising through the interaction between the individual's internal conditions (shaped by previous experiences) and external ("objective") conditions (consisting of the environment surrounding the individual):

... it [the principle of interaction] assigns equal rights to both factors in experience – objective and internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a situation. (Dewey [1997](#) [1938], p. 42)

In other words, through this interaction, new experiences are made possible, but also limited by the conditions who are present (both internal and external) in each situation. Because a person's internal conditions are shaped by previous experiences, previous experiences are crucial for how external conditions are interpreted and how a situation is formed. The principle of continuity and the principle of interaction are, thus, inextricably connected:

What he [the individual] has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue. (Dewey [1997](#) [1938], p. 44)

This means that we use our previous experiences when interpreting a new situation; at the same time, our new experience of this situation changes our understanding and shape how we interpret future situations.

In order to understand these abstract notions, let us imagine a machinist facing a broken car engine. Although he/she only has experience in repairing boat engines, he/she will still have better prerequisites for repairing the car engine than a teacher or a doctor. Nevertheless, he/she might experience that his/her knowledge is not sufficient to repair the given engine, and that he/she needs to make new experiences that can provide him/her with better insights. One can imagine that he/she thus initiates a thorough investigation in which he/she searches for information on the Web (discussion forums, manuals, etc.), studies the engine carefully and tests various solutions, and maybe contacts a friend who is a car mechanic. The experiences the machinist undergoes through these interactions changes his/her understanding of the specific car engine and engines in general. These experiences can, thus, be used to both to repair the car engine in question and to interpret and act in new situations in the future.

It is, however, important to note that this process of experience is not just a linear process that cumulatively helps us understand the world better and act in it, it is also very much a creative process in which the meeting of different experiences creates new ideas and new understandings of

what is possible. Experiences do not only form the basis for what we do can do and understand, but also what we can imagine and create.

## Experience and Imagination

To Dewey, imagination is an integral part of human activity, experience, and growth (Krüger [2002](#), p. 188). Imagination serves as stimuli for thinking and reflection and can be said to be a transformative force of the mind that is connected to the possible and enables us to grasp what lies beyond what we can observe. Dewey sees imagination as a natural part of learning and communication that extends beyond the situation we are in here and now. Dewey points to how a child can play with a boat and imagine other situations with the boat, as an example of how this ability drives the child's activity forward. He says that the child can:

... change the material that serves as a boat almost at will, and introduce new factors as fancy suggest. The imagination makes what it will of chairs, blocks, leaves, chips, if they serve the purpose of carrying the activity forward. (Dewey [2004](#) [1916], p. 165)

This quote shows how a child is able to consciously recreate images in the mind based on experiences with events or objects, and then use these experiences to imagine something else. This quality is also central to our empathy and capacity to understand other human beings as well as our ability to solve different problems.

Problem-solving is very much an act of reflection. Dewey sees problem-solving as a process developing in five stages: First, we have a perceived problem, disagreement, or conflict arising. Second, we think through the problem and try to find out what is essential in order to solve it. Third, we try to imagine different possible solutions. Fourth, we start developing hypotheses through reasoning and experimentation. Fifth, we observe and test and this results in the approval or rejection of our hypothesis. Dewey ( [2004](#) [1916]) argued that it is crucial to gather information that makes it possible to investigate the problem at hand in an appropriate way and that it is important to actually test out the hypothesis to see if they hold. In any case, the problem-solving process will be something one can explore and learn from.

Dewey does, however, not consider problem-solving as an individual activity, but more as a social process in which people are jointly trying to solve problems. In such processes in which new ideas are to be created and tested, imagination plays an important part. What an individual possesses as knowledge accumulated through its past experience serves as a tool for what it can understand and can imagine. In short, an individual's past experiences form a repertoire of tools that informs a person's mind and will influence the options that seem possible for that person in any new situation. In daily life, when a group of people discuss how to solve a problem together, a potential exchange of experience will often take place. Most likely they will have different experiences and this diversity is key to stimulating the imagination when they share their different views (Ness [2020](#)). It is, however, important that the participants of a discussion manage to share their ideas in a way that becomes meaningful for each other to establish a common understanding. Furthermore, for new ideas to be imagined, it is also important that the different perspectives challenge each other. In this way, the individual's imagination can be expanded through a reconstruction of previous experiences, making new solutions appear. It is worth noting here that this is the same process as the processes enabling new knowledge and technology to emerge and be developed in a culture.

In the next section we will explore this further and look at what conditions must be present for a new experience to take place.

## Conditions for New Experiences

So far, we have seen that according to Dewey ( [1997](#) [1938]) we are continuously engaged in an interactive process with our environment. Through this interaction, new interpretations become possible, but also limited by the conditions present (both internal and external) in each situation. The current situation, however, both relates to the future and the past. The future because we engage with our environment through our plans and expectations. The past because our current understanding is formed by previous experiences which condition how new situations occur for us. The process of experiencing is, thus, continuous, where the interplay between past experiences, plans for the future, and external conditions affect how new experiences come into being. This continuity of experience can therefore be depicted as a spiral. Since every spiral of experience is unique, since no one lives identical lives, our expectations, interpretations, and understandings will be different.

This way of thinking about experience is very similar to that of the philosophical hermeneutics, represented by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. According to Gadamer ( [2012](#), p. 347), we can consider two types of experiences: experiences that correspond with our expectations and confirm them, and new experiences that thwarts our expectations. Gadamer regards the latter as real experiences, experiences which are essentially negative because they disprove our expectations. This negativity is, however, a productive one because it liberates us from wrongful assumptions and provides us with new insights. That is, a new experience implies, on the one hand, acknowledging that one's understanding was inadequate, while, at the other hand, it entails acquiring a new horizon of understanding shedding new light on a matter (Gadamer [2012](#)).

Gadamer ( [2012](#)) also highlights the linguistic dimension in an experience. Experiences are not only a consequence of pure sensory impressions, but the result the dialectical interaction between questions and answers, between the interpreter and what is interpreted. When we interpret something, we use our preconceptions (prejudices) as an interpretive framework. That means, the questions we can ask are made possible, but also limited by our horizon of understanding. In other words, our previous experiences represent the opportunities for the dialogues we can have with the world, making certain conversations possible and others impossible.

According to both Gadamer and Dewey experiences are not just a matter of new insights in a particular area, but something that changes our understanding holistically. An experience represents a breach with our expectations that allow us to see ourselves and the world in a new perspective. That is, the experiences we undergo affect how we become as human beings.

To illustrate: When reading a text, you use relevant past experiences to ask questions to the text and interpret its meaning. Through this process of interpretation, you might be subjected to unfamiliar perspectives that changes your horizon of understanding and the questions you are able to ask. This affects both the way you understand the text itself and your ability to interpret other texts in the future. Such an experience, however, is not solely restricted to text interpretation, but also provides a new horizon of understanding through which you can see yourself and the world.

In our lives these interactions happen continuously through our meetings with other human beings and the materials that surrounds us, where both the internal and external conditions in our

environment affect our interpretations and how our horizon of understanding changes. Because we all live different lives, our understanding and imagination will differ.

It is, however, not so that all changes are for the better. Dewey ( [1997](#) [1938]) argues that in the context of educating and parenting, we need to separate between experiences that are educative, miseducative, and noneducative.

## Educative, Miseducative, and Noneducative Experiences

Dewey ( [1997](#) [1938]) distinguishes between experiences that are noneducative, educative, and miseducative. Noneducative experiences refer to interactions between the individual and its environment that do not contribute to new experiences; for instance, if the individual does not get a meaningful experience out of a situation because there is no connection between previous experiences and the object of interpretation. For example, you cannot read a text in Japanese if you do not understand the language. An attempt to read the text will thus become noneducative, at least in terms of understanding the text. Similarly, a situation might be noneducative if it simply confirms what has already been experienced before. For example, you might observe that throwing a rock into the air results in the rock coming down again, as you have experienced before. Hence, no new experience is made.

Dewey ( [1997](#) [1938]) realizes, however, that the question of experience is not simply a question about gaining new experiences regardless of their consequences. It is also a normative question, at least from the perspective of an educator or parent who needs to consider that some experiences might also be harmful for their children/pupils. Dewey therefore separates between educative and miseducative experiences in terms of what an experience may lead to. Using “growth” as a metaphor, Dewey ( [1997](#) [1938]) associates growth with the ability to make new experiences in new directions. The quality of an experience is, thus, related to whether it promotes or restricts the opportunity for future experiences. According to Dewey ( [1997](#) [1938]), an experience that offers good conditions for growth in new directions is considered educative, while an experience that inhibits or disrupts growth is considered miseducative.

Although all experiences both promote and inhibit opportunities for further experiences, one can imagine that some experiences are less restrictive than others. For example, learning to read will probably open a child to many new experiences. While, conversely, experiencing that others do not value you may be restrictive for your possibilities to make social experiences. Furthermore, it is important to note that it is not only the external conditions themselves that determine whether an experience is educative, but how the external and internal conditions interact. Therefore, the same external conditions can lead to different experiences depending on an individual’s internal conditions. This means that even the process of learning something commonly considered good may have undesired consequences. Dewey calls this “collateral learning”:

Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular things he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future. (Dewey [1997](#) [1938], p. 48)



The point is that the experiences a person makes help to shape how he/she becomes. In other words, an experience means not only that we understand an object, phenomena, etc., in a certain way, but also that we understand ourselves in a certain way through the experience as a whole. In this way, any experience becomes a point of reference for how we understand ourselves in the world. A parent or a teacher can therefore not be content with focusing exclusively on external conditions of the child(ren) which he/she is responsible for, he/she must also take into account their subjectivity and development as human beings. In the next section, we will look at how the process of experience is also connected with the development of moral judgment.

## Experience and Moral Judgment

Educative experiences for Dewey ( [1997](#) [1938]) imply a gradual emancipation from immediate impulses and drives. Since we, as human beings, can plan the future in the light of past experiences, we are not bound by a particular situation in time, but able to take a general perspective independent of our immediate desires. To take a general perspective is not solely an innate ability, but a result of experience and linguistic development. Our ability to anticipate and assess the consequences of our actions and inactions are therefore shaped through the life we live.

However, anticipating and assessing the consequences of an action also means making an ethical assessment. At this point, Dewey's concept of experience is similar to the ancient philosopher Aristotle's ( [2009](#)) concept of moral judgment, *phronesis*. *Phronesis* differs from fixed skills and knowledge in that it is about judging what may in principle be different. While skills and knowledge make it possible for a person to change tires on a car, *phronesis* concerns judgment of when one *should* change the tires. This kind of contemplation relates to our actions, that is, to consider what is the right thing to do in each situation. In other words, it is this reasoning we use in daily life when we decide what we do and what we refrain from doing. This ability to make moral judgements is related to our experience, understanding, and imagination as a whole.

When we experience something unfamiliar in a specific situation, this experience changes us and leads to new understanding and self-understanding. This affects how we interpret new situations. Our experiences, however, also affect our attitude to what is right and wrong, and our ability to judge what is right in the individual situation. We therefore use our imagination and judgment, shaped by past experiences, when we consider what a specific situation requires from us. Our understanding and judgment are, in turn, affected by how we experience the consequences of our actions. In other words, experience, understanding, imagination, and judgment are intimately related:

1.

We interpret a new situation through our current horizon of understanding.

2.

Through our understanding of what the situation requires and imagining possible solutions we act.

3.

The experiences we undergo as a consequence of our actions affect our understanding and self-understanding we change.

4.

We can face new situations with changed imagination and moral judgment.

Knowledge and skills are tools we use when we act, but these tools can be used differently depending on how a person interprets a situation and what this person might want to achieve. An action is thus a result of what we can understand, what we can imagine as possible, and what we can

do. What we *can* do is, however, subordinate to what we *choose* to do. Our imagination, skills, and knowledge must therefore be considered in the context of our moral attitude to what is right and wrong. Dewey ( [1983](#) [1922], p. 194) argues that it is wrong to make moral “A separate department of life.” According to Dewey, morality is not something that we only use on special occasions, all situations require moral judgment. This is as much about assessing what one should refrain from doing, as what one should do. Of course, a person’s moral judgment may be more or less morally conscious, and actions may be considered more or less morally sound. The point is that all situations place moral demands on the individual. How we chose to interpret and react to these demands, however, will differ from person to person. In retrospect, many of us probably think that we have sometimes acted right and sometimes acted wrong. What we should have done, we often do not realize until later. Such experiences, however, can help us assess and imagine future situations.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we started by presenting the pragmatism’s view of knowledge and Dewey’s conception of experience as transformative events that are based on two principles: the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction. Further on, we discussed Dewey’s concept of experience in relation to imagination and the possible before moving on to experiences as educative, miseducative, and noneducative, and, finally, the relationship between experience and moral judgment. Through this presentation we have highlighted that experiences are considered by Dewey as historically conditioned transformative events occurring through a continuous and lifelong interaction process between individuals and their environment. They are historically conditioned because previous experiences affect how we interpret and deal with future events. They are transformative because new situations, in which new experiences are made, changes our understanding, providing us with new horizons through which we can interpret, imagine, and create. This implies a continuity where previous experiences are used in new situations, and new situations reconstruct our experiences. Knowledge and skills are tools we use when we act but these tools can be used in differently depending on how a person interprets a situation and what this person might want to achieve. An action is thus a result of what we can understand, what we can anticipate, what we can imagine as possible, and, thus, what we can do in the end. The concept of experience is related to the possible and to what we can imagine as a transformative source. Experiences do not only form the basis for what we do can do and understand, but also what we can imagine and create.

The process of experience can therefore be described as a spiral; an individual’s horizon of understanding affect what experiences can be made and how they are made, and new experiences affect the individual’s horizon of understanding. Experience, however, is not only about acquiring new knowledge, but also about how one is formed as a human being, and is thus also a moral phenomenon. Experiences entail a real change of an individual understanding and self-understanding which reflects on one’s moral judgment when imagining and choosing how to act in each situation. We are therefore at the mercy of our experiences in how we become as human beings. This requires a particular awareness from educators and parents to consider whether the experiences their children undergo are educative or miseducative in a broad sense.



# References

Aristotle, Ross, W. D., & Brown, L. (2009). *The Nicomachean ethics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Dewey, J. (1983 [1922]). *Human nature and conduct*. Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1997 [1938]). *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone.

Dewey, J. (2004 [1916]). *Democracy and education*. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing.

Dewey, J. (2008 [1938]). *The later works of John Dewey, 1925–1953: 1938, logic – The theory of inquiry*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Feilzer, M. Y. (2009). Doing mixed methods research pragmatically: Implications for the rediscovery of pragmatism as a research paradigm. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 4(1), 6–16. [CrossRef](#)

Gadamer, H.-G. (2012). *Truth and method*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

James, W. (2000). Lecture VI. Pragmatism's conception of truth. In I. W. James & G. Gunn (Eds.), *Pragmatism and other writings* (pp. 87–105). London: Penguin Books.

Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26. [CrossRef](#)

Krüger, T. (2002). Imaginasjon – slik begrepet fremtrer i Platons Staten, Rousseaus Emile og Deweys Democracy and education. In I. S.-E. Holgersen, K. Fink-Jensen, H. Jørgensen, & B. Olsson (Eds.), *Musikpædagogiske refleksjoner. Festskrift til Frede V. Nielsen 60 år*. Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitet.

Ness, I. J. (2020). *Diversity: Key to creative processes in interdisciplinary teams*. Geneva: SIETAR Switzerland. The First-Class Postbuzz.

Noddings, N. (2007). *Philosophy of education* (2nd ed.). Boulder: Westview Press.