Review

Reviewed Work(s): Experience and Nature by John Dewey

Review by: H. Wildon Carr

Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Jan., 1926, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Jan., 1926), pp. 64-68

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2179265

REVIEWS OF BOOKS.

Experience and Nature. By JOHN DEWEY. Chicago, Open Court Publishing Company, 1925.—pp. xi, 443.

The charm of Professor Dewey's writing is that the geniality of his own personality continually breaks through his literary expression. His book indeed is a delight to read. We can understand, however, the philosophical student experiencing some disappointment, occasionally perhaps even exasperation, at the elusiveness of the author. There is no lack of definite doctrine or clear direction in this book and yet the particular theory which Professor Dewey holds and which he names instrumentalism, a theory which appears at one time as a form of radical empiricism, at another as a form of pragmatism, never comes out into the open. It darts about weasel-like, to adopt a simile introduced by Professor Dewey into his opening sentence. It peeps out at us for a moment, to disappear immediately and almost before we are aware of it, behind expositions and criticisms and comparisons of general standpoints. Moreover the book is not one that he who runs may read, the style is never lucid like Hume's or technical like Kant's, and the meaning is often obscure. Indeed we have often found it necessary to read a sentence at least three times, once to see what it says, again to know what it means, and yet again to decide the importance attached to the meaning. There is purpose in these remarks. We cannot help feeling that Professor Dewey's doctrine draws much of its fascination from its being kept in the background. "We do it wrong being so majestical to offer it the show of violence." Indeed like the apparition of whom these words were spoken Professor Dewey's theory does appear as something posed between the materialism of an external reality and the spiritualism of an internal activity without obvious support from either. The shadow of realism and the spectre of idealism seem to haunt his efforts to place his instrumentalism on a self-supporting basis.

A scientific flavor pervades Professor Dewey's philosophizing due perhaps to the conscious or unconscious influence of the honoured name whose memory is preserved in the lectureship, but the scientific aspect of his own doctrine is never emphasized. Professor Dewey seems more concerned to point comparisons and to indicate contrasts between the view-point of the older philosophies and that of our

modern world. In this also we experience some disappointment for he seems often to stress trivialities. We have no doubt, for example, that there are still earnest searchers for truth who are worried with the dialectical difficulties discussed in the first chapter,—whether let us say the word 'experience' applied to our knowledge of the flower in the crannied wall should be confined to the actual sense impression and so be without content and denote nothing, or whether it should include all that is implied in that simple existence, in fact denote everything,—but we must admit that we have little sympathy with them in their difficulties and considerable impatience with their logomachies. For in philosophy today we have before us an urgent and strenuous task. We cannot be idlers lounging in the market-place, nor dreamers spinning the cobwebs of our speculative systems in the aloofness of our studies, we are called on to assist humanity in an intellectual effort of the first magnitude, in its endeavour to adapt its mind to a new outlook on the universe. We of the present generation find ourselves in the midst of one of those crises in the history of thought which from time to time have filled humanity with amazement, disturbing its habits, falsifying and rendering useless all the ideas with which it had accustomed itself to coördinate its practical, scientific, social, political and religious interests. Never since man had to meet the paradox of the antipodes has so complete a revolution in his scientific notion of the nature of the physical world presented itself as that which now arises before him in the principle of relativity. Never before in history has so fundamental a reformation of his ethical and religious ideas been forced upon him as that which the acceptance of the evolution hypothesis entails. The day is gone by when philosophers could dissociate themselves from the men of science and leave it to the mathematicians and physicists to settle among themselves what are to be the fundamental concepts and the working hypotheses in physical science.

Let us turn however from the general reflection which the book as a whole suggests to us and consider the main theme and special subject-matter of the work. The most valuable part and that which most clearly illustrates the instrumentalist theory is without doubt the exposition of Professor Dewey's philosophy of language. It is not a scientific theory of the origin of speech but a philosophy of the nature and import of intersubjective intercourse. This we may say is the central theme of the book. Stated briefly the doctrine is that knowledge is a tool and that language is the tool of tools. It is man's acquirement of the faculty of speech, and the means of intercourse

which this has put into his possession, which marks the height of his evolutionary attainment, constitutes his superiority in the hierarchy of the living and enables him to establish his domination. All this achievement of man may be traced to his possession of a tool,—*logos*, the word,—a tool for giving tools. The means by which this end is accomplished is the device of attaching meanings to detachable signs. The essence of the tool is detachment, and that a detached sign may signify, may possess meaning, it must have meanings attached to it. Language makes this possible. This we take to be Professor Dewey's theory. It is by their meanings that words become language, before this they are mere sounds or noise, but by the attachment to them of meanings they become words, serve for intercourse and transform man from an instinctive to a rational creature. The theory is forcibly and very ably argued, and yet no sooner is it propounded and well under way than it makes shipwreck on the rock of realism. Such at least appears to us its disastrous issue. For no sooner has he shown us that words without meanings are not words, and that meanings unexpressed are not meanings, than he turns aside to discuss the meaningless question what are words when they are without meaning and therefore not words, and he strives vainly to give an intelligible answer. That we may not be suspected of misrepresentation, we will refer the reader to the argument, too long to quote, on page one hundred ninety-six, following the illustration of the whistle used in the regulation of traffic. The argument is that the physical fact, the sound of the whistle, is something in its own right entitling it absolutely to be described as the sound of the whistle, even if abstraction be made of police officer, traffic and traffic regulation. If this is not a *reductio ad absurdum*, it is at least a gratuitous introduction of a surd into the equation. No idealist need deny the brute nature of the sign as a limiting concept but this is quite irrelevant to the philosophy of language, and to introduce it as a factor is simply to change the whole ground. It is in effect to abandon the ideal of a philosophy of expression and intercourse and propound a genetic hypothesis of the origin of language challenging comparison with the now discredited 'bow-wow' and 'ding-dong' theories. Professor Dewey disappoints us.

Closely connected with his doctrine of language is his peculiarly emphatic insistence in rejecting the implication so generally accepted in philosophical discourse, that experience in its very nature is owned and "that the ownership is such in kind that everything about experience is affected by a private and exclusive quality" (p. 231).

He declares the implication to be an absurdity. It may be, but is it not, we ask, this "absurd" implication which has proved so stubborn an obstacle in scientific research that mathematicians and physicists have come to the conclusion that the only way is to accept it? Have they not come to terms with it in formulating the principle of relativity? However indifferent to the work of the scientific laboratory philosophy may feign to be and however philosophers may be drawn to soar in the empyrean, there is no way of disavowing responsibility here. Science accepted from philosophy its conceptual space-time framework of the universe and treated it as reality. The familiar Newtonian metaphysics has proved unworkable and the idea of nature as an absolute system of reference has failed. Modern physics has discovered that the universe is not disclosed or revealed to the observer of physical phenomena, it is an extrapolation. It is this which gives its paramount importance to the philosophy of language. The common world is a function of intersubjective intercourse and not as hitherto assumed its *a priori* condition. Each of us views the world from an individual standpoint and we can no other, and the mathematicians are proving the possibility of accepting the fact of universal relativity and yet securing an objective basis for physical science. Without language not only could there be no idea of an external world but there would be no external world.

Many will turn with special interest to Professor Dewey's presentation of the emergent theory of life and mind to which he signifies his adherence (p. 271). He forestalls the criticism of that theory based on the fact that emergence is merely a descriptive term and is neutral as to nature and origin. It is he thinks this neutral standpoint which makes it attractive and gives it scientific value in enabling us to approach the philosophic problem without bias or prejudice. This misses, however, so at least it seems to us, the real criticism of the emergent theory. The objection to it is not that it is mere description but that it is false description. If emergence means no more than that life, and later mind, appear at a definite period of the history of this planet, then it is little more than the expression of a belief that the planet has a history. It certainly seems to imply more than this in the philosophers who undertake to expound it, for they maintain that life and mind are definite planes or levels in a cosmic evolution. If this is the implication then the theory is false even as description. Life is not a phenomenon of cosmic evolution at all, it is a phenomenon wholly connected with solar radiation. There is not the slightest scientific reason for supposing, or evidence for believing, that the

complexity of atomic structure, or of molecular arrangement, which is what we usually refer to when we speak of cosmic evolution, took on new qualities at a definite level or stage and that life and mind are such levels. At a certain period in the history of this planet there appears the form of activity we name life, it is apparently single in origin and one in its manifestation and its work consists in intercepting, redistributing and generally controlling and directing the radiating energy of the sun which is temporarily arrested on the earth's surface. To describe such a phenomenon as emergent is false and misleading. So also it could be shown that to describe mind as an emergent plane or level of biological evolution is equally misleading. Mind, at least in the intellectual form it assumes in man, is not a new level or plane in the evolution of structural forms, but the appearance of an activity which freeing the animal from its dependence on natural conditions enables it to create the conditions and take its destiny into its own hands. It is a unique phenomenon and to describe it as emergent is to darken council and misinterpret fact.

In criticizing these particular points in Professor Dewey's most interesting book our intention is not to depreciate it, certainly not to cast any slight on its teaching. In reading his book we have felt like accompanying a friend in his task of philosophizing. The journey may seem to start from nowhere and to reach no haven but we enjoy the sound reflection and intellectual stimulation as he discourses with us by the way.

H. WILDON CARR.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

La théorie de l'intelligence chez Schopenhauer. Par PHILIPPE MÉDITCH. Paris, Félix Alcan, 1923.—pp. 363.

In the history of philosophy M. Méditch distinguishes two conceptions of the intellect: as reflecting nature and as constructive in nature. The first conception prevailed prior to Kant; for the second, Kant is mainly responsible. Schopenhauer begins by continuing the Kantian analysis of the constructive intellect. As is brought out in the first chapter of this book, dealing with Schopenhauer's doctoral dissertation, Schopenhauer transforms Kant's transcendental idealism into an illusionist idealism: Kant's *Erscheinung* becomes pure *Schein*. Ultimate reality transcends intelligence; it is will. The world is my idea; but my idea, my intellect itself is after all but a function of the world, or rather of the brain. All knowledge whatever is always in relation to the will. Schopenhauer, the successor of Kant, is also the predecessor of William James. There is in Schopenhauer like-