

Creative imagination and creativity

Imaginação criativa e criatividade

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Abstract: In the last decades the idea of creativity has gained increasing interest in the field of philosophy, cognitive sciences, sociology, etc. and there have been renewed contributions regarding the classic idea of creativity. We consider that the contribution of classic pragmatism deserves special mention—particularly in the works of Charles. S. Peirce and John Dewey. In this article, we are going to refer exclusively to the Deweyan treatment of this idea. We will sustain that Dewey's theory provides interpretative elements which are innovative and disruptive regarding the philosophical tradition including a novelty conception of creative imagination. We will expose some consequences of his position—as we interpret it. In effect, we are going to sustain that Dewey moves away from classic demands according to which a creative product involves, necessarily, a radical transformation of human life, according to the idea of degrees of creativity; that this Deweyan theory constitutes an interesting insight for promoting the creative attitude; that the creative process retains the same structure in all cases—science and art, for example—and that creativity is now an intrinsic potentiality of human beings—which may be realized or not. Finally, we consider the relevance of some Deweyan theses for nowadays positions, as in the case of the cognitive psychologist Robert Weisberg, emphasizing their coincidences and disagreements.

Keywords: Creativity. Degrees of creativity. Dewey. Imagination. Innovation. Weisberg.

Resumo: *Nas últimas décadas, a ideia de criatividade vem recebendo um interesse cada vez maior nos campos da filosofia, ciências cognitivas, sociologia, etc. e teve uma contribuição renovada com relação à ideia clássica de criatividade. Consideramos que a contribuição do pragmatismo clássico merece uma menção especial—em particular, as obras de Charles S. Peirce e John Dewey. Neste artigo, iremos nos referir, exclusivamente, ao tratamento deweyiano dessa ideia. Sustentaremos que a teoria de Dewey fornece elementos interpretativos que são inovadores e disruptivos com relação à tradição filosófica, inclusive, uma concepção inédita da imaginação criativa. Exporemos algumas consequências de sua posição—como nós a interpretamos. Com efeito, sustentaremos que Dewey afasta-se das demandas clássicas para as quais um produto criativo envolve, necessariamente, uma transformação radical da vida humana, segundo*

a ideia de níveis de criatividade; essa teoria deweyana constitui um insight interessante para a promoção da atitude criativa; este processo criativo preserva a mesma estrutura em todos os casos—ciência e arte, por exemplo—e esta criatividade é, agora, uma potencialidade intrínseca dos seres humanos—a qual pode ser realizada ou não. Por fim, consideramos a relevância de algumas teses deweyanas para posições atuais, como no caso do psicólogo cognitivo Robert Weisberg, enfatizando as coincidências e desacordos de ambos.

Palavras-chave: *Criatividade. Dewey. Imaginação. Inovação. Níveis de criatividade. Weisberg.*

1 Introduction

The idea of creativity has been defended for centuries in our culture. In its most generalized version, both in the world of science and art, it has been made explicit in terms of a novel product that impacts the world and transforms it in a notorious way. Also, in a well-known version, it is related to the performance of mysterious forces, intuitions¹ or as a possibility restricted to privileged beings. Another common feature of the traditional idea of creativity is that art and science are opposite activities since art is a product of the imagination and creativity, while science is the product of observation and calculation.

However, since the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been renewed contributions regarding this classic idea of creativity. It is also true that in the last decades this subject has gained increasing interest and has been reconsidered in the field of philosophy, cognitive psychology, sociology, etc. We consider that in the field of philosophy, the contributions of classical pragmatism deserve special mention, particularly, in the work of Charles Peirce and in that of John Dewey, heir to a large extent of Peircean developments. In this paper, however, we are going to refer exclusively to the Deweyan experience theory. We will argue that, understood in terms of transactional and transformational action theory, it offers a promising framework for accounting for human creative processes in an acceptable and novel way. In short, following John Dewey and the important contributions made by Hans Joas,² we will defend the idea that experience understood as transforming action is the key to understanding the notion of creativity in Dewey. A theory that, as we will suggest at the end, allows us to test alternative solutions currently discussed.

1 About intuition, for example, Dewey says: “The term ‘intuition’ is one of the most ambiguous in the whole range of thought. In the theories just considered, it is supposed to have essence as its proper object.” (*LW* 10:299).

2 Joas analyses, in several works, the contributions made by the classic pragmatic tradition regarding action and creativity theory. He argues that the pragmatic conception of creativity lies in the pragmatic understanding of human action itself. And he highlights that the most complete development in this regard was achieved by John Dewey, who develops his experience theory in terms of action theory, a transactional action theory. (See: JOAS, 1996).

2 Experience, creativity and imagination in John Dewey

2.1 Experience and creativity

To begin with, let us remember that Dewey has been critical regarding the traditional experience theories. Dewey considers that they would have offered reductionist interpretations of the human experience itself, especially by linking it exclusively with the processes of knowledge. This means for example, that for tradition, having an experience of a flavor, a color or an object means to have knowledge of them—either we then consider it a real knowledge to build science or a mere belief; also, by linking it to sensations or impressions that would occur in the subjects' minds, experience would have a mental or subjective character and it is consequently considered a sort of cognitive mental copy whose central reference is to the past. And, therefore, as Federico López says (2014, p. 99),

Insofar as experience is a record of what is actually felt or perceived, it differs from that which is thought or inferred, and all relation and all inference can only be a later addition, alien to experience itself, whose validity we can and must, as a matter of principle, doubt. Experience is an experience of discrete elements that then the imagination, reason, intellect or any other faculty that we suppose to have must relate or synthesize, adding to experience something that by definition is foreign to it. (LÓPEZ, 2014, p. 99).

Situation that Vincent Colapietro (2009, p. 4) reminds us, with very significant words of Dewey himself: “It has said, Lord, Lord, Experience, Experience; but in practice it has served ideas forced into experience, not gathered from it” (*MW* 10:10-11).

Against these theories, Dewey suggests an experience theory whose characteristics are such that they allow us to collect the whole of human experience, one anchored in the activity of agents who are always situated. He thus holds that the very nature of experience is determined by the *essential conditions of life itself*. To move forward, Dewey only requires us initially to accept a distinction between living beings and inert objects, between the animate and the inanimate. He illustrates what he means by stating that, indeed, if a rock suffers the effects of a force and if that force is greater than the mechanical strength of the rock, it will break; otherwise, the rock will remain unchanged. What will never happen is for the rock to react or fight to maintain its integrity. Accordingly, what distinguishes animate beings from inanimate beings is then their ability to react, their capacity to act. Experience and action are then intertwined from the beginning and constitute the ordinary forces and conditions of experience, which also commits itself to levels of continuity between animal and human life. We want to emphasize then that action is constituted from the most elemental to the most complex stages of life, in the most basic analysis category to give meaning to what we mean by “experience.”³

3 As we have said elsewhere, Dewey is indebted to Peirce in his novel way of conceiving experience. The naturalist approach and the crucial role of action are some of the inherited ideas, originally expressed in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878) and “The Fixation

In *Knowing and the Known* (1949, *LW* 16:96), Dewey and Bentley, focusing on the specific analysis of experience in terms of action, specify the perspective from which to understand it. Briefly, there they specify that if experience itself is to be understood in terms of *transactional action*, then this means, among other things, that we will no longer understand any active process as occurring between things and objects that exist on the one hand, apart from human subjects, nor to the human beings involved as existing in a totally separate way from things.⁴ Thus, unlike the consequences that other conceptions must assume, their position is not required to deal with the problem of forcing the human being and the world to fit into some type of organization or connection. They are interconnected from the beginning: the human organism develops, lives, and modifies with and in the rest of the cosmos.

A nearly natural consequence of this thesis is that if science, art and common sense should be treated in terms of transactions, none of these fields can therefore be seen as consisting of entities that are separate, complete and closed-in on themselves, even when this contradicts traditional philosophy in its diverse conceptions.⁵

In order to emphasize nuances, let us also remember that Dewey identifies vital and transactional experience in terms of Art. Art in the productive and active sense in which Ancient Greece assimilated the productive or useful arts to practice itself. From this new perspective, Dewey emphasizes that both scientific research and artistic activities—or of any kind—are potentially creative activities.⁶ Thus, according to Dewey, they include processes able to bring into existence something novel and transformative. It is interesting to recall here that Dewey's recovery of the Aristotelian dimensions of praxis is modified in a very original way. Indeed, the transactional conception of Practice, Art or Experience, in Dewey's terms, includes a component that emphasizes the transforming power of has been transformed by human agents. In short, we can think that the use of the transactional concept allows Dewey to sustain the agent and patient character of the subject in interactive processes and also, the agency of the material world itself—an ignored or underemphasized perspective when the word used is *interaction*, within the framework of contemporary action theories, or praxis in the Aristotelian point of view.

of Belief" (1877). Thus, the formulation of the pragmatic maxim, the idea according to which beliefs are habits and rules for action; as well as the famous doubt-belief structure, dissatisfaction-satisfaction that show the deep commitment to the intrinsically active nature of the human condition, are the Peircean germ of the conception of experience, understood as a problem solving activity, linked to the search for enjoyment, stability and adjustment with the environment, which receives deeper development in Dewey's work, not without differences with the Father of American classic pragmatism. (See: DI GREGORI-PÉREZ RANSANZ, 2017).

4 Dewey and Bentley clearly argue that the transactional perspective is opposed to the perspective of self-action and the perspective of interaction. (See: *LW* 16:101).

5 Let us also remember that the term transaction was stated by Dewey in his article "Conduct and Experience" (1930).

6 As we have said elsewhere, "[...] according to the Stagirite, knowledge [...] concerns the active processes of production, generation and transformation of the world. Of course, the world that "corresponds" to it is changeable, is subject to changes and scientists as audience have given way to agents that research, experiment, intervene and transform the world according to their targeted action". (LÓPEZ and DI GREGORI, 2017).

In short, Dewey's creativity theory, in accordance with his conception of experience and understood from a transactional viewpoint, commits to the following theses: (a) creativity combines *continuity* with *novelty*. Both the artist and the scientist produce from a background of knowledge, attitude and inherited values, from which their creations are developed. The activity they are engaged in is always situated and affects the previously existing background, material that is deliberately controlled and targeted at one object or purpose. Then, art and science do not differ in the processes that characterize them but in the means and ends they are aimed at; (b) creativity does not spring from mysterious or *sudden inspirations* but it is the result of effort and work; (c) *This is not a capacity for privileged beings* but one that all human beings share and, therefore, may be exercised in all areas of human life.

The active, transactional and transformational nature of experience is at the basis of Dewey's statements when, moreover, he claims that his conception of creativity certainly avoids any classic representationalist commitment. Taking the artistic creativity and its non-representational nature as an example, he argues that in the context he develops, the idea he distinguishes between the pre-artistic material—shared by all human beings—and the artistic work material itself, in which the shared material turns into something individual and unique thanks to the artist's creative vision. An artist's work, thus, is not representative (or imitative, we can add) of something previously existing but represents a transformation of the ordinary material thanks to the application of a new and individual mode of experience,⁷ a transformation which, depending on the degrees of impact achieved, will transform collective life as well.

Similar conclusions can be drawn regarding the production of scientific knowledge. Indeed, scientific research is not a mere description of the states of pre-existing things either—it does not merely represent a world intended to be fixed and stable; it does not merely suggest a rule of action either. Knowledge is a *transformation* of the world we know.⁸

Another issue to bear in mind is that Dewey distinguishes between different types of experience. There are experiences which are equivalent to the sum of mere series of sensations, that is, there are mechanical responses to normal situations of ordinary life; there are experiences interrupted by distraction or other reasons, but there are also others which are constituted as *genuine experiences*; Dewey refers to the

7 We think that another important pertinent consequence of this position is development in our time by Vincent Colapietro. He said "It no longer makes sense to locate the source of creativity in the subject. The subject is a constituted and situated being [...]. Hence, whatever conscious and ingenious agency we can attribute to individual subjects such as a creative artist [...]. We can do so only with a critical awareness of the way and extent such attributions have little or nothing to do with the original capacities of isolated individuals." (COLAPIETRO, 2003, p. 64).

8 Similarly, Dewey says regarding scientific activity: "*The position here taken holds, on the contrary, that declarative propositions, whether of facts or of conceptions (principles and laws) are intermediary means or instruments (respectively material and procedural) of effecting that controlled transformation of subject-matter which is the end-in-view (and final goal) of all declarative affirmations and negations*" (LW 12:162, *our emphasis*). And add: "The philosophic basis of the representative theory is compelled to omit this qualitative novelty that characterizes every genuine work of art." (LW 10:292).

latter in terms of *having an experience*. He insists that those experiences which result in a unified whole, which display beginning development and closing or fulfillment phases, should be distinguished from other types of experience. Dewey says,

In contrast with such experience, we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; (*LW* 10:42).

What allows the difference between one and the other to be drawn is a specific aspect of its immediate quality which is referred to as *emotional*; having an experience refers to the course of an action in which, through consecutive events, a significance is maintained, which is preserved and accumulated to a certain end, which, at the same time, is identified as the culmination of a process. Every experience of this kind has an emotional aesthetic quality and that is “the grounding and unifying instance of the process of having an experience.”⁹ And even though the aesthetic quality is generally present in every experience, we should distinguish between the function of quality in scientific research and artistic activities. Finally, what we wish to highlight with these considerations is that, according to Dewey, the experiences classified as *having an experience* constitute the suitable candidates in the field of creativity.¹⁰

Ultimately, creativity is now an inherent capacity or potentiality of all human beings, necessarily involved in a constant change or reorganization of their habits, institutions and material world; it is also an intrinsic potential of action, of

9 As Dewey reminds us in *Experience and Nature* (1958), it is undeniable that there are multiple activities that do not have an intrinsically enjoyable meaning. A good deal of daily tasks —at home, factory, laboratory or office— fall into that group. Since we do not have the appropriate language resources, that is, those which allow us to call them aesthetic or artistic, we are satisfied in calling them *useful* and move forward. But he argues that if we asked ourselves what they are useful for, we would be forced to review their real consequences, and challenged by them, we would likely find that those activities are (harmful/damaging) rather than something useful. According to Dewey, sacrificing the aesthetic quality may have serious consequences for life itself. Following this direction, we can say that the Dewey’s reflections on aesthetic qualities have a remarkable relevance. Richard Shusterman (2012, p. 109) says that “Aesthetic experience (with its sensory appreciative perception of aesthetic qualities) constitutes a far wider realm than the experience of art. And this brings us to our second key trend of aesthetics today, the expansion of the aesthetic field beyond the Hegelian paradigm of the philosophy of fine art. There are several reasons for this change of perspective. There is the growing philosophical tedium (even when not explicitly expressed) of limiting aesthetics to fine art and the repeated rehashing of the issues of its definition, ontology, individuation of works, and the logic of their criticism.

10 A complex idea of experience, understood in terms of action, which includes qualitative and emotional components, in many cases deliberative, can be understood, as Vincent Colapietro does in terms of drama. And, as many colleagues think, particularly for the case of creative experience, one that includes emotional processes of suffering. We will advance on these questions in future work.

transactional processes, by means of which human beings and the world mutually change, reorganize and modify as naturally as people sow and harvest.

2.2 Creative imagination

Nevertheless, creativity requires imagination. According to Dewey, imagination is a capacity for ordering and making sense of our experience; it enables, he insists, old and familiar things to become new experience. It is not possible either to create without imagination or to understand what has been created without it; needless to say, it is a privileged component in the creative process as a whole. Also, it is a component that goes beyond the scope of artistic activities, contrary to what is usually argued, and which, as Fesmire (2003) reminds us, is as natural to human life as are muscle movements.¹¹

Dewey says,

[...] the experience enacted is human and conscious only as that which is given here and now is extended by meanings and values drawn from what is absent in fact and present only imaginatively. (*LW* 10:276).

Indeed, Dewey argues that, for example, to say as has been done, that the imaginative capacity falls within the field of fine arts is a false idea of the nature of imagination, insisting that every conscious experience necessarily has a certain type of imagination. As Fesmire (2003) points out, it can be said that the very core of Dewey's concept of imagination refers to the ability to recognize what we have in front of us in light of what that could be. According to Dewey, imagination is,

The large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange become the most natural inevitable things in the world. (*LW* 10:272).

Dewey assigns the imaginative capacity or quality to every human experience without ignoring a series of distinctions. One of them relates to the imagination activity captured in dreams, reveries or a certain type of fiction. In these processes, imagination:

[...] forms the matter of reverie, of dream; ideas are floating, not anchored to any existence as its property, its possession of meanings [...]. The pleasure they afford is the reason why they are entertained and are allowed to occupy the scene [...] (*LW* 10:277).

11 Fesmire adds, "Dewey cautions against the custom of identifying the imaginative, which is interactively engaged and rooted in problematic conditions, with the imaginary, which is subjective. "Neither the imaginative nor the imaginary occurs *ex nihilo*, independent of a bio-cultural matrix, but only the imaginative necessitates courage to engage the present and stretch." (2003, p. 65).

By contrast, creative imagination is controlled by the interest in promoting or anticipating an adjustment between old and new, and this “*purpose rules the selection and natural development.*” A type of imagination he also calls *virtually* creative; an essential instrument to overcome the strength of the experiences merely mechanical and common. Far from being a product of frivolity and a whim, they embody a process laden with meanings and rooted in issues that, unlike mere fantasy, are bound by the purpose of promoting adjustments and changes to the situation out of which it emerges.¹²

Finally, according to Dewey, the so-called *creative imagination* represents the highest degree of potentiality of imagination itself. In his work *Psychology*, Dewey, referring to it, argues that,

The highest form of imagination, however, is precisely an organ of penetration into the hidden meaning of things, meaning not visible to perception or memory, nor reflectively attained by the processes of thinking [...] In its highest form, imagination is not confined to isolation and combination of experiences already had, even when these processes occur under the influence of sensitive and lively emotion. It is virtually creative. It makes its object new by setting it in a new light. (*EW* 2:171).

3 Final comments

Ultimately, while it is true that Dewey does not develop an explicit creativity and imagination theory, we believe that, as Joas points out, it is possible to identify such a theory and that it provides interpretative elements which are really innovative and, disruptive regarding the philosophical tradition.

Among the innovations we wish to underline because we understand they constitute key axes for exploring further this issue, I mention the following:

1. It highlights the distinction suggested between mere imagination and creative imagination. Creative imagination is controlled by the interest in promoting or anticipating an adjustment between old and new. It is not the imagination based on a whim or reverie—which, of course, also exists.
2. It emphasizes that imagination and creativity are not the result of an individual activity understood as a dedicated flight from this world; they are not a result of the initiative of autonomous human subjects nor they can be generated but from within experience transactionally understood; this without forgetting that, according to Dewey, individuality is also a potentiality that is only performed by interacting with environmental conditions. In the transaction process, the capacities inherent to individuality transform and constitute a self.

12 “When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange become the most natural inevitable things in the world. There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination [...]” (*LW* 10:272).

3. It is interesting to think that Dewey moves away from classic demands according to which a creative product is that which *necessarily* involves a *radical transformation* of human life. Creativity is now an intrinsic potentiality of humans which may be realized or not. And even though the creative process retains the same structure in all cases, the impact of transformation may be differentiated in degrees. Not only is this consistent with the ubiquitous although non-trivial nature of creativity but it also suggests that Dewey's theory constitutes an interesting insight for promoting the creative attitude.
4. Last but not least, taking into consideration the case of science or art in particular, a potentially creative product should be deemed positive by the relevant public area (either the scientific community or the community of artists, etc.) for its incorporation. If the novelty is rejected, the product is not creative for the community, is not transforming, at least, until further notice. The audience concerned plays an important role in turning the proposal into a creative event. But this requires further explanations. In fact, it is currently a very debated idea because it seems to implicate that in these cases there is no creativity in any sense. We consider that this is not a good version of Dewey's position. Based on the idea of the degrees of creativity, we can say that, even in those cases, there was individual creativity and that the individual himself was transformed in that process (always taking into account the renewed concept of individual and community held by Dewey).¹³

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that even contemporary positions sharing central theses with Dewey's conceptions, as in the case of the cognitive psychologist Robert Weisberg, suggest reserving the term *creativity* for the *creative* individual's production and the word *innovation* for the process by which the potentially creative product is eventually valued. However, the public assessment process of novelty may not be part of the definition of creativity itself. Or in other words, the main theme of creativity even in an interactional context like Weisberg's, unconsciously intends to continue to be a strictly individual issue. In the first case, it could be said that, from Dewey's point of view, it would be falling into a dichotomous commitment, and, moreover, not compatible with Weisberg's position, while it is emphatically distinguished between the public and the private since, as Dewey points out,

13 In Shusterman terms, (2000, p. 58-59) "If Dewey's definition is valuable, its value lies not in achieving a wholesale conceptual revolution and satisfying our traditional impulse for general definition, but in its directive gesture towards remedying certain painful limitations in art's institutional practice [...]. So rather than pursuing Dewey's totalizing definitional quest, I instead aim, in the spirit of piecemeal of pragmatist labor, to make a more specific case for widening art's borders to forms of popular culture and to the ethical art of fashioning one's life." [...] "rethinking art as experience might help effect the artistic legitimation of a form like rock music, which affords such frequent and intensely gratifying aesthetics experience to so many people [...]."

The distinction between private and public is thus in no sense equivalent to the distinction between individual and social, even if we suppose that the latter distinction has a definite meaning. Many private acts are social; their consequences contribute to the welfare of the community or affect its status and prospects. In the broad sense any transaction deliberately carried on between two or more persons is social in quality. It is a form of associated behavior and its consequences may influence further associations. A man may serve others, even in the community at large, in carrying on a private business. (*LW* 2:243-244).¹⁴

In other cases, the same differentiation is used to distinguish the “minor” instances of creativity in terms of innovation, reserving the term *creativity* for “major changes” causing an impact on human life. The interpretation of what we call “degrees” of transformational change in Dewey would also evade the need for such complex distinctions.

Ultimately, the Deweyan creativity theory promotes further development taking into account its promising utility within the current framework of life, especially if we believe, as he does, that creative intelligence projects new and more complex goals for life and that in the creative process it is a matter of collectively valuing the changes in life itself in a positive way ... or not.

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