

NOTES AND COMMENTS

DEWEY, SPIRITUALITY, AND RATIONALITY: A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR RODA¹

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Professor Roda worries about the propriety of a statement in a recent issue of *Educational Change* in which I suggested that for Dewey “spirituality is more important than rationality” (see Garrison, 2000, p. 2). Roda believes that “Dewey would have viewed the distinction between rationality and spirituality as primarily formal” (see Rota, 2000, p. ii). I believe the distinction is primarily one of part to whole when the operations of rationality are spiritual; otherwise, they are two different kinds.

As evidence of the kind of “formal” distinction Professor Rota believes Dewey has in mind between spirituality and rationality, he cites the following from *Art as Experience*: “It is not possible to divide in a vital experience the practical, emotional, and intellectual from one another and to set the properties of one over against the characteristics of the other” (Dewey, 1934/1987, p. 61). What Dewey describes here is a formal distinction in experience. In my opinion, Dewey the staunch antidualist could draw distinctions with an acuity the best of analytical philosophers might well admire. Anyway, the passage quoted is a fine instance of the kind of “formal” distinction Professor Roda has in mind; it is not, I feel, the proper way to map the distinction between spirituality and rationality. Rationality can express spirituality, though when it does so it is only a partial expression.

Before moving forward, I want to voice a lingering concern. By drawing a “formal” distinction between spirituality and rational-

ity, Roda seems to want to confine spirituality to some one or another domain of human experience while clearly Dewey wanted to leave open the possibility it may pervade the entirety of human experience. I even wonder if Professor Roda means to assign rationality to one of the formal divides above (e.g., the practical or intellectual) and spirituality to another (e.g., the emotional); I think that would be a mistake. I do doubt, though, this is actually his intent.

In the remainder of my response, I first expand about the passage cited by Professor Roda above as well as review the three characteristics I associated with spirituality in my original paper. (Allow me to add that the three characteristics overlap; even so, they may not exhaust all that Dewey meant by spirituality).

In the passage cited above, Dewey is explicating what is involved in having “an experience” (p. 61). The passage continues thus:

The emotional phase binds parts together into a single whole; ‘intellectual’ simply names the fact that the experience has meaning; ‘practical’ indicates the organism is interacting with events and objects which surround it. The most elaborate philosophic or scientific inquiry and the most ambitious industrial or political enterprise has, when its different ingredients constitute an integral experience, esthetic quality (p. 61).

The emotional, intellectual, and practical are phases, aspects, or subfunctions of a single experience; when fully integrated into a consummatory experience, the experience becomes “distinctively esthetic” (p. 61).

First, note that there is nothing distinctively “rational” about any of the three aspects constituting “an experience.” Emotions simply bind the experience together as an immediate experience while the practical implies that the experience involves an organism-environment interaction. The “intellectual” phase just refers to the mediated, meaningful character of experience. According to Dewey (1933/1986): “[T]hings gain meaning when they are used as means to bring

about consequences (or as means to prevent the occurrence of undesired consequences), or as standing for consequences for which we have to discover means” (p. 233). Any aspect of experience may acquire rational aspects once they become meaningful. For Dewey (1938/1986), “Rationality as an abstract conception is precisely the generalized idea of the means-consequence relation as such” (p. 17). Indeed, in aesthetic experience for Dewey (1934/1987), “Means and end coalesce [A]ll the cases in which means and ends are external to one another are non-esthetic” (p. 202). Rationality simply emerges as an extension of the working out of meaning. I am not referring to pure “rationality,” which Dewey explicitly rejects, or the “reasons and structures that drive the present industrial economic order” as Rota suggests, nor would Dewey (p. ii). I hasten to add that however “rational” the current economic order proves, Dewey, Rota, and I agree that the ends would not approve themselves upon further reflection with regard to their consequences. That, however, is another matter.²

While formally distinguished from each other, the practical, intellectual (including the rational), and emotional interpenetrate at all times. For example, in his *Logic*, Dewey (1938/1986) observes, “What I have said in *Art as Experience*, in chapter VII, on “The Natural History of Form” can be carried over, *mutatis mutandis*, to logical forms” (p. 372). In aesthetic experience for Dewey (1934/1987) the practical, intellectual (including the rational), and emotional become integrally related in the dynamic organization characteristic of all form (see pp. 62). As “an experience,” the three aspects of experience among which Dewey draws a “formal” distinction are parts, phases, or subfunctions of a larger whole. In any particular experience, one or another aspect is usually foremost, but the others never fully disappear. In an aesthetic experience, all three blend into a consummatory aesthetic experience. In a consummatory spiritual experience, all three blend in much the same way. A lesser spiritual experience may have all three, but not well integrated; it may also have any two, or only one. Rational experience, for instance, may have spiritual properties either alone or as part of a larger spiritual experi-

ence. Martin Luther King used civil disobedience as a means to his end is an example of method in the service of moral freedom and spiritual growth. I suspect many freedom marchers had spiritual experiences during these protests, though sadly, some were martyrs to the cause. The relation between spirituality and rationality is that of whole (spirituality) to part (rationality), provided rationality (or any other part) is actually spiritual. Sometimes, as Professor Roda points out, "rationality" is the opposite of spirituality. Pure, detached "rationality," or the "rationality" of practicalistic the current economic order or technocratic administration are not, upon reflection, truly rational in Dewey's definition of inquiry (see, Dewey, 1938/1986, p. 108). So, I conclude, spirituality is more important than rationality if for no other reason than the latter is, at best, only part of the former.

So, what are some of the characteristics of spirituality? In my original paper, I suggested that spirituality is a struggle for poetic unity involving three things: (1) the human eros to live a life of expanding meaning and value, (2) the human desire to find intimacy, unity and harmony with the rest of existence, and (3) the desire that human creative action matter in the course of events. Dewey writes that when "the factors that determine anything an experience are lifted high above the threshold of perception and are made manifest for their own sake" we have aesthetic experience. Personally, I believe that when spirituality integrates the aesthetic (and artistic), moral, and cognitive (meaning and rationality) spheres it lifts them above even aesthetic experience. So, I conclude that for Dewey spirituality is more important than rationality not only because it contains it as a part, but because spirituality is more important even than the aesthetic experience itself. Now I am not so confident about this last claim regarding Dewey, but I am quite sure that is my own reading. As Dewey observes, regarding any existence, including presumably a text, "The same existential events are capable of an infinite number of meanings" (p. 241). We may read Dewey's texts in an infinite number of interesting, valuable, and valid ways. That does not mean all ways, including mine, are any of these things. There are also an infinite number of wrong readings as well as meaningful, though

flawed readings. While Professor Roda questions my reading, he also personally solicited my response to sustain the dialogue. That is more than courtesy; it is the spirit of the living logos as it moves through Roda, Garrison, and, you, the reader who must decide, or, better still, write your own reading.

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¹ I would like to thank Professor Roda for his kind invitation to continue the conversation. We are in profound agreement about the importance of ongoing dialogue in human affairs.

² Another thing wrong with the present industrial economic order is that it uses Hume's not Dewey's sense of instrumental reasoning in which means are completely detachable from ends and in which rationality always serves the emotions (see Garrison, 1999). I am confident professor Roda and I agree on this as well.