

PRAGMATIST TOOLS FOR EXPLORING THE “FABRIC OF EXPERIENCE”.

JOHN RYDER’S KNOWLEDGE, ART, AND POWER. AN OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF EXPERIENCE.

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John Ryder’s latest book, *Knowledge, Art, and Power*, represents a stimulating attempt to outline a theory of experience, as is openly declared in the subtitle. The main purpose of the book is to develop a richer and more multifaceted idea of experience, capable of taking into account the plurality and complexity of human interactions with the world. The project has a strong systematic character and purpose, aiming as it does to develop an exhaustive conceptual framework for dealing with experience along two main axes. The horizontal axis is represented by what Ryder regards as three basic “dimensions” of experience – the cognitive, the aesthetic, and the political. The vertical axis reflects three basic modes of “making our ways” into the world (Ryder 2020, 1), namely three modes of “judgment” that John Ryder draws from Justus Buchler – the assertive, the exhibitiv, and the active.

The volume could be considered the result of Ryder’s enduring engagement with John Dewey’s legacy as regards the concept of experience, integrated and corrected through Justus Buchler’s theory of judgment. The whole project is enriched and given topical relevance through constant comparisons with some interesting trends in current philosophical debate – from the field of embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended mind theories to naturalization in philosophy, from some intriguing investigations about the similarities between classical pragmatism and modernist literature to rival theories of democracy.

For sure, readers of this volume will appreciate the clarity of John Ryder’s style, which seems to be pursued as an explicit goal by the author. Ryder constantly stands on the side of the reader – whether she be a beginner in pragmatist studies or an expert – who expects that each

step of an argument be duly considered. Readers will also perceive a certain taste for systematic balance in the articulation of the various issues at stake, almost an old-fashioned love for symmetry and completeness that characterizes Ryder’s book.

I will begin my reading by offering an overview of the main theses and contents of the book, devoting the second part to some partially critical but constructive remarks grounded in the common naturalistic and pragmatist framework I share with John Ryder.

I.

The premises of John Ryder’s threefold approach to experience are presented in the first and second chapters, representing a *trait d’union* with his previous book, *The Things on Heaven and Earth* (Ryder 2013). Two basic assumptions inform his further investigations, namely a naturalistic, emergentist, and relational conception of ontology and a structurally interactive or transactional idea of experience.

For Ryder, endorsing a naturalistic ontology means accepting the pluralistic view of nature as consisting “of whatever there is” (Ryder 2020, 2), while at the same time excluding anything supernatural, transcendental, or ontologically alien to nature. This means that Ryder’s naturalistic ontology is essentially open to the many ways of being real characterizing the wide range of entities we usually engage with in our ordinary life. It also means that Ryder is explicitly committed to a form of emergentism: “the full range of human actions and products” (Ryder 2020, 24), namely human experience itself, is an emergent process, exclusively based on the previous natural order but involving novel properties. There is no need to espouse the form of physical reductionism that is still assumed by some trends in the philosophy of mind and in the cognitive science; rather, Ryder assumes that emergent naturalism is the most coherent option to guarantee a degree of continuity in nature as well as a non-reductive conception of the constitution of more complex orders of being out of simpler ones. Ryder’s ontology is further characterized by a strong adoption of a relational conception of what it

means to be an entity, which the author explicitly derives from Justus Buchler. By rejecting the traditional Aristotelian idea of things as constituted by substances and properties that can or cannot be attributed to them, a relational and ordinal ontology considers things as peculiar complexes of relations, where different modes of being are connected with the ways those relations are ordered and are more or less relevant to one another. Given this ontological background, the traditional question whether an entity is real or unreal changes into an investigation on the specific order in which some relations prevail on others and make a difference.

The second basic assumption of the whole discourse is represented by the pragmatist conception of experience as the process whereby both active and passive transactions take place between a person and her environment, whose relations are mutually constitutive. By emphasizing his dependence on Dewey's conception of experience, Ryder develops its anti-mentalistic and anti-reductionist potential as well as its convergence with more or less recent inquiries into the embodied, embedded, extended and enactive status of the mind and cognition. Experience cannot be reduced either to a set of mental processes enclosed in the alleged interior theater of the mind or to neural processing and computing. Of course, neurological features are an important part of the process of thinking and acting, but they play this role together with other bodily features (such as arms and legs and lungs) as well as other environmental resources (such as the ground sustaining our steps and the air we breathe as well as any hindrances impeding our actions). Furthermore, we have no need to distinguish the outside from the inside by means of an ontological gap, if we assume that both the mind and the environment consist in complex webs of relations that are mutually intertwined and that experience consists in fully embodied interactions between human living beings and their environment.

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The second chapter completes this picture of experience as a transaction between an individual and her environ-

ment by examining it in light of some of the main conceptions of experience developed in the history of modern philosophy. One of the most interesting aspects highlighted by the author is that a transactional conception of experience leads to the dissolution of the standard opposition between the inner and the outer usually pervading traditional conceptions of experience. Differently from Kant's transcendental revolution, a real Copernican revolution could be represented by the rejection of the idea that the self and the environment are two independent entities, which are supposed to be already and completely defined before any interaction between them takes place. We no longer need to tackle philosophical cramps such as solipsism, mentalism, and the idea of a noumenal reality, if we assume that the self and its mind are configured by the complex web of constitutive relations with one's environment – with an emphasis on the claim that the environment itself is relationally constituted and that selves are both active and passive ingredients of its configuration.

Another cornerstone of Ryder's philosophical proposal is Buchler's theory of judgment. Within the overall architecture of the book, it represents a further central prerequisite for gaining a richer and more complex idea of experience, capable of considering not only the cognitive dimension but also the aesthetic and the political ones. In spite of his apparently idiosyncratic conception of judgment, Ryder decides to make use of Buchler's term to emphasize the fact that human experience is constituted by our tendency to selectively intervene within the world, constructively making our way through it by means of conscious or unconscious discriminations. Buchler extends the usual term beyond its traditional boundaries to characterize the varieties of human selective, active, creative, constructive or manipulating explorations of the environment. This shift allows him to go beyond assertion as the standard mode of discernment and to claim that humans' selective engagement with their world occurs in various ways – human beings usually assert and manipulate propositions, and organize materials by attributing some properties to a subject,

but they also show natural materials through a form of “exhibitive” judgment, while at the same time making things and actively tackling situations and problems through “active judgments”. At this stage, the ground has been set for John Ryder’s philosophical inquiries into the cognitive, aesthetic, and political dimensions of experience. Readers already have a transactional idea of experience, a relational ontology, and a theory of judgment as a theoretical framework for gaining a more pluralistic characterization of experience.

The following three chapters respectively deal with the cognitive character of experience, the aesthetic in experience and the political as structural dimensions of experience.

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Ryder’s treatment of cognition in the third chapter of his book is rich and complex. Very briefly, three features of his approach prove particularly important.

The first aspect concerns a basic revision of traditional inquiries about the relations between experience and cognition. Both classical empiricism and rationalistic philosophy pose the problem whether experience could be considered the first reliable or deceptive ground for cognition, famously providing opposite answers to this question. On the contrary, John Ryder reverses the question: we have to ask about the role of cognition in experience, by assuming that experience is a wider concept than cognition and that cognition is only one (if crucial) component or phase of experience. Explicitly supported by the classical Pragmatists’ legacy, Ryder’s basic assumption is that human experience is wider and richer than cognition and that thinking of humans as exclusively cognitive animals is misleading. Cognition is not the process of familiarizing ourselves with something outside of us; on the contrary, knowing consists in the creation of further relations with the environment in which we, the knowers, are deeply embedded, and create new relations in order to solve banal or complex problems arising in the course of our interactions with the world.

A second interesting feature characterizing Ryder’s approach to cognition is his argument against the professional over-intellectualization of knowledge produced by philosophers: cognition arises within experience every time we have to solve a problem in our ordinary experience, whether the problem is that there is no milk for having breakfast at home or having to find a more coherent explication in quantum physics. Consequently, specific knowledge resulting from a cognitive inquiry is primarily true when it is able to solve a specific problem, rather than when it corresponds to a predetermined reality. Speaking of cognition only in terms of true propositions, epistemic justifications, giving reasons and truth values can conceal the essential roots of cognition in ordinary experience. Cognition happens primarily ‘in the wild’ and formalistic approaches to knowledge should not be considered the paradigmatic feature of cognition: on the contrary, they are abstraction derived from those everyday “queries” – in Buchler’s terms – through which we try to respond to the hesitations and uncertainties lying at the core of experience.

A third important point I would emphasize is the pluralistic and broad-minded idea of truth emerging from Ryder’s investigations into the cognitive dimension of experience. If cognition involves the capacity to tackle problems in more or less ordinary experience, we need a wider, more Jamesian conception of truth than correspondentism: truth is the condition in which an idea finds itself when – and only when – it works in a specific complex of relations. This means that truth is not guaranteed forever and everywhere but can be fragile and exposed to change. Nonetheless, Ryder acknowledges that there are cases where a correspondentistic notion of truth is more useful because of some specific transactions between the different elements that are at stake. In other contexts, such as when reading an inspiring novel or watching a drama film, truth can also mean the experience of a deep meaning, capable of having an effect on our life and re-orienting it, as highlighted by Gadamer and the hermeneutic tradition. The point is, according to Ryder, that we have to understand what

idea of truth is more suitable for each situation, meaning that each time we have to discriminate what the specific constitutive relations are in a particular context, as well as their order and the stronger or weaker level of reference they have to us.

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When dealing with the aesthetic dimension of experience, John Ryder emphasizes an important distinction between the aesthetic experience and the aesthetic dimension in experience. The notion of aesthetic experience has been used since the 18th-century philosophy to define some common features characterizing the experience of artworks: from reading a novel to appreciating a painting and attending a theatrical performance. Differently, Ryder claims that “the aesthetic is a definitive feature of the very fabric of experience” (Ryder 2020, 117) and that, following Dewey, we should approach art as an enhancement of aesthetic features that are already present within experience. According to Dewey's continuistic stance, we should consider art a refinement of materials coming from our ordinary transactions with our environment – that is, features which are already there, in experience, before they are developed into a properly artistic form.

Ryder speaks of the aesthetic within experience as something which concerns harmony, unity or dissonance as experiential components. Far from supporting a return to formalism, these expressions are grounded in Ryder's reading of Dewey's naturalistic aesthetics. Harmony, unity, and dissonance concern the interactions rhythmically taking place between an individual and her own environment, which is to say that they pertain to experience as a dynamic process of tension and balance, disrupting and searching for new integrations between the individual and the environmental resources in nature. From this perspective, the artistic form, rhythm, and harmony in a work of art seem rooted in the very structure of experience, as is the case with artistic creativity, which seems to derive from the productive effort in experience to create new forms of balance between individual and environmental energies.

A second important aspect in Ryder's treatment of the aesthetic in experience is represented by its frequent (although not necessary) connections with exhibitiv judgments. An exhibitiv judgment consists in a manipulation or re-organization of previous elements into a new assemblage that is able to display something new or previously unnoticed. It involves an active intervention on the environment and a creative activity producing a result that can elicit a meaningful answer from other people. This typical connection between the aesthetic dimension and the exhibitiv judgment is the reason why works of art usually show or exhibit something rather than describing a state of things, making an assertion about it, arguing or making an inference. This pre-eminence of exhibition over assertion and inference can often take place by means of linguistic utterances, as is the case with poetry and literature.

In fact, there is one last point I wish to mention briefly with regard to Ryder's investigations in the aesthetic dimension of experience, namely the wider consequences for a philosophy of literature deriving from an interactionist conception of experience and from a non-exclusively propositional epistemology. The analytic philosophy of literature tends to assume that linguistic utterances are eminently propositions with a truth value and that literature has nothing to do with truth because it is mainly fictional. This approach could be misleading because it involves a narrow conception of language, as consisting only in propositional utterances – and not, as is often the case in poetry, in exhibitiv and creative utterances – as well as a too limited idea of truth as consisting only in the correspondence between words and objects. Based on this, Ryder develops an interesting comparison between classical pragmatism and modernist literature through which he focuses on both their convergences and some ambiguities with reference to the concept of experience as pure experience and as an intimately relational experience.

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Experience, according to John Ryder, also has an intrinsically political dimension because it carries a power to

change the environment, to transform it actively as a way to solve the problems and difficulties arising in the processes of interaction with the environment. This means that power, in this basic sense, has no negative connotations. The political within experience has to do with our capacity to actively engage and solve problems and with the properly human attitude to configure one's own life. Consequently, Ryder has to distinguish between the political as a basic feature of experience and political experience, just as he suggests a distinction between the aesthetic dimension of experience and aesthetic experience. This means that for Ryder every experience is potentially political, because experience involves an essential attitude to solving problems by actively engaging with environmental conditions and changing them, if required. Differently, political experience is defined as the systematic exercising of public authority – including processes of political competition – as far as shared interests are concerned. This is a crucial difference because the public use of power can be – and often is – coercive because my individual interests and those of my community can differ and be in opposition to the interests of others. Hence, Ryder identifies three categories – interest, the individual and the community – as the basic elements shaping our political life. They form complex webs of mutual connections, which can help us explain different forms of political power and political phenomena more generally – from conflict to exploitation, from agreement to revolution and political reform.

The author develops an interesting comparison between Dewey's idea of democracy and the rival conception of democracy developed by Chantal Mouffe. Ryder responds to Talisse's crucial objection – is a Deweyan democracy capable of managing pluralism or even conflict? – by arguing that in Dewey's normative conception of democracy "the co-existence of common interests and antagonistic disagreement is not only possible, but probably the normal state of affairs". In a democracy, individual disagreement and common interest necessarily coexist because experience is potentially political, meaning that it always involves mutual and asymmetric references to

interests, the individual and the community. However, as Ryder explicitly states, this means that a Deweyan idea of democracy differs from the deliberative-consensual conception of democracy illustrated by Rawls and Habermas. The use of intelligence advocated by Dewey as a major political tool can make divergences and conflict even more evident. Moreover, sharing common ends does not mean pursuing any consensual agreement, but rather trying to identify and reach similar goals while responding to different needs and interests.

II

John Ryder's book has many merits. One of the most significant, to my eyes, is his careful attention to the multifaceted character of human experience – the variety of modes of experience, the complexity of its features, the overlapping and intertwining of the earliest and the latest. He is alien to any residual form of reductionism with reference to experience: there is no paradigmatic model of experience – cognition – and no eminent form of judgment – assertion – in comparison to which the other modes should be considered defective. Hence, among other things, the aesthetic appears to be a central issue in human experience, which is not inferior, as such, to scientific enterprises and political engagement. Its consequences on the ways we live are constitutive parts, e.g., of the political institutions with which we identify ourselves (or not). On the other hand, truth can be pursued in multiple ways, each deserving respect with reference to a specific context – e.g. searching for a political or historical truth as well as testing the truth of a scientific hypothesis. Another major quality of this volume is Ryder's capacity to look at cognition, artistic practice and political action as deeply rooted in the human form of life, i.e. as basically connected to the circumstance that humans are living beings interacting with and within the world they are part of. This means enlarging the conception of cognition far beyond representation as well as beyond merely intellectual practices. It even means assuming that the human search for unity in the diversity of experience, while energetically expen-

sive (Tooby & Cosmides 2001, 10), is rooted in the phenomenon of life. Thirdly, a broadly anthropological view of power as a constitutive feature of human experience can produce a fruitful revision of bad stereotypes about power as well as a more critical awareness of the ineliminability of this feature from the human world.

In certain respects, I think that Ryder's book could be integrated or re-directed, in order to better pursue the goal he has set himself – namely, to understand the complex variety of ways in which human beings “make their way” in the world or “get organized” in it (Noë 2015, 3 and ff.).

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One first point is that there is the risk of underestimating sensibility or affectivity in experience and its role in the aesthetic. The author claims that emotion, together with language and imagination, is “profoundly important” as a “constituent” of experience; however, it cannot be assigned the status of one of the three main “dimensions” of experience because “it is not pervasive and ubiquitous as the three dimensions of experience are” (Ryder 2020, 61). Emotions are denied a necessary role within experiences, whether at the beginning or in their fulfilment; “Not every reaction of judgment” – in the broad sense of the term assumed by Ryder – “is an emotional one” (Ryder 2020, 61). This is true of emotions considered as specific episodes that often have a tendency to break the course of habitual interactions (Dewey 1971, 139). However, it could be a misleading statement if it involves a disregard for the felt meanings and qualities characterizing our “primary experience”, to use Dewey's words.

“Empirically”, he claims, “the existence of objects of direct grasp and possession, use and enjoyment cannot be denied. Empirically, things are poignant, tragic, beautiful, humorous, settled, disturbed, comfortable, annoying, barren, harsh, consoling, splendid, fearful; are such immediately and in their own right and behalf” (Dewey 1981, 82). First, we experience things, other persons and events as characterized by affective or qualitative significances (Dewey 1984 and Dewey 1988), by meanings that

are “felt or directly had” (Dewey 1981, 200). They are pervasive in experience because humans are living organisms, whose lives are structurally exposed to the environment – a natural and naturally social one – they interact with and depend on in order to be what they are (Dreon 2013, 80, Dreon 2019, 17 and 24). Moreover, it is precisely with reference to the felt qualities of a situation that Dewey mentions the word “aesthetic”, or better “esthetic”: “If we take advantage of the word esthetic in a wider sense than that of application to the beautiful and the ugly, esthetic quality, immediate, final or self-enclosed, indubitably characterizes natural situations as they empirically occur” (Dewey 1981, 82). Consequently, it makes sense to characterizing the aesthetic in experience as connected to the attempt to recover unity and harmony within organic-environmental interactions and to consider it as a precursor, so to say, of artistic practices – as John Ryder does. However, this characterization of the aesthetic should be explicitly connected with affective, qualitative or “esthetic” significances as pervasive features of experienced situations, grounded in the bio-social dependence of human life on the environment it is embedded in.

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A further possible integration to John Ryder's inquiry regards his conception of the political as a basic feature of experience. I think that this idea could be strengthened through an explicit emphasis on the Pragmatists' thesis of the essentially social character of human life and, more specifically, the high degree of interdependence, which characterizes it. Ryder is right to connect political experience with the human power to act and transform current circumstances into opportunities for further purposes. However, the natural human ability to face problems actively and productively is not enough to characterize the political as an essential feature of human experience. To put it very briefly, our experience is basically political also because we always find ourselves in a complex web of interpersonal relations of dependence, care, belonging, subordination, affiliation, and so on. In other words, human social relations are often

asymmetric power relations: they often involve relations of power that can have a negative characterization and mean coercion (although this is not always the case). Human relations cannot be reduced to a matter of power and this, to me, is the strength of the pragmatist heritage in comparison to critical theory, Foucault, Bourdieu and, before them, Nietzsche, whose lesson is valued by John Ryder. Nonetheless, power in human interactions should be thematically brought into focus, explicating its roots in human structural interdependence. The issue of interest, which the author considers in relation to the individual and the community, could be further developed against this background, so as to give an account of the often competing dynamics of human relations and their frequently, although not invariably, hierarchical structure (see Santarelli 2019 on interest).

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Finally, yet very importantly, the issue of language in experience deserves some words. John Ryder prefers not to engage with the issue of the language-experience debate that marked the confrontation between classical pragmatism and contemporary pragmatists, who returned to Pragmatism after the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy.¹ Differently, he adopts a deflating strategy, by acknowledging the role played by language in experience but scaling it down. Ryder's position is to assume that language is a constitutive feature of experience, together with emotions and the imagination, while denying it the role of a dimension of experience: as we have seen, the only dimensions of experience are the cognitive, the aesthetic, and the political. The argument he gives in support of this position is that the cognitive, the aesthetic, and the political are pervasive traits in experience – at least potentially – while the linguistic is not: “while all experience can, depending on the case, have cognitive, aesthetic, or political traits, not all experience can be linguistic, emotional, or imaginative” (Ryder 2020, 207). If speaking about possibilities, I honestly

have difficulties understanding why a specific experience – there is no milk for breakfast, I go and buy it at the supermarket – could be considered potentially political, but not imaginative and linguistic. For sure, it involves the power to transform and manipulate existent materials to tackle a problem by performing more or less habitual actions, but it also cannot occur outside a context of shared practices that are linguistically and culturally scaffolded. It is probably true that sometimes we should extend the concepts of the linguistic or the affective in order to apply them to each human experience, but the same happens with the political, the aesthetic, and the cognitive. In other words, even in these cases, we have to extend the significance of the terms. I am not arguing in favor of language as a quasi-transcendental condition of human experience, namely the space of reasons, as happens in McDowell's and Brandom's philosophies. With Dewey and Mead, I think that we should adopt a more empirical attitude toward language and consider its natural history, as it has occurred within a specific form of organic life and has contributed to re-shaping it from the inside (Margolis 2017). In other terms, by adopting an emergentist (but not teleologically compromised) view of human experience, I think we should consider the consequences of the completely contingent but irreversible advent of language, in comparison to previous animal forms of interaction, for the configuration of specifically human forms of interaction with the environment, both along an ontogenetic line and a phylogenetic one. Among other things, this means focusing on the role of linguistic practices in supporting the emergence of a specific form of cognition in humans, different from other forms of organic intelligence (Lorimer 1929). This does not involve supporting the claim that each human practice is strictly linguistic or can be translated into language, but considering that the environment where human experiences take place is a pervasively linguistic environmental niche, characterized by complex communicative and meaningful practices, it is clear that each young individual of our species finds herself embedded in it from birth.

¹ For an insightful overview of this discontinuity see Cometti 2010; an interesting balance on the language-experience debate is drawn by Hildebrand 2014.

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In conclusion, instead of emphasizing the distinction between the dimensions and the constituents of experience, it might be more advantageous to leave open the list of features characterizing experience as human and to consider the transformations this experience undergoes in the environment. Differently from other kinds of *Umwelt*, the human environment has become – and still continues to be – pervasively linguistic and charged with shared meanings, as well as increasingly characterized by very complex forms of sociality and conjoined action. This point is simply intended as a critical suggestion to carry on and further develop John Ryder's brilliant project of exploring the multifaceted "fabric of experience" through Pragmatist tools.

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