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Dewey's Interactionist Account of Self-Realization

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Dewey's Interactionist Account of Self-Realization

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I am firmly convinced that when all the dust of controversy settles, John Dewey will be regarded as the philosopher of human growth in the age of modern science and technology, as the philosopher who saw man not as a creature with a fixed nature, whether conceived as a fallen soul or a soulless configuration of atoms, but as a developing mind-body with an historical career, who because he does something in and to the world, enjoys some degree of freedom, produces consequences never witnessed before, and leaves the world different from the world into which he was born. (Hook 1959: 1013)

## 1. Introduction

- 1 The idea of self-realization is one of the most significant points of intersection between ethics and philosophical anthropology.<sup>1</sup> It holds together two basic principles: on the one hand, that in order to understand the conduct of human beings it is necessary to clarify the kind of entities they are, thus examining their characteristics, potentialities and limitations; on the other hand, that it is not possible to describe human nature without taking into account its active side, that is, the tendency of human beings to shape their lives on the basis of their beliefs and evaluations. The idea of self-realization thus makes it possible to show the entanglement between anthropology and ethics, and thereby to shed light on both fields. Nevertheless, contemporary philosophers (as well as psychologists, economists, theologians, etc.) have rarely

provided detailed accounts of this idea – which they call, depending on the context, human flourishing, human development, self-fulfillment, self-actualization – and the issues it involves.<sup>2</sup>

- 2 A notable exception is John Dewey. In his philosophy, Dewey not only explicitly addresses the idea of self-realization, providing a detailed analysis of its components and conditions, but also clarifies – as perhaps only Aristotle and a few others have done before and after him – the role of this idea in the different contexts of individual and social experience. In this way, he sheds light on both the ethical dimension of human nature and the anthropological basis of ethics, framing the two issues within a unifying view.
- 3 But Dewey has another, more important merit. Not only did he help clarify the idea of self-realization, but he also proposed an original and productive interpretation of it. At the heart of this interpretation is the claim that self-realization does not consist in the mere actualization of a given essence, but in the interaction of a human being with her natural and social environment. For this reason, I will understand Dewey’s view as an “Interactionist Account” of self-realization.
- 4 My goal in this contribution is to present this account and to show its philosophical relevance. This theoretical purpose, however, must first come to terms with the exegetical concern that Dewey’s view of self-realization and his naturalism belong to two separate phases of his philosophy and therefore should not be conflated. This concern rests on the traditional “discontinuist reading,” according to which Dewey pursued the project of an ethics of self-realization in the early stage of his career, under the influence of British neo-idealism, but finally set it aside after the discovery of Darwin’s evolutionary biology and William James’ pragmatism.<sup>3</sup> Leaning on the more recent “continuist reading,” I argue instead that in his later work Dewey does not relinquish the idea of self-realization, but rather translates and partially reworks it in naturalistic terms through the concept of *growth*.<sup>4</sup>
- 5 In order to keep my theoretical goal and this exegetical concern together, I proceed as follows: in section 2, I present the most popular view of self-realization, namely the Essentialist Account; in order to uphold Dewey’s alternative, in section 3 I examine the *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, i.e., the text in which he lays the foundation for the Interactionist Account; in section 4, I focus on some of the main areas of Dewey’s later philosophy (anthropology, ethics, politics) in order to show the permanence of the earlier account; in section 5, I compare more explicitly the Interactionist Account and the Essentialist Account; finally, in section 6, I turn back to the entanglement of ethics and anthropology.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The Essentialist Account

- 6 In order to clarify the originality and value of Dewey’s account of self-realization, it is useful first to examine the most common view of this topic, both in science and in everyday language. According to this view, self-realization is the process by which an individual actualizes her potential, that is, those properties and abilities that *essentially* characterize her and which she therefore has reason to value. These properties and abilities are hence conceived as latent powers that need to be unfolded and manifested. For the sake of simplicity, I will call this view the “Essentialist Account.”

- 7 At the heart of this account are an anthropological thesis and an ethical thesis. According to the anthropological thesis, every human being possesses several properties, both physical and mental. Some of these properties (e.g., having green eyes) are contingent, or extrinsic, that is, they depend on the existence of other entities or accidental circumstances. Other properties (e.g., being able to communicate), on the other hand, are essential, or intrinsic, that is, they belong to the very nature of the individual. The ethical thesis claims that it is good for human beings to actualize their essential properties, i.e., to exercise and develop them: insofar as they define an individual for who she is, in fact, these properties are what is most valuable to her.
- 8 In the context of ethical perfectionism, for example, these two theses are often summarized in the idea of human flourishing as the excellent exercise of (theoretical or practical) reason, i.e., the capacity that is considered essential to human nature. As a consequence, according to this view, human beings realize themselves only by living rationally.<sup>6</sup>
- 9 To some extent, this account conceptually frames a popular insight, namely, that what defines an individual in a relevant way lurks within her, so she must express it as fully as possible. Of course, this is only possible within the right circumstances, since human beings always act within a natural and social environment. According to the Essentialist Account, however, the influence of context is merely extrinsic. The environment can foster or block the development of a human being: for example, a just society or good friends can be crucial for leading a flourishing life. But the fact of being a human, provided, for instance, by the property of rationality, does not depend on external circumstances, since it is part of someone's very nature as a member of the human life-form. Indeed, the traits that truly characterize an individual are not context-dependent, for otherwise they would be something accidental rather than essential. According to the Essentialist Account, therefore, the environment has an *instrumental* rather than a constitutive function: that is, it is a means to self-realization, not its source.

### 3. The Interactionist Account: Dewey's Early View

- 10 The first work in which Dewey presents his account of self-realization in detail is *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891). He wrote this text primarily, though not exclusively, as support for courses he taught at the University of Michigan, devoted to such topics as "Anthropological Ethics" and "Ethics of Human Relations."<sup>7</sup> The choice of these topics stemmed from his purpose to address the classical question of moral conduct in light of the findings of modern science. Not surprisingly, the book opens precisely by stating that ethics shares with anthropology and other disciplines its content, but differs from them in form, that is, in its non-descriptive but *normative* approach:

This does not mean that it belongs to ethics to prescribe what man ought to do; but that its business is to detect the element of obligation in conduct, to examine conduct to see what gives it its *worth*. Anthropology, etc., do not take into account the *whole* of action, but simply some of its aspects – either external or internal. Ethics deals with conduct in its entirety, with reference, that is, to what makes it conduct, its *end*, its real meaning. Ethics is the science of conduct, understanding by conduct man's activity in its whole reach. (EW.3: 241)

- 11 The aim of the work, then, is to examine *human conduct*. Dewey makes it clear that this term – which he will also use extensively in his later writings – is not identical with “action”: while the latter refers to any kind of activity (even “the working of a pump”), the notion of “conduct” “implies more than something taking place; it implies purpose, motive, intention; that the agent knows what he is about, that he has something which he is aiming at. All action accomplishes something or brings about results, but conduct has the result *in view*” (EW.3: 242). Investigating human conduct therefore means first identifying and evaluating the ends in view that guide it.
- 12 This involves two important issues for my analysis. First, that analyzing conduct means shedding light on the fundamental features of human nature, such as “character – [...] feelings and inclinations” (EW.3: 247). From this perspective, ethics is thus entangled with anthropology. Second, if the main object of ethics is the ends of conduct, then self-realization is its ultimate point. Indeed, while an agent usually pursues external goals, in realizing herself she intentionally pursues her own fulfillment. Put differently: self-realization consists in the identity of the agent and her end in view.
- 13 Dewey presents his account of self-realization specifically in §§ XXXIII-XLI of the *Outlines*. This account is based on four basic concepts: (1) *individuality*, (2) *interest*, (3) *adjustment to the environment*, (4) *community*.

### 3.1. Individuality

- 14 The starting point is the following formula: “*The Moral End or the Good Is the Realization by a Person and as a Person of Individuality*” (EW.3: 301). This formula holds together three notions: (a) the *moral end*, i.e., the ultimate goal of human conduct; (b) the *person*, which Dewey defines here as “a being capable of conduct – a being capable of proposing to himself ends and of attempting to realize them” (*ibid.*); (c) *individuality*. The latter is the notion on which he dwells most and which he explains thus:
- We may distinguish two factors – or better two aspects, two sides – in individuality. On one side, it means special disposition, temperament, gifts, bent, or inclination; on the other side, it means special station, situation, limitations, surroundings, opportunities, etc. Or, let us say, it means *specific capacity* and *specific environment*. Each of these elements, apart from the other, is a bare abstraction and without reality. Nor is it strictly correct to say that individuality is constituted by these two factors *together*. It is rather, as intimated above, that each is individuality looked at from a certain point of view, from within or from without. (EW.3: 301-2)
- 15 This quote already summarizes some of the key elements of Dewey’s account of self-realization. Individuality is composed of two inseparable and interdependent aspects:
- a. a person’s *capacities*, that is, the specific traits that characterize her and make her able to be and do certain things rather than others;
  - b. a person’s *environment*, that is, the specific context in which she finds herself and which thus establishes possibilities and limits to her actions.
- 16 Dewey makes it clear right away that these are not really two different aspects, but simply two ways of considering individuality: it is possible to describe a person by referring, “from within,” to her characteristic traits (“she is intelligent, brave, melancholic, good at drawing...”) or, “from without,” to the conditions in which she lives and which have shaped her (“she was born in Italy, grew up in a working-class family, studied architecture, married to Agnese...”).

- 17 There is something surprising about this idea. As the Essentialist Account also suggests, we are used to considering as constitutive of a person only her “internal” characteristics, and at most her physical traits, but we regard the external environment as a contingent factor, i.e., something that can change or even disappear, without a person ceasing to be who she is. But, according to Dewey, this is a mistake. The environment, in fact, “is not simply the facts which happen objectively to lie about an agent; it is such part of the facts as may be *related* to the capacity and the disposition and gifts of the agent” (EW.3: 302-3).
- 18 Thus understood, then, a person’s environment does not coincide with mere space-temporal circumstances, but with those aspects of a (material, but above all cultural and social) context that “motivate” this person, that is, capture her interests, attract her desires, activate her abilities, and so on. As a consequence, for Dewey it is not only the individual who comes into contact with an environment and is influenced by it, but it is also the environment itself that is shaped by the individual, i.e., by her dispositions, goals, cognitions, skills, etc. In other words: what counts as an environment for a certain person are those aspects of a context that are “meaningful” to her. Dewey thus considers the environment “a constituent factor” of individuality, since it contributes to “make it what it is” (EW.3: 302). As a consequence, two people, e.g., a brother and a sister, while living in the same circumstances (same parents, same house, same town), do not really have the same environment, since their individual capacities “carve out” the context in different ways, so that something that is, say, exciting or frightening to one is not so to the other.
- 19 Unlike the Essentialist Account, then, Dewey believes that a person’s identity – meaning the answer to the question “who is she?” – is not reducible to her physical or psychological characteristics, but also involves her surroundings and her interactions with them. We could also put it this way: for Dewey, we come to define who we are and what we want to do only by interacting with the environment (by learning a language, becoming familiar with a system of values and meanings, taking on certain social roles, and so on), so our evaluative relationship with ourselves – that is, our personal identity – is structurally mediated by our relationship with the contexts in which we act.
- 20 This twofold aspect of individuality has consequences on how people realize themselves. For Dewey, we can fulfill ourselves only by interacting with our environment. A capacity, in fact, is nothing more than *the power to do something*, so without a world in which it is possible to actively exercise this power, the very concept of “capacity” loses its meaning. Dewey explains it as follows:
- the manner and the purpose of exercising his capacity is always *relative* to and *dependent* upon the surroundings. Apart from the environment the capacity is mere emptiness; the exercise of capacity is always establishing a relation to something exterior to itself. All we can say of capacity apart from environment is that *if* certain circumstances were supplied, there would be something there. We call a capacity *capability*, possibility, as if for the very purpose of emphasizing the necessity of external supplementing. (EW.3: 302)
- 21 If realizing oneself means cultivating one’s individual capacities, that is, developing those properties and abilities that make us the specific persons we are, then self-realization involves successfully interacting with those contexts that actually allow one to activate and exercise those capacities. Dewey speaks in this regard – with perhaps too mechanistic a term – of the “*function*” of individuality, which he defines as “an active relation established between power of doing, on one side, and something to be

done on the other” (EW.3: 303). To exercise one’s function, then, is to employ one’s subjective capacities to ‘respond’ to the objective requirements of the environment. It is important, however, that both factors are present. On the one hand, a person does not realize herself by narcissistically fulfilling her own desires, namely, by disregarding the context: “To exercise a function as a student is not to cultivate tastes and possibilities internally; it is also to meet external demands, the demands of fact, of teachers, of others needing knowledge” (*ibid.*). But on the other hand, realizing oneself does not mean simply conforming to external directives either: “Without the inner disposition and inclination, we call conduct dead, perfunctory, hypocritical. An activity is not functional, unless it is organic, expressing the life of the agent” (EW.3: 304). Thus understood, then, self-realization is structured as a *twofold movement*: on one side, the person exercises her abilities and achieves her goals; on the other side, the environment grows and improves as a result of the person’s contribution.

### 3.2. Interests

- 22 Once he has clarified individuality and how it is realized, Dewey moves on to examine the components of this process in more detail. To this end, in §§ XXXIV-XXXVI he focuses on the role of *interests*, understood as the “inner side” of a person’s function, while in § XXXVII he discusses the person’s *adjustment to the environment*, that is, the way in which she realizes her function externally. Dewey identifies three main characteristics of interests:
- a. they are *active*, since they involve a person’s engagement with something; Dewey writes that this is why we talk of “a man’s interests, meaning his occupations or range of activities” (EW.3: 305);
  - b. interests are *objective*, since they are directed toward an object; interest is thus not merely an inner state, but an involvement with the world: we in fact “are always interested *in something*” (*ibid.*);
  - c. interests consist in *satisfaction*, since they imply unity between the interested subject and the interesting object; while desire is a state of tension of a person toward something other than herself and which she does not possess, interest always presupposes an engagement with the object: we are interested in something because this thing *concerns us* and therefore, to some extent, already belongs to us; in other words, by being interested in an object, we find ourselves in it.
- 23 Dewey then distinguishes two general forms of interest: in *persons* and in *things*. Interest in persons can concern both *self* and *others*. Self-interest, which may also be called *prudence*, consists in that care which each individual should have for her own well-being. It must not, however, be confused with selfishness or sentimentalist indulgence for oneself: rather, it involves the self-respect and self-valuing that underlie honor, dignity and moral commitment. Interest in others, or *sympathy*, consists in having others as ends in view of one’s conduct. Dewey specifies that sympathy should not be understood in terms of altruism (just as self-interest is not merely egoistic); more generally, the very distinction between altruism and egoism is not very helpful in understanding human conduct:
- If man is truly a social being, constituted by his relationships to others, then social action must inevitably realize himself, and be, in that sense, egoistic. And on the other hand, if the individual’s interest in himself is in himself *as a member of society*, then such interest is thoroughly altruistic. (EW.3: 308)



- 24 Interest in things, on the other hand, can be *contemplative* or *productive*. The former is directed toward the world, both natural and social, and its most eminent form is intellectual work, i.e., *science*. This should not be understood, however, as cold, detached observation: when there is true interest, “Man identifies himself with the meaning of this world to the point that he can be satisfied only as he spells out and reads its meaning” (EW.3: 310). Productive interest is driven by a similar involvement with the things of the world, that is, with “the large and goodly frame of things” (*ibid.*); but its end is fulfilled in the creation and manipulation of reality, for aesthetic or instrumental reasons. Its prominent form is thus *art*.
- 25 By inquiring into these forms of interest, Dewey thus presents the basic modes of a person’s interaction with the environment, that is, of engagement with the natural and social world. Depending on the person involved, each of these modes can be a source of self-realization.

### 3.3. Adjustment to the Environment

- 26 In § XXXVII Dewey addresses the issue of adjustment to the environment in more detail. Having already explained the concept of “environment,” here I dwell mainly on that of *adjustment*, which Dewey takes, as he himself states, “by evolutionists” (EW.3: 313).<sup>8</sup> He thus argues that “adjustment” does not mean passive conformity to a fixed context, but “*transformation* of existing circumstances” (EW.3: 313) This occurs through a dynamic that can be broken down into three distinct, though mutually related, movements:
- a. first, a person “absorbs” the environment in which she finds herself, that is, she learns and appropriates the norms and ends that structure the surrounding reality; this is the condition of possibility for the formation of her individuality, just as for a child learning a language, a value system, etc., is a condition for being able to relate to the world and to herself;
  - b. second, adjustment requires the person to “assert [herself] *against* [her] surroundings,” (*ibid.*) that is, to take a critical distance from what she has found: this is necessary to determine her own ends autonomously;
  - c. third, the person “goes back” to the environment, to transform it according to what she has established as valuable; this involves “a reconstruction of the prior environment” (EW.3: 314).
- 27 Hence, for Dewey, adjustment “is not outer conformity; it is living realization of certain relations in and through the will of the agent” (*ibid.*). Self-realization is but the highest and most successful form of adjustment to the environment, that is, *a plastic and rational interaction of a person with the natural and social world*. This is why Dewey’s early account of self-realization can be characterized as *interactionist*.

### 3.4. Community

- 28 Dewey closes his analysis with a second formula, which he calls the “ethical postulate,” since it is both the presupposition and the foundation of human conduct:

IN THE REALIZATION OF INDIVIDUALITY THERE IS FOUND ALSO THE NEEDED REALIZATION OF SOME COMMUNITY OF PERSONS OF WHICH THE INDIVIDUAL IS A MEMBER; AND, CONVERSELY, THE AGENT WHO DULY SATISFIES THE COMMUNITY



IN WHICH HE SHARES, BY THAT SAME CONDUCT SATISFIES HIMSELF. (EW 3: 322  
[capitalization in original])

- 29 This formula completes in a sense that of § XXXIII. There Dewey had claimed that the moral end is the realization of individuality. After showing that individuality is constituted by its relation to the environment, here he argues that its realization necessarily entails the realization of the environment, and particularly of the community to which a person belongs. This means that by exercising one's function, i.e., pursuing the ends that make a person the specific individual that she is, she contributes to the development of her environment. For example, a father who fulfills himself as a father thereby also contributes to the making of a good family; a physician who performs her work with intelligence and involvement realizes herself while doing good for her patients and the hospital.
- 30 From an anthropological perspective, this stems from the social embeddedness of human beings, that is, from the fact that people are always and primarily members of one or more groups. The ethical consequence of this is that individual ends are always also collective in scope, so that personal self-realization implies social commitment.

#### 4. The Interactionist Account: Dewey's Later View

- 31 I would now like to shift the focus of my analysis to Dewey's later writings in order to show the permanence of the Interactionist Account of self-realization that he developed in the *Outlines*. As I have already mentioned, the "discontinuist reading" of Dewey's philosophy considers this exegetical move a hermeneutical mistake. However, this reading is mostly based on the occurrence of the term "self-realization," which Dewey himself links to the neo-idealist ethics of Green and Bradley and which he therefore stops using (though never entirely) when he distances himself from them from 1892 onward.<sup>9</sup> This thus seems to lead to the conclusion that in his later work Dewey rejects the idea of self-realization as such.
- 32 In my opinion, however, this is a misunderstanding. On the one hand, it is true that Dewey progressively abandons the more idealistic elements of his early view; but, on the other hand, he never relinquishes his belief that self-realization plays a fundamental role both in the lives of individuals and in the organization of society. Evidence of this is that he keeps throughout his career insisting on the importance of the development of human capacities and the freedom of individuals to flourish – although he refers to it in terms of *growth*, in accordance with the naturalistic framework of his later philosophy.<sup>10</sup>
- 33 But this continuity can be demonstrated more specifically by examining the way Dewey understands self-realization, or growth, in his later works. This is what I aim to do in this section. As we have seen, at the heart of Dewey's early account are three basic claims:
- a. self-realization is the ultimate goal of human conduct;
  - b. it consists in the adjustment to the environment, i.e. the interaction of a human being with her material and social conditions;
  - c. it thus implies a mutual development between the human being and the environment.
- 34 As I will show in the following pages, in his later philosophy Dewey rejects only claim (a), while sticking to (b) and (c).

35 To this end, I focus on three central areas of Dewey's work to demonstrate the key role that the Interactionist Account of self-realization plays in them: (1) *anthropology*, (2) *ethics*, (3) *politics*. Of course, I cannot go into the details of Dewey's ideas in these areas; here I merely point out their continuity with the earlier view.

#### 4.1. Anthropology

36 The work in which Dewey most extensively develops his anthropological view is *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922). For the purposes of my analysis, there are three issues in this work on which it is important to dwell.

37 First, Dewey takes up the problem of the relationship between what in the *Outlines* he called the "two sides" of *individuality*, namely capacity and environment, which he here examines and justifies within a fully naturalistic philosophical framework. At the heart of this work, too, is the claim that "all conduct is *interaction* between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social" (MW.14: 9). This means that, in order to understand human conduct, it is necessary to focus on that peculiar "encounter" between the innate dispositions that characterize human beings (instincts, inclinations, needs, etc.) and the behaviors acquired through education and socialization. This makes it possible to identify, on the one hand, the biological and anthropological conditions that enable moral action and freedom, and, on the other, the ways through which human nature can be directed toward the realization of individual and social good. This allows Dewey to restate the *entanglement of ethics and anthropology*, which he summarizes in the idea that "morals is the most humane of all subjects. It is that which is closest to human nature" (MW.14: 204).

38 Second, Dewey again emphasizes the crucial role of the *environment* in human conduct, which he explains as follows:

Human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not "in" that environment as coins are in a box, but as a plant is in the sunlight and soil. It is of them, continuous with their energies, dependent upon their support, capable of increase only as it utilizes them, and as it gradually rebuilds from their crude indifference an environment genially civilized. (*Ibid.*)

39 The key issue that needs to be stressed here is the idea of the "mutual benefit" of interaction: namely, it is not only the environment that enables human growth, but it is also human growth that fosters the flourishing of the environment.

40 Third, Dewey returns to the topic of *interest* as a mode of engagement of the self with the environment. In the fully naturalistic framework of his late philosophy, he explains it as a stage in the determination of *habit* – a concept that was not developed in the *Outlines*. Interest in something or someone, in fact, consists in an involvement toward the object or person of reference; it thus involves a positive tendency that, if reiterated and stabilized, can produce a habit. Dewey defines this concept as "an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response" (MW.14: 32), that is, a cognitive and practical disposition to interact with external stimuli in definite ways. Like interest, then, habit represents one of the main ways through which a human being's interaction with the environment occurs. More specifically, habit is that characteristic that makes interaction sufficiently smooth and effective to enable an individual to grow and freely achieve her ends. So, according to Dewey's later view, realizing oneself involves not only having an interest in the world, that is, an active involvement with

the natural and social environment, but also well-established habits of such involvement.

- 41 From a strictly anthropological point of view, Dewey thus develops a conception according to which human beings are *constitutively relational on both the phylogenetic and ontogenetic levels*: on the one hand, he embraces Darwinian theory, by considering even the distinctive traits of the species as adaptive responses to the environment (rather than as essential features); on the other hand, he shows that individual development is the product of complex interactions with material circumstances and with other humans, their artifacts, symbols, norms and institutions. For Dewey, then, human nature is doubly tied to the environment: both in its “endowment” and in its capacity for growth.<sup>11</sup>

## 4.2. Ethics

- 42 The 1932 volume, *Ethics* (here I refer only to the second edition), is particularly important for assessing continuities and differences between Dewey’s early view of self-realization and his later philosophy. More specifically, this work clearly shows that he, on the one hand, continues to advocate the importance of placing human nature and its tendency toward growth at the center of moral theory, but, on the other hand, no longer considers self-realization the ultimate goal of conduct. Unlike the *Outlines*, in fact, the theoretical framework of *Ethics* is pluralistic in nature, since it understands moral agency as directed toward three factors: right, good, and virtue. At the same time, however, Dewey argues that these factors should not be regarded as abstract and separate ideals, but as mutually integrating parts of the individual’s conduct, that is, as ways through which she unfolds and at the same time shapes her identity through her actions:

It is not too much to say that the key to a correct theory of morality is recognition of the *essential unity of the self and its acts*, if the latter have any moral significance; while errors in theory arise as soon as the self and acts (and their consequences) are separated from each other, and moral worth is attributed to one more than to the other. (LW.7: 288)

- 43 This is a point of strong continuity with Dewey’s earlier philosophy. However, the focus on the growth of the self does not invalidate the separation of the three moral factors of right, good, and character that Dewey defends in *Ethics*, but rather allows for a better justification of their role in understanding moral conduct. Indeed, in this work, self-realization is no longer the ultimate goal toward which human agency must aim, but rather a by-product that is achieved through right, good or virtuous action.<sup>12</sup> He therefore writes, “Self-realization may be the end in the sense of being an outcome and limit of right action, without being the *end-in-view*” (LW.7: 302).
- 44 This shows, then, that Dewey certainly gives up what I indicated above as claim (a), but he does not relinquish claims (b) and (c). Indeed, he holds even in *Ethics* to the idea that interaction with the environment can be a source of growth and development for the individual: “our actions not only lead up to other actions which follow as their effects but they also leave an enduring impress on the one who performs them, strengthening and weakening permanent tendencies to act” (LW.7: 170).

### 4.3. Politics

45 It is no coincidence that the interpreters who have been most willing to acknowledge the central role of self-realization even in Dewey's later philosophy are mainly those who have dealt with his political thought. Indeed, this is the area in which Dewey most strongly emphasized the importance for individuals to flourish, that is, to develop their capacities and freely achieve the goals they value.<sup>13</sup> He defends this idea especially in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), where he very clearly restates some of the key issues he had examined in *Outlines*. In particular, he takes up, reworking them within a new theoretical framework, claims (b) and (c) mentioned above that self-realization consists in a process of interaction and mutual benefit between an individual and her social environment. Dewey writes:

From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. (LW.3: 327-8)

46 The specific character of democracy, that is, what makes it a way of life and not just a form of government, is that it therefore embodies the ideal of growth through interaction. As already stated in *Outlines*, therefore, the individual can flourish only to the extent that she contributes her own capacities to the common good, just as society can develop only if it allows people to realize themselves.

47 Dewey expresses this idea even more explicitly in *Freedom and Culture* (1939), where he writes that “the cause of democratic freedom is the cause of the fullest possible realization of human potentialities,” whereby “self-governing institutions are the means by which human nature can secure its fullest realization in the greatest number of persons” (LW.13: 154-5).

## 5. The Meaning of Dewey's Interactionist Account

48 Having completed the diachronic analysis of Dewey's Interactionist Account, I would like to finally summarize its central features and show its meaning. For this purpose, it is useful to make a comparison with the Essentialist Account. This can be condensed into the following claims:

- a. what matters in an individual is determined by her intrinsic potential, i.e., the properties and abilities she possesses independently of the environment;
- b. self-realization consists in the actualization of this potential;
- c. the environment is an external means for self-realization, i.e., it can either foster or block it.

49 Instead, the account that Dewey develops in the *Outlines* and then maintains, despite some major changes, in his later works can be summarized as follows:

- a. what matters in an individual is determined by the relationship between her capacities and the environment;
- b. self-realization, or growth, consists in the plastic and rational interaction between these capacities and the environment; this is made possible by the role played by:
  - i.) interests,
  - ii.) habits;

c. the environment is a constitutive component of self-realization, so that an individual's growth also involves the growth of the environment (and vice versa).

- 50 Along with these more structural aspects, it is important to note the role played in Dewey's account by *school education*, which enables the self-knowledge necessary to define one's valuable capacities and goals, and by *democratic social conditions*, which allow in practice the free and successful interaction between individuals and the environment.
- 51 The differences between the Essentialist Account and the Interactionist Account are clear. Both assume that the idea of self-realization involves the development of an individual's fundamental capacities. They differ, however, on how to understand both this development and the nature of capacities. For the Essentialist Account, capacities are inner powers that, given favorable circumstances, can be manifested outwardly; their development is thus a transition from potentiality to actuality. For example, if my main talent is having a beautiful voice, realizing myself will involve something like becoming a professional singer, as a way of expressing my "inner" power "outwardly."
- 52 For Dewey, on the other hand, capacities are not simply an individual's dispositions, but her characteristic ways of interacting with the environment. Having capacity  $x$ , then, does not mean having latent power  $x$  (although this also plays a role), but being able to  $x$ -ing. For example, it is not a matter of having a "beautiful voice" (whatever that means), but of actually singing well: it is the kind of interaction between the voice and the environment that allows someone to be ascribed a "singing talent." For Dewey, in fact, it makes no sense to talk about a power without clarifying the specific ways in which that power is exercised. Put another way: it does not matter that I "have" a talent, but how I employ it, namely, what role it plays in my experience, what value it has for me, and how it therefore guides my choices. Dewey explains this point clearly in *Individualism, Old and New* (1929):

Individuality is at first spontaneous and unshaped; it is a potentiality, a capacity of development. Even so, it is a unique manner of acting in and with a world of objects and persons. It is not something complete in itself, like a closet in a house or a secret drawer in a desk, filled with treasures that are waiting to be bestowed on the world. Since individuality is a distinctive way of feeling the impacts of the world and of showing a preferential bias in response to these impacts, it develops into shape and form only through interaction with actual conditions; it is no more complete in itself than is a painter's tube of paint without relation to a canvas. The work of art is the truly individual thing; and it is the result of the interaction of paint and canvas through the medium of the artist's distinctive vision and power. (LW.5: 121)

- 53 In Dewey's account, therefore, an individual's self-realization does not depend on the degree to which she is able to manifest her inner powers, but on the quality of her interaction with the environment, i.e., her success in achieving her valuable goals.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

- 54 In this contribution, I investigated the relationship between ethics and anthropology, focusing on one of their most significant entanglements: the idea of self-realization. To this end, I examined two possible explanations of this idea: the Essentialist Account and the Interactionist Account. By looking at several of Dewey's works, I have tried to show that the interactionist explanation of self-realization is richer and stronger than that

provided by the essentialist one. In conclusion, I would like to use this result to explore more explicitly the issue of the entanglement between ethics and anthropology.

- 55 Both the Essentialist Account and the Interactionist Account reject the idea that human nature is a blank slate on which the environment can write anything. They differ, however, on how they explain this rejection. The Essentialist Account is based on the assumption that human nature has content in it that is independent from the environment. Human beings therefore are cores loaded with powers that must be discovered and manifested.
- 56 For Dewey, on the other hand, it is not possible to isolate human nature from the environment, not only because it is part of it, that is, it belongs to the natural and social world, but also because it is only in interaction with the environment that human capacities are truly articulated and can therefore be comprehended. To describe human nature by detaching it from the circumstances that activate it and make it “work” would be like trying to explain a musical instrument without ever making it play. On the one hand, then, human beings have internal dispositions and tendencies (both individual and universal, i.e., relative to the species); but on the other hand, these features are formed only through engagement with the environment, which shapes them as much as they are shaped by it.
- 57 All of this has important ethical consequences. For both the Essentialist Account and the Interactionist Account, human nature has an inherently ethical dimension. The Essentialist Account holds that this is determined solely by the internal powers of human nature, which define an individual for who she is and are therefore worthy of actualization. For the Essentialist Account, hence, the entanglement between ethics and anthropology is all within anthropology, that is, the explanation of human nature and its capacities.
- 58 For Dewey, by contrast, this entanglement is due to the particular way in which human nature interacts with the environment. For it is not a question of whether or not there are inherent traits, but of identifying the best, that is, the most intelligent and valuable ways of making them “function.” It is the fact that this involvement of human nature in the environment can be better or worse, i.e., can be more or less beneficial for one and the other, that implies an entanglement between the ethical and anthropological planes. In other words: it is not a matter of explaining how it occurs that two separate things – human capacities and the environment – come into relationship, but of assessing the *quality* of this relationship, which pre-exists their distinction and is thus the fundamental condition for their realization.

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## NOTES

1. In this article I use the term “anthropology” to refer to *philosophical* anthropology, i.e., the discipline that focuses on human nature in conceptual terms.
2. For an overview of the topic in philosophy cf. Gewirth 1998; Frankel Paul, Miller & Paul 1999; Altobrando, Niikawa & Stone 2018; Stuhr 2023; Mountbatten-O'Malley 2024.
3. Cf. Welchman 1995.
4. Cf. Shook 2000; Good 2006; Good & Garrison 2010; Pearce 2020. More specifically on the permanence of the idea of self-realization in Dewey's later work see Festenstein 1997; Levine 2020.
5. I quote Dewey's writings according to the edition of *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, published in the three series of *The Early Works* (= EW), *The Middle Works* (= MW), *The Later Works* (= LW). References follow the order: series, volume number in the series, page number (e.g. EW.3: 237).
6. A prominent example is Hurka 1993. See also Foot 2001.
7. See Martin (2002: 120).
8. As Pearce (2020: ch. 4) has shown, Dewey takes the concept of “adjustment to the environment” from Oxford idealists Edward Caird and Samuel Alexander, and in particular from their attempt to reconcile Hegel's dialectic with evolutionary theory, and thereby interpret thought and action in terms of interaction between organism and environment. More generally, Pearce has proved, in my opinion incontrovertibly, that a “naturalistic bent” is already to be found in Dewey's early philosophy, since it is not in conflict with his Hegelianism, but rather is nourished by it. This thus seems to me to refute Welchman's (1995: 121) claim that Dewey's “rather free use of this [notion of ‘adjustment’] and other terms drawn from evolutionary biology does not argue a close acquaintance with, let alone comprehension of, either Darwinian theory or subsequent developments in the life sciences.”
9. The two main texts that testify to this distancing are the essays “Green's Theory of the Moral Motive” (1892) and “Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal” (1893).
10. See Roth 1962, which maps the idea of self-realization in various areas of Dewey's philosophy. Unfortunately, it deals only with Dewey's later works, thus ignoring not only the “seeds” of this idea, but also its changes over time.
11. A contemporary version of this view is Tomasello 2019. More extensively on Dewey's account of human nature cf. Dreon 2022; Renault 2024.
12. Levine 2020 is particularly clear on this issue.
13. See Festenstein 1997; Frega 2019.

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## ABSTRACTS

The idea of self-realization is one of the most significant points of intersection between ethics and philosophical anthropology, the disciplines that study, respectively, human conduct and human nature. An examination of this idea, therefore, allows us to shed light on these two fields and their entanglement. In this article I present two possible accounts of self-realization: the Essentialist Account, which understands it as the actualization of an intrinsic potential, and the Interactionist Account, which conceives it as the successful interaction between an individual and her environment. My goal is to argue for the Interactionist Account, in the comprehensive version developed by John Dewey. To do so, I proceed as follows: I introduce the Essentialist Account; I present Dewey's alternative, by examining first the *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* and then some major later works, thereby showing the continuity (and discontinuity) of his conception of self-realization, or growth, throughout his career; after a closer comparison between the Interactionist Account and the Essentialist Account, I finally clarify the relevance of Dewey's view for understanding the entanglement between ethics and anthropology.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Dewey, Human Nature, Individuality, Interaction, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, Self-Realization

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