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The Essential Uncertainty of Thinking: Education and Subject in John Dewey

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Introduction

From *The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism* (Dewey, 1882) to *Knowing and the Known* (Dewey and Bentley, 1949), the question of thinking is pivotal to Dewey’s work. It is not only the focus of several Deweyan works but also at the intersection of Dewey’s conception of experience, education and inquiry. Nevertheless, according to Johnston (2002) and Rømer (2012), a Deweyan understanding of thinking has been victim to several simplifications. One type of reduction involves considering Dewey a positivist or an advocate of individualistic approaches to education, which is ironic given that the very question of education in Dewey is grounded on sharing and communication (Dewey, 1930 [1916], pp. 6, 7, 101, 115). There is also another type of reduction of Deweyan thought that is perhaps less evident but likewise misleading. This reduction works by equating the broad question of thinking to the questions of “inquiry” and “reflective thought”, thus reducing the “mind” to the production of knowledge, experience to “intellectual experience” and human beings to inquirers. Of course, inquiry and reflective thought are central issues to Deweyan thought. However, when analysing them, we must ask about the ground on which inquiry and reflective thought lies. Such “genealogical work” is important to remain faithful to the Deweyan aim, namely, to understand and leave intact “the cord that binds experience and nature” without taking intellectual experience as primary (Dewey, 1929 [1925], p. 23). I believe that such genealogical work is faithful to the concept of thinking and subject that have been expressed by Dewey since he wrote *How We Think* (1910) and *Democracy and Education* (1930 [1916]). In these two masterpieces, Dewey clearly notes that thinking is marked by uncertainty (Dewey, 1910, p. 14, 26, 34) and is grounded on something situated “below the level of reflection” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 22). As Dewey boldly states, “the power of thought […] opens to us the possibility of failures to which the animal, limited to instinct, cannot sink” (Dewey, 1910, p. 19).

Of course, Dewey’s perspective did not go unnoticed. Works by authors such as Garrison (1994, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2003, 2005), Wilshire (1993), Biesta (1994, 2009b, 2010), Biesta and Burbules (2003), and Farfield (2010) have dismantled the “apparently optimistic worldview” (Saito 2002, p. 249) that some take from Dewey’s work. The work by these scholars allows us to see how Deweyan radical challenge to Descartes’ epistemology entails dismantling the “[m]odern theories of knowledge” (Dewey, 1929 [1925], p. 157) that reduce experience to what rationality establishes as experience. Indeed, Biesta and Burbules (2003), as well as Glassman (2004) and Higgins (2010), note that Deweyan transactional turn challenges at its very basis the longstanding predominance of knowledge over the living. Moreover, since the 1990s, Garrison’s interpretation of Deweyan thought as a “hermeneutics of bottomless being” (Garrison, 1998, p. 128) clearly shows that Dewey regarded thinking as a process without any safe ground. Along these lines, Boisvert (1998) and Semetsky (2003, 2008) have highlighted how knowledge and subject are events rather than centres in Deweyan work. They are events that emerge by and within experience as part of its ongoing flow. Thus, in light of these examples, I wish to address the question of the “weakening” of thinking and subject in Deweyan thought and to analyse the educational import of such a weakening.

The paper is organised in three sections. In the first one, I will argue that, along with a Deweyan commitment to thinking as reflective thought, we find another Dewey, so to speak: a Dewey fully aware of how uncertainty, unpredictability and even an absence of awareness are constitutive elements of thinking. Stressing the question, we may even say that uncertainty and unpredictability are the very ground on which thinking lies. Simultaneously with Heidegger, Dewey shows that we are always already embedded in the world and that such an embeddedness is out of the boundaries of knowledge and conscious control because knowledge and consciousness – and, thus, the very possibility of inquiry - are grounded on something that lies behind them, namely, experience. In the second section, I address the question of the subject. I wish to show that we can hardly conceive of a Deweyan subject as a coherent centre of agency. Rather, we have to conceive of a Deweyan subject as a scattered, disseminated one. A Deweyan challenge to Plato’s and Descartes’ “theoretical gaze” goes straight to the core of the subject’s question. Dewey challenges not only
“the Cartesian attempt to find the locus of absolute certainty within the knowing mind itself” (Dewey, 1929, p. 61) but also the very concept of the subject as a stable centre of thinking. Finally, in the third section, I wish to address the educational consequences of the frame I have attempted to present. In the weakening of thinking and subject, we must conceive of education not so much as the attempt to understand experience but as the means to create new experience and to create new points of interactions in our relationship with the environment. With this move, we will be able to engender new experiences and change our being-embedded-in-the-world.

The essential uncertainty of thinking

Let me begin with a Deweyan statement that is as much disquieting as it is overlooked - to my knowledge, there is no close inquiry into it. In *Democracy and Education*, when analysing the relationship between inquiry and what “lie[s] below the level of reflection”, Dewey states: “We rarely recognize the extent in which our conscious estimates of what is worthwhile and what is not, are due to standards of which we are not conscious at all. However, in general it may be said that the things which we take for granted without inquiry or reflection are just the things which determine our conscious thinking and decide our conclusions” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 22).

In this statement, Dewey clearly notes that the basic appreciation of the world is due to standards that partially escape to our awareness. Moreover, “our conscious thinking” as well as “our conclusions” stand on a ground that is “below the level of reflection”. Because Dewey states that such a ground consists of “the things which we take for granted without inquiry or reflection”, we could conclude that Dewey’s aim is to foster inquiry into such an implicit ground and to put it under the lens of reflection. However, the question is to what extent inquiry can grasp such an implicit, unthought ground. My point is that Dewey, in several passages of his work, was adamant in denying such a possibility. Knowledge, consciousness, reflective thought – and, thus, the very possibility of inquiry - are grounded on something behind them, namely, experience – something that is ungraspable by reflective thought. Of course, we are aware of the existence of such an ungraspable ground, but we have no means to put such a ground under the light of reflection. In the Deweyan account, reflective thought is grounded on something that we could hardly place on the ground of “pure” rationality.

I wish to make my point in three steps: a) in the first step I will argue that the very ground on which reflective thought lies is out of the boundaries of reflective thought; b) in the second step I will argue that the push, the “directive source” (Dewey, 1980 [1934], p. 97) that engenders knowledge and reflective thought, is anything but ‘reflective’; and c) in the third section I will argue that inquiry and reflective thought in themselves are crossed by and directed toward uncertainty.

The ground of reflective thought

According to Biesta and Burbules, “[o]ne of the most important implications of Dewey’s transactional approach is that it tries to account for the point of contact between the human organism and the world. For Dewey the human organism is always already ‘in touch’ with reality” (Biesta and Burbules, 2003, p. 10, emphasis in original). Biesta’s and Burbules’ analysis clearly shows that “being in touch” with reality is the standpoint from which we have to conceive of knowledge. Thus, faithful to a Deweyan pragmatic approach, the question is as follows: what are the consequences that follow from thinking of knowledge as starting from such a standpoint? With my end in view, the very question is to what extent the subject can manage and control his relationship with the environment. Dewey gives us a response in *Experience and Nature*, in a passage that removes off every doubt: “Apart from language, from imputed and inferred meaning, we continually engage in an immense multitude of immediate organic selections, rejections,
welcomings, expulsions, appropriations, withdrawals, shrinkings, expansions, relations and dejections, attacks, wardings off, of the most minute, vibrantly delicate nature. We are not aware of the qualities of many or most of these acts; we do not objectively distinguish and identify them. Yet they exist as feeling qualities, and have an enormous directive effect on our behavior. Even our most highly intellectualized operations depend upon them as a ‘fringe’ by which to guide our inferential movements” (Dewey, 1929 [1925], pp. 298-299).

In this passage, Dewey clearly states that our behavior depends on “an immense multitude of immediate organic selections […] [which] we do not objectively distinguish and identify”. This means that our interaction with the environment is grounded in something that we cannot manage. To say it clearly, we cannot even know what we make in our interaction with the environment. We know only, and only to a certain extent, the consequences of such making. Moreover, such unknown and unknowable “making” has “an enormous directive effect on our behaviour”. To the extent that behaviour is the combination of our actions and that reflective thought depends on our actions, to say that behaviour depends on something that “we do not objectively distinguish and identify” is to say that reflective thought depends on something that “we do not objectively distinguish and identify”. To add evidence, I wish to highlight that for Dewey, even inference – namely, the primary means of reflective thought – depends on such “immediate organic selections” as a “fringe”. That is to say that inquiry and reflective thought do not control their very ground. Such an understanding is reinforced by a Deweyan account of knowledge, whose import depends on conditions that are anything but cognitive. In Experience and Nature, Dewey clearly states that it is “literally impossible to exclude that context of non-cognitive but experienced subject-matter which gives what is known its import” (Dewey, 1929 [1925], p. 23). Such an exclusion, furthermore, would be harmful because “[w]hen intellectual experience and its material are taken to be primary, the cord that binds experience and nature is cut” (Dewey, 1929 [1925], p. 23). Thus, to the extent that knowledge must be knowledge of the world and experience and not knowledge that fuels the “industry of epistemology” (Dewey, 1917, p. 32), we must consider its weakness.

**Interest, bias and imagination**

Thus far, I have attempted to argue that the ground on which knowledge and reflective thought lie is basically ungraspable by knowledge and reflective thought. In what follows, I wish to argue that the moving force that engenders knowledge and reflective thought is also anything but “reflective”. I will make my point by examining three issues: interest, imagination and what we may call the first expression of the “hermeneutic circle”, namely, the “previously evolved meanings […] from which meanings may be educed” (Dewey, 1910, p. 106).

Let us pay attention to the following statement: “The directive source of selection is interest; an unconscious but organic bias toward certain aspects and values of the complex and variegated universe in which we live” (Dewey, 1980 [1934], p. 97). The statement, quoted from Art as Experience, is part of a broader question about “the materials” that constitute “the products of mind”. Dewey, asking what the moving force is that selects such materials, responds that this force is the interest: “the dynamic force in selection and assemblage of materials”. This is why “products of mind are marked by individuality, just as products of mechanism are marked by uniformity” (Dewey, 1980 [1934], p. 266). It is important to note that Dewey boldly states that such a force is “unconscious but organic”; there is nothing hidden in it that knowledge must discover. Placing the unconscious on the ground of our vital tendencies, Dewey puts it firmly out of the boundaries of knowledge and refers to knowledge as something grounded on such vital tendencies. Interest, which is behind reflection, gives the contents of its own activity to reflection.

However, this is not the only question. In focusing attention on our conscious understanding of the world, we meet that which, from Heidegger onward, is called the “hermeneutic circle”. Dewey furnished a clear and unmistakable formulation of such a fundamental structure of our
understanding in 1910, seventeen years before Heidegger’s masterpiece, *Being and Time* (1996 [1927]). In *How We Think*, Dewey states, “We do not approach any problem with a wholly naïve or virgin mind; we approach it with certain acquired habitual modes of understanding, with a certain store of previously evolved meanings, or at least of experiences from which meanings may be educed. If the circumstances are such that a habitual response is called directly into play, there is an immediate grasp of meaning. If the habit is checked, and inhibited from easy application, a possible meaning for the facts in question presents itself” (Dewey, 1910, p. 106).

Here, Dewey boldly states that every issue of experience and every problem of life is approached by “certain acquired habitual modes of understanding” and by a “certain store of previously evolved meanings”. We experience the world starting with “evolved […] experiences from which meanings may be educed”. There is no “pure” meaning in our understanding of the world or nature. Specifically, we do not have a “basic” ground on which we conceive of the world and nature. Our understanding, and thus our reflective thought, gains its import by moving into the circle of “previous evolved meanings”, which engenders new meanings. Such new meanings, in turn, become the basis on which further meanings evolve. The process is continuous. As we know, this means that we cannot stop the activity of understanding by putting it under the lens of reflection because, on one hand, the lens of reflection is involved in such an activity as an output of the ongoing circle of the generation of meaning, and, on the other hand, such an activity is continuous; when we reflect on it, the activity has already gone forward. We find such a question also in examining the logic of understanding, namely, the logic of inquiry: “Logic as inquiry into inquiry is, if you please, a circular process; it does not depend upon anything extraneous to inquiry. The force of this proposition may perhaps be most readily understood by noting what it precludes. It precludes the determination and selection of logical first principles by an a priori intuitional act, even when the intuition in question is said to be that of Intellectus Purus” (Dewey, 1938, p. 20).

Here, Dewey emphasises that logic is not a meta-reflection on the principles of inquiry; logic is situated on the same level as inquiry. In this statement, Dewey clearly challenges the very possibility of presenting something as a privileged point by which to manage knowledge and experience. We are always within our experience, and by no means can we look at our experience from above.

In examining the logic of reflective thought, there is also another question: the medium by which reflection reaches the world and constructs its own contents. Such a medium, which connects previous meanings with the meanings we are going to make, is imagination, as “the medium of appreciation in every field” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 276). It is very important that Dewey conceives of imagination as a) something that belongs to “every field” and b) something that makes us able to appreciate the world, namely, to perceive the world we live in. I quote the entire sentence, and then I provide an additional comment: “Only a personal response involving imagination can possibly procure realization even of pure ‘facts’. The imagination is the medium of appreciation in every field. The engagement of the imagination is the only thing that makes any activity more than mechanical” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 276). The point I wish to highlight is that Dewey conceives of imagination as the junction at which meanings are established as such. Only through imagination are we able to project our ends into the future. This is why Dewey defines imagination as “a normal and integral part of human activity as is muscular movement” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 277). Imagination is thus neither fantasy nor a way to escape reality but the very means by which to conceive of reality. Imagination has a basic cognitive – and vital - function. I believe that the latter part of the statement above also has to be understood by considering such a cognitive function. In saying that “[t]he engagement of the imagination is the only thing that makes any activity more than mechanical”, Dewey does not mean that imagination adds something “subjective” or “creative” to our activity. Instead, Dewey means that only by imagination can we perform activities that are “more than mechanical”, namely, activities that involve judgment and reflection. If we were deprived of imagination, we would be reduced to an animal state without meanings to conceive of. However, imagination, by its own nature, is peculiarly exposed to mistakes and failures: “No hard
and fast rules decide whether a meaning suggested is the right and proper meaning to follow up” (Dewey, 1910, p. 106). That is, we cannot put a clear line between fantasy and reality or between failures and "warranted assertibility" (Dewey, 1938, p. 9) because the means by which to conceive of both reality and fantasy are the same.

**Thinking as a “leap”**

Thus far, I have attempted to argue that both the ground and the moving forces of reflective thought are behind reflective thought. Now, I wish to argue that reflective thought in itself is also conceived by Dewey as fundamentally uncertain. Let us pay attention to the following statement: “[A]ll thinking involves a risk. Certainty cannot be guaranteed in advance. The invasion of the unknown is of the nature of an adventure” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 174). The statement is clear enough in itself. I wish only to linger on the word “adventure” because there are far-reaching consequences beyond the surface understanding of the word. Indeed, we have to ask what the unique characteristic of an adventure is. An adventure is not only something that is not guaranteed in advance; rather, an adventure is something that gains its sense by being not guaranteed in advance. To put it roughly, if I am able to predict the end, I am not experiencing an adventure. Thus, following the Deweyan metaphor, if I am able to predict in advance how something ends, I am probably not thinking because in thinking “we cannot be sure in advance” (Ibid.). Stressing the concept, we could even say that certainty is the distinctive sign of the fact that we are not thinking. Such an understanding of the Deweyan account of thinking is even reinforced in the following pages of the work: “The data arouse suggestions […]. But the suggestions run beyond what is, as yet, actually given in experience. They forecast possible results, things to do, not facts (things already done). Inference is always an invasion of the unknown, a leap from the known. In this sense […] thought […] is creative” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 186, emphasis in original). Again, creativity is not something added to thinking but a hallmark of thinking. This happens above all because “[w]hile the content of knowledge is what has happened, what is taken as finished and hence settled and sure, the reference of knowledge is future or prospective” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 397). In being “future or prospective”, the reference of knowledge requires that imagination is conceived of. Indeed, imagination gives a “thinking being” the possibility “[t]o act on the basis of the absent and the future” (Dewey, 1910, p. 14). This is why “[t]he exercise of thought […] involves a jump, a leap, a going beyond what is surely known to something else accepted on its warrant” (Dewey, 1910, p. 26). Such an understanding of thought, as I wish to argue in the final section, has far-reaching consequences in education. In what follows, I attempt to present an account of the Deweyan subject.

**Deweyan subject**

Let us pay attention to the following statement: “Experience, a serial course of affairs with their own characteristic properties and relationships, occurs, happens, and is what it is. Among and within these occurrences, not outside of them nor underlying them, are those events which are denominated selves” (Dewey, 1929 [1925], p. 232, emphasis added). Several things should be highlighted in this founding statement. Above all, Dewey is adamant in stating that “selves” are not centres of autonomous agency; rather, selves are “events”, namely, things that emerge in the ongoing flow of experience and that, just as they emerge, can sink. Moreover, the event that the self is does not have a privileged position with respect to the other events engendered by experience. Dewey boldly states that the self can neither establish nor control the occurrences of experience. Selves are “not outside of them nor underlying them”; selves are “among and within” all the other occurrences engendered by experience, which “is what it is”. In Deweyan words, it seems that we
do not have any power over our own experience. On the contrary, if we stress the question, we could even say that experience has us because experience engenders ourselves as an event in its ongoing, always-evolving flow – and, in a sense, it is exactly so.

The continuation of the statement does not mitigate the subject’s dismantlement conducted by Dewey: “To say in a significant way, ‘I think, believe, desire’, instead of barely ‘it is thought, believed, desired’ is to accept and affirm a responsibility and to put forth a claim. It does not mean that the self is the source or author of the thought and affection nor its exclusive seat” (Ibid.). Here, Dewey is adamant in asserting the question of the impersonality of thought. To say, “I think, I believe” is only “to accept and affirm a responsibility and to put forth a claim”. The right way to say this should be, instead, as Dewey clearly suggests, “it is thought, believed”. Thinking is clearly framed as something that happens in ourselves. Incidentally, the link that Dewey makes between thinking and desire is also meaningful; something that is not at our disposal, something that brings, assails us - namely, desire - is equated to the very process of thinking. This is neither the only nor the first claim about the impersonality of thought. As early as 1910, Dewey boldly stated, “Primarily, naturally, it is not we who think, in any actively responsible sense; thinking is rather something that happens in us” (Dewey, 1910, p. 34, emphasis in original).

I believe that to fully understand the upsetting modernity of the weakening of the subject conducted by Dewey through the impersonality of thinking, we have to locate it in a Deweyan “theory” of experience. I put the term “theory” in quotation marks because the founding issue of the Deweyan account of experience is exactly that we cannot have a theory of experience. Experience is behind knowledge and theory as the ground on which knowledge and theory lies: “The thing to be known does not present itself primarily as a matter of knowledge-and-ignorance at all. It occurs as a stimulus to action and as the source of certain undergoings. [...] Such presence in experience has of itself nothing to do with knowledge or consciousness; nothing that is in the sense of depending upon them, though it has everything to do with knowledge and consciousness in the sense that the latter depends upon prior experience of this non-cognitive sort. Man's experience is what it is because his response to things [...] and the reactions of things to his life, are so radically different from knowledge” (Dewey, 1917, pp. 47-48). Dewey emphasises not only the primacy of experience with respect to knowledge and self but also the “untouchableness” of experience by knowledge and self. Indeed, experience “is what it is”, and knowledge and consciousness depend on experience. We can even say that it is experience that makes us and not that we make experience. We are within experience, and we emerge by experience as an event. Thus, experience is much more than we may grasp of it. Such an interpretation is reinforced by the Deweyan understanding of selfhood and subjectivity: “Personality, selfhood, subjectivity are eventual functions that emerge with complexly organised interactions, organic and social” (Dewey, 1929 [1925], p. 208). To speak of selfhood and subjectivity in terms of “eventual functions” entails their weakening.

The questions of the weakening/dispersion of the subject and the impersonality of thought strongly suggest a pivotal educational question: what is the possibility of intentional/intelligent action? A foothold for the question lies in Dewey’s definition of mind in The Quest for Certainty (1929): “The old center was mind knowing by means of an equipment of powers complete within itself, and merely exercised upon an antecedent external material equally complete in itself. The new center is indefinite interactions taking place within a course of nature which is not fixed and complete, but which is capable of direction to new and different results through the mediation of intentional operations. Neither self nor world, neither soul nor nature […] is the center […]. There is a moving whole of interacting parts; a center emerges wherever there is effort to change them in a particular direction” (Dewey, 1929, pp. 290-291, emphasis added). Defining mind as “indefinite interactions taking place within a course of nature” (Dewey, 1929, p. 290), Dewey undermines the basis for a consistent account of the subject as the place by which to manage our relationship with the world and nature. Indeed, mind emerges by the “effort to change”, and the subject too is such an “effort to change”. Using the term “indefinite”, Dewey put two things clearly: a) the range of interactions of the mind is potentially infinite, and b) such interactions are out of the boundaries of
knowledge in the sense that they are behind knowledge and behind consciousness. We become aware of such interactions when they have already happened. Moreover, we are always already taken in the flux of interactions without the possibility of stopping it. The self is exactly such an ongoing relationship with the environment, a relationship that is continuously reconstructed and without a fixed centre. As Dewey would state five years later, “Mind is primarily a verb” (Dewey, 1980 [1934], p. 263).

**Education as the generation of experience**

So far, I have attempted to argue the following: a) in Dewey’s work, reflective thought is both grounded on and propelled by something out of the boundaries of the same reflective thought; and b) we can hardly conceive of the Deweyan subject as a coherent centre of agency; rather, we have to conceive of the Deweyan subject as a scattered, always-emerging one. In this section, I will attempt to argue about the educational consequences of the issues identified above. I will begin with the latter question, namely, that of the subject. Bearing in mind that for Dewey, “[m]ind is primarily a verb” (Dewey, 1980 [1934], p. 263), we have to conceive of the subject as something that continually emerges from the ongoing flow of our exchange with the environment. Such a “weak” understanding of the subject has far-reaching educational consequences. By putting uncertainty at the core of reflective thought, Dewey has undermined the very possibility of both mastering the environment and mastering ourselves. By dismantling Cartesian epistemology, Dewey cannot leave intact the Cartesian auto-grounded subject. To the extent that mind is “indefinite interactions taking place within a course of nature” (Dewey, 1929, p. 290), the only “power” that a subject possesses is to create new interactions within the course of nature, and education is exactly such a creation. We may even say that for Dewey, the subject does not grasp experience because, at the same time, he engenders and is engendered by experience. If my frame makes sense, education is the point by which experience and subject are engendered.

Of course, experience, in the Deweyan account, is the ground on which we reside, and Dewey clearly affirms that experience is always beyond what we can understand of it. However, exactly for this reason, we must conceive of education not so much as the attempt to understand experience but as the means to create new experience. That is why Dewey states that there is no separation between life and developing and that “the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 59). This is also why he says that growth is something that human beings – children, in his passage – “do” (Dewey, 1930 [1916], p. 50). This doing consists of putting new interactions in ongoing contact with the world, projecting our possibilities in the world, “free[ing] experience from routine and from caprice” (Dewey, 1917, p. 63). This projecting is a projecting that precedes knowledge and subject in the sense that, according to Semetsky “knowledge becomes an emergent property contingent on ever-changing local conditions” (2003, p. 23, emphasis in original) and, according to Garrison, the subject is a “situated and contingent function” in the ongoing flow of experience (2003, p. 359). This is why the weakening of knowledge and subject corresponds to a reinforcement of education; education is the way in which the emerging subject that we are puts forth new points of interactions within the environment, engendering new experience. Thus, Dewey conceives of education as “an emancipation and enlargement of experience” (Dewey, 1910, p. 156). As Dewey boldly states, “Personality, selfhood, subjectivity are eventual functions that emerge with complexly organised interactions, organic and social” (Dewey, 1929 [1925], p. 208). Education is, at the same time, the way such interactions are reconstructed and newly projected and the way new forms of subjectivity are able to emerge.

We also find the centrality of education in a classic passage in *How We Think*: “Experience may welcome and assimilate all that the most exact and penetrating thought discovers. Indeed, the business of education might be defined as just such an emancipation and enlargement of experience” (Dewey, 1910, p. 159). Experience, as our always-being-embedded-in-the-world,
precedes and grounds knowledge, and the subject, too, emerges within experience and through education. Through education, we can emancipate and enlarge our own experience, thereby emancipating ourselves.

A further consequence of the weakening of knowledge with respect to experience is that we cannot predict what will follow from the creation of experience that occurs through education. This unpredictability of education is a matter of fact because we are not able to predict in advance what will come to us through education. To the extent that we engender new experience by education and that experience is behind knowledge, if we could predict in advance the outcomes of education, we would not have education; uncertainty is essential for education to happen. By such uncertainty and by the loss of his – supposed – power over experience, a human being also recovers the alliance with nature: “[A] mind that has opened itself to experience knows […] that [t]he belief, and the effort of thought and struggle which it inspires are also the doing of the universe, and they in some way, however slight, carry the universe forward” (Dewey, 1929 [1925], p. 420). Thus, as human beings, we are compelled to “the effort of thought” as a spring of the universe, but at the same time, we are aware that such an effort entails the possibility of sinking. We experience something, but we recognise that experience in its entirety is ungraspable. We need education and find our end in education because “the educational process […] is its own end” (Dewey, 1930, p. 59), but we cannot predict what will come to us through education. In his work, Dewey clearly makes an ethic of finiteness, which shows how our educational effort is grounded on, moved by and directed towards uncertainty.

References

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1 For the comparison between Dewey and Heidegger, see Troutner, 1969, 1972; Rorty, 1976; Toulmin, 1984; Margolis, 2010.
The term “disseminated subject” clearly singles out Derrida and his “theory” of dissemination; for the comparison between Dewey and Derrida, see Garrison, 2003 and Biesta, 2010.

This anticipation of the hermeneutic circle has been noted implicitly by Higgins in his *A Question of Experience: Dewey and Gadamer on Practical Wisdom*, where he states that Dewey shows “a conception of human experience as running in circles, both vicious and productive. Experience may spiral outward in breadth or become routinised and pinched” (2010, p. 303).

Boisvert, analysing the Deweyan account of subject, openly speaks about its death: “Dewey, long before French philosophers made the death of the ‘subject’ popular, identified, not the cogitant self, but the affairs of the world as ‘subjects’” (Boisvert, 1998, p. 35).

On the issue of the emergence of the self in Dewey, see Garrison, 1998, in which Dewey, by his analysis “of breaking old habits and creating new ones” (p. 125), puts forth the basis for self-creation, forestalling Foucault’s work on subjectivity.