

Experience and Understanding.

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The subject, viewed in so-called “Cartesian” lights, has probably been the most repudiated concept in contemporary philosophy. Notwithstanding, subjectivity continues to be a realm which appears in the demands of a great many social movements. Thus, would it perhaps be the possible to recover the potential of the concept of subjectivity, while not being burdened with traditional dichotomies, such as internal vs. external, subjectivity vs. objectivity, or socially-construed vs. naturally-given? To this aim, we propose a program for revisiting certain old-fashioned ideas as are the hermeneutical concept of understanding and the pragmatist notion of experience.

This program accepts from the beginning the point that the subject cannot provide more grounding foundations for every normative stance. Certain phenomena such as the opacity of self-knowledge, or the necessitation of being recognized to become a subject, have now irreversibly altered the way of thinking about subject. However, it still remains necessary to keep up a certain form of human stance dependent on mutual understanding and recognition. In addition, as Dewey claimed in *Experience and Nature*, the way of supporting and widening the human experience is the touchstone of any philosophy: This is what I shall call the Deweyan “tribunal of experience” for philosophy as it differs from the Quinean one, with the latter being much more this later in the empiricist tradition; a tradition suffering from a certain epistemological anxiety to test beliefs rather than the Deweyan one, which appeals to experience as a kind of way of making sense of life. I suspect that most contemporary philosophical approaches would not be able to pass this test. Hence, it remains necessary to come back to the subject to see how it experience and understanding would be possible without returning to metaphysical commitments of Modernity.

To begin, the idea of understanding has been considered in light of two models: in the first, one following Gadamerian tradition, “understanding” means to situate an event within an internal space of expectations. In the second model, “understanding” is a way of acting according to a rule, or, as

in the Heideggerian tradition, a way of being-there, that is, to make sense as an existential way of being situated. The first model appears to be too intellectualist: understanding is considered a mental process occurring in the cognitive dimension, but it does not mean a commitment or engagement of the subject in his or her own situation of understanding. The second model, in its turn, although less intellectualist, is nevertheless flawed in the sense that the first-person authority is dissolved into the social authority of practices, or it is dissolved into the reality. My criticism of both models is that neither is able to account for experience. A reason for this is that experience has the nature of a normative process which essentially entails first-person authority. The problem for both models is that the engagement of a subject in the process of understanding in both models is flawed because it lacks a moment of embodying and embedding the sense.

We contend that understanding is a kind of success, an achievement of meaning which supposes in its turn a previous moment of explanation, and that consequently it must not be viewed more as contrasting understanding with explanation. We will propose a concept which borrows certain elements from Ricoeur's concept of interpretation as well as Dewey's concept of experience. Roughly speaking, I will propose considering understanding as an achievement of making sense through an "appropriation" of a singular event or objective structure. It presupposes experience as a moment of the sense, and hence it does not confront third-person with first-person views. The basic core of our proposal will be the question about authority in experience. In this way, we will propose recovering the authority of the first-person view.

The eclipse of experience

Experience played an essential role in the modern epistemological program. It was mainly a consequence of the authority that consciousness held in the modern concept of access to reality. Notwithstanding, experience was born under a destiny of being in tension between two poles: objectivity and subjectivity. Insofar as one of the two poles gained importance against the other, this will result in a loss of epistemic authority for experience. That was in fact the consequence of some objectifying practices in contemporary culture.

First of all, let us notice three elements present in the idea of experience which will be precisely in play in this objectifying cultural process: Firstly, experience is a process of a subject that has an authority over her inner self which is asymmetrical and different from the epistemic authority that she is able to obtain over the outer order of the things. As placed in the subject,

experience is a process which contains some passivity and obedience to the world, but also spontaneity and presence of the subject. The second element was important during the dawn of modern science: It is the public dimension of experience, that is, it requires a compulsory exposition of experiences in a public space to be considered as candidates for common experiences. So then, certain social practices were practices of producing public experiences to reach some collective assent. For instance, political as well scientific practices necessarily play the role of public spectacles to obtain public assent to the authority of a certain person: sometimes a scientist, sometimes a prince. Thirdly, experiences must be considered as real phenomena which happen to the subject, no matter if they deliver information or not over other things or phenomena. Such a real nature was notoriously emphasized by Dewey.

During the cultural process of the nineteenth-century s a series of objectifying practices was spread leading to an eclipse of experience as a significant concept of authority. The aim of these new practices was the elimination of anything idiosyncratic or individual in the basis data, scientific as well as cultural or political. Statistics, accounting, data processing, etc., were practices aiming to normalize individual data being considered as useful resources. Without such practices neither science nor modern economy and politics would be possible. But the price was the very concept of experience, which progressively was confined to a new inner place: subjectivity in the modern, romantic sense of a private and inaccessible place. A radical suspicion of personal psychology substituted the former authority of the consciousness. Personal psychology was “normalized” by being referred to as a source: only “typical” cases were object of some authority. The others were simply considered as strange entities worthy of study but not of authority. The important thing is that many philosophers reacted to this process by self-submitting their own philosophy for this objectifying process. Phenomenology and the so-called “Linguistic Turn” were manifestations of a more general purpose to show philosophy as an also objective discipline. Because of this process, the twentieth-century began under a strong anti-naturalistic impulse: only “objective” items such as propositions, “pure” contents, etc., were admitted for philosophical reflection.

It is without? question that the sciences or society were legitimated to undertake this program of objectivity. Of course they were, although Husserl and Weber claimed otherwise. The question is if philosophy was also legitimated to mimic that objectifying obsession. I think that this philosophical turn was the fruit of a desire to appear in the scholarly space

of sciences as a respectable objective activity. Certainly, some traditions tried many forms of resistance. Thus, for instance, the “hermeneutical turn” chose an alternative way, but the price was also to accept the new model of subjectivity as one alien to objectivity, as well as the great divide between “explanation” and “understanding” as two different and incommensurable methods. Anti-scientific thinking, or symmetrically, eliminativism of ordinary folk thinking seems to have been the sole options for contemporary philosophy.

Is there perhaps a new third-view that, without disclaiming the objectifying practices, is, nevertheless, able to recover the authority of experience? The proposal is to go back to the very concept of understanding, so as to aim at a new concept beyond the explanation-understanding dichotomy. Against the background of the objectifying processes, the question is, hence, to recover the human dimension of understanding without enclosing it within the old-fashioned concept of subjectivity, that is, one itself that was shaped by the same goal of objectifying everything; one that, because of this process, resulted in a private remainder. This alternative view is to consider understanding as a process that arises from the human experience: to understand is an achievement of making sense. It occurs paradigmatically when experience is in touch with a medium of symbols, texts, artifacts, words, actions, or intentional creatures. Certainly, the understanding of causal events and processes is not excluded, but only in so far as the aim is “to make sense” of some piece of that. To understand, properly stated, is to attain making sense, provided that this task of attaining sense always turns out to be a very difficult aim. A reason for this difficulty is that sense arises from the human experience of being decoupled and being excluded from an area of reality, an experience of coping with what occurs, or of coping with that which happens or with what one is. Making sense is sometimes a kind of an attempt to recover a lost reality.

The place of interpretation in understanding

I find useful for this aim the notion of interpretation Ricoeur that presents in the context of a controversy between his hermeneutical approach and the “structuralist” text theory in the sixties. A text, Ricoeur argues, is a communicative act which has been fixed by writing. Written texts survive words, and this survival is essential to writing, in the same sense that consequences survive the actions that produce them. The romantic hermeneutical tradition considers, as does Dilthey, that understanding a text is to grasp the author’s intentions behind it. By contrast, Text Theory contends that a text is an object which must be

explained by looking for its underlying structure. In this sense, Text Theory makes a claim common to most social sciences and even common to some philosophical approaches as is the so-called “Practices Turn” from Foucault and Wittgenstein. Ricoeur accepts it; indeed he considers that explaining texts, just as explaining actions, is a necessary moment which must be followed by a second moment of reading, a moment that Ricoeur considers as a moment of appropriation.

Ricoeur, hence, does not oppose explanation against interpretation. By contrast, he conceives explanation as a part of the latter interpretation: interpreting a text is at once to explain and appropriate it, considering this as an operation analogous to reading. The important thing is that appropriation supposes a certain self-understanding, while a third-person approach to explaining the text suffices. Understanding, or interpreting, becomes then an act of appropriation of a sense which is mediated by the signs of a culture within which the subject lives. In the act of appropriation a fight against the cultural distance that every text supposes coexists with an idiosyncratic embodiment of this text. Hence, appropriation becomes access as well as incarnation. Entangled third-person with first-person approaches are both necessary to achieve making sense of a text.

This double aspect is one that happens very often in social contexts; as when some agents are inside a certain kind of social situation, as for instance a prisoner dilemma, without realizing that they are inside of this particular situation. In such kinds of situations a sort of “hetero-phenomenology” must complement the first-person access to the situation. Only through bypassing the other’s view, does it occur that a correct approach to one’s own subjectivity can be reached without risking biases, self-deception, etc. This moment of objective explanation is needed since the huge amount of empirical evidence leads uncontroversibly to the non-transparency of the self-reflecting subject. A large tradition of empirical data from psychology and sociology now supports this claim of non-transparency. Thus, it seems to create an insurmountable gap between the internal origin of the intention and the public character of action. Actions become meaningful only in a medium of symbolic structures and practices that threaten the first-person authority: the subject thus requires a great deal of external knowledge to reach true self-knowledge. This is a lesson that we learned from Wittgenstein and Foucault: self-knowledge cannot be conceived as the task of an inner detective that investigates the labyrinth of the consciousness.

Ricoeur accepts the inevitability of this process, however proposes to restore the work of interpretation as a part of a broader aim of obtaining

understanding. Understanding does not oppose explanation, as in the old-fashioned controversy. In this sense, Ricoeur follows the text model as a model of human action: the explanation, in a text as well as in an action, must be followed by an act of appropriation. In the case of texts this is provided by reading; in the case of actions, this appropriation is the act of simulating the action from a first-person approach. The interesting point is that Ricoeur claims that appropriation always involves some dose of self-understanding, even in the case of alien actions.

Understanding as an achievement of the experience: the authority restored.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach opens a window to subjectivity: self-understanding as an act of subjectivity and making sense is an interplay of the sense of distance or estrangement with being recognized in a public space by the other, and within the other. The self can be self-encountered and self-recognized only by alienating and self-encountering into a narrative. That is, it can be achieved by self-locating in a kind of textual structure which requires firstly being explained and then being incarnated in one's own life. Subjectivity, hence, does not oppose objectivity, as does a moment of distortion of reality, such as is conceived in the Cartesian tradition. What is here at play is that subjectivity cannot be considered more within an inner-outer topology, but as a question of authority.

Certainly, the Cartesian turn was a replacement of the authority of things by the authority of subjects, and this latter authority as the result of a reflective capacity. Clarity and other phenomenological properties become sources of evidence and justification only in light of reflective judgment. Kant, in his turn, added to this the question of unity and integration of consciousness: contents of perception are not able to combine and solve the objectivity without the concurrence of the unity of apperception: an object, Kant says, is not the sum of qualities. Unity of consciousness is for Kant the mark of subjectivity. However, Kant was not able to explain experience as a way of being involved in reality, which is something that empiricism did. The point is that neither Cartesian nor Kantian approaches explain the epistemic authority as an empirical achievement, and it remains only as a mere "intellectual" achievement: nobody says where the authority becomes authority. At the end, as Nietzsche realized, this authority in the Cartesian tradition can only be supported by the will.

The Deweyan novelty is thinking about experience as a creative achievement. This expanding experience coincides with becoming a subject, in the sense of being a "subject of" rather than "subject to". Becoming a

subject results from a fragile equilibrium between autonomy and dependence, between spontaneity and passivity and obedience. Becoming a subject is brought about by a proper skill to navigate between two sources of authority: one's own authority, that is, autonomy as self-government, and the world's authority, and especially the part of this that others' authority is. Contemporary objectivism is unable to cope with this unstable equilibrium and it leads to an unbalancing reduction of one of the two poles. But experience is attained too by a kind of active obedience to reality: experiencing is the way humans establish bonds with reality. Different from animals, which are bound to reality through habits acquired by trial and error, human beings understand their bonds with reality, and the world becomes their world, as an experienced world. Experiences arise as authorizer achievements, that is, as devices opening windows of practical possibilities and rational inferences from which the subject was excluded before the transformation experiences occurred

Finally, there is a narrative component in this attainment: experiences consist of a complex ordering of events that involves an "enactive" embedding of the subject in the course of such events. This ordering brings about asymmetrical states, regarding former states of the subject since she learns something about the world, or about herself, and learning supposes irreversibility. In this sense, having an experience constitutes an inflexion point, a sort of relocation before the reality, because of her learning. This asymmetry confers a narrative structure on the achievement of the experience. Notice that this Deweyan concept of experience makes something more valuable of this than the mere empirical impinging the traditional concept of experiences supposed. Having experiences is the human way of life, a non-determined path which is discovered while it is covered in sinuous trajectories.

It is nonsense to question if reality rather than spontaneity is the engine which moves experiences. Thus, in artistic and scientific experience (and perhaps in more daily experiences, as for example, sex and cuisine), it is necessary to transform something to reach an experience, but in other cases it is the world, or the others which are the moving engine or experience. Such is the case, for instance, of perception, where a more passive attitude is enough to enjoy experiences. In such cases, subjects are answerable to the demands of reality insofar as they are open to the world. However, in both extremes, experiences are the ends of a process culminating in an achievement.

Experiences, viewed as bonds to reality and ways of life, are real processes that can function as a measure of human height. Thus, experiences set up the level of human perspective. As individuals, as well as communities even as a species, human beings are not more than mere events in the order of the things: now then, they are also creatures which see the world from their perspective, and this cannot be eliminated even in the science map of reality.

First of all, experience involves essentially a personal scale: this level is neither mental nor bodily. The place of human scale has its own peculiar dimensions: a) it is located between the past and the future, in a blended space of histories and projects, between reality and imaginary; b) it is a network of dependences, and of response-dependent properties, that is, it is composed of a network of recognition relationships; c) it is configured by the irreversibility of the experiences, and so then it is configured by contingents trajectories of identities. The human level experience shapes are composed of entities that must be appraised against the background of such experiences, and also the interactions with the world or society. The human scale is then neither too big nor too small; it must be related to the unities experiences conform. There is not any novelty in this; there are a lot of such irreducible levels, as for instance health, even life: ascending to the dawning of this level means to lose the property in question

Secondly, the human and personal scale must refer to agency as the most important feature of the source of experience: only through agency does experience become possible as the way of human interaction with reality. Correspondingly, agency is just the capacity to determine the meaning of an experience.

Now then, we can close the proposal of relating understanding and experience: to make sense is equivalent to reaching a kind of authority; it is equivalent to acquiring a sufficient degree of agency to self-determine one's own life-trajectories. Understanding is then the very exercise of subjectivity; but it must be conceived as an agential way to obtain experiences, an authorial way to convert the order of things into the narrative order of one's own life.