

## Materials for first session:

### On Philosophical Roots of Focusing. An Introduction

Donata Schoeller

Quotes by William James

"Experience is remoulding us every moment" James, William. *The Principles of Psychology* [2 Vol]. Vol. 1. 1890. New edition, New York: Dover, 1950. [Dover-Books on Biology, Psychology and Medicine, p. 226]

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as "chain" or "train" do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A "river" or a "stream" are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter. Let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life. (*Principles of Psychology*, 239)

At every instant of conscious thought there is a certain sum of perceptions, or reflections, or both together, present, and together constituting one whole state of apprehension. Of this some definite portion may be far more distinct than all the rest; and the rest be in consequence proportionably vague, even to the limit of obliteration. But still, within this limit, the most dim shade of perception enters into, and in some infinitesimal degree modifies, the whole existing state. This state will thus be in some way modified by any sensation or emotion, or act of distinct attention, that may give prominence to any part of it; so that the actual result is capable of the utmost variation according to the person or the occasion.... Our mental states have always an essential unity, such that each state of apprehension, however variously compounded, is a single whole. (*Principles of Psychology*, 241)

A mind which has become conscious of its own cognitive function, plays what we have called "the psychologist" upon itself. It not only knows the things that appear before it; it knows that it knows them. (*Principles of Psychology*, 272-273)

What is that first instantaneous glimpse of some one's meaning which we have, when in vulgar phrase we say we 'twig' it? Surely an altogether specific affection of our mind. And has the reader never asked himself what kind of a mental fact is his *intention of saying a thing* before he has said it? It is an entirely definite intention, distinct from all other intentions, an absolutely distinct state of consciousness, therefore; and yet how much of it consists of definite sensorial images, either of words or of things? Hardly anything! Linger, and the words and things come into the mind; the anticipatory intention, the divination is there no more. But as the words that replace it arrive, it welcomes them successively and calls them right if they agree with it, it rejects them and calls them wrong if they do not. The intention *to-say-so-and-so* is the only name it can receive. One may admit that a good third of our psychic life consists in these rapid premonitory perspective views of schemes of thought not yet articulate. (...). (*Principles of Psychology*, 253)

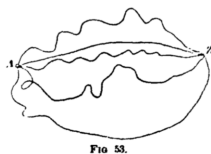
It is, the reader will see, the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention. (*Principles of Psychology*, 254)

It is just like 'overtones' in music: they are not separately heard by the ear; they blend with the fundamental note, and suffuse it, and alter it; and even so do the waxing and waning brain-processes at every moment blend with and suffuse and alter the psychic effect of the processes which are at their culminating point. (*Principles of Psychology*, 258)

Knowledge *about* a thing is knowledge of its relations. .. Of most of its relations we are only aware in the penumbral nascent way of a 'fringe' of unarticulated affinities about it (*Principles of Psychology*, 259)

The words in every language have contracted by long association fringes of mutual repugnance or affinity with each other and with the conclusion, which run exactly parallel with like fringes in the visual, tactile, and other ideas. The most important element of these fringes is, I repeat, the mere feeling of harmony or discord, of a right or wrong direction in the thought. (*Principles of Psychology*, 261)

Throughout all the rest of the stream, the feelings of relation are everything, and the terms related almost naught. These feelings of relation, these psychic overtones, halos, suffusions, or fringes about the terms, may be the same in very different systems of imagery. A diagram may help to accentuate this in-difference *of* the mental means where the end is the same.



Let *A* be some experience from which a number of thinkers start. Let *Z* be the practical conclusion rationally inferable **from** it. One gets to this conclusion by one line, another by another; one follows a course of English, another of German, verbal imagery. With one, visual image *B* pre- dominate; with another, tactile. Some trains are tinged with emotions, others not; some are very abridged, synthetic and rapid; others, hesitating and broken into many steps. But when the penultimate terms of all the trains, however differing *infer* «*P*, finally shoot into the same conclusion, we say, and rightly say, that all the thinkers have had sub- stantially the same thought. It would probably astound each of them beyond measure to be let into his neighbor's mind and to find how different the scenery there was from that in his own. (*Principles of Psychology*, 269)

We have been using the word Object. *Something must now be said about the proper use of the term in Psychology.* In popular parlance the word object is commonly taken without reference to the act of knowledge, and treated as synonymous with individual subject of existence. Thus if anyone ask what is the mind's object when you say 'Columbus

discovered America in 1492,' most people will reply 'Columbus,' or 'America,' or, at most, 'the discovery of America.' They will name a substantive kernel or nucleus of the consciousness, and say the thought is 'about' that, - as indeed it is, - and they will call that your thought's 'object.' Really that is usually only the grammatical object, or more likely the grammatical subject, of your sentence. It is at most your 'fractional object;' or you may call it the 'topic' of your thought, or the 'subject of your discourse.' But the *Object* of your thought is really its entire content or deliverance, neither more nor less. It is a vicious use of speech to take out a substantive kernel from its content and call that its object; and it is an equally vicious use of speech to add a substantive kernel not articulately included in its content, and to call that its object. Yet either one of these two sins we commit, whenever we content ourselves with saying that a given thought is simply 'about' a certain topic, or that that topic is its 'object.' The object of my thought in the previous sentence, for example, is strictly speaking neither Columbus, nor America, nor its discovery. It is nothing short of the entire sentence 'Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492.' And if we wish to speak of it substantively, we must make a substantive of it by writing it out thus with hyphens between all its words. Nothing but this can possibly name its delicate idiosyncrasy. And if we wish to feel that idiosyncrasy we must reproduce the thought as it was uttered, with every word fringed and the whole sentence bathed in that original halo of obscure relations, which, like an horizon, then spreads about its meaning. (*Principles of Psychology*, 275f.)

The object of every thought, then, is neither more nor less than all that the thought thinks, exactly as the thought thinks it, however complicated the matter, and however symbolic the manner of the thinking may be. It is needless to say that memory can seldom accurately reproduce such an object, when once it has passed from before the mind. It either makes too little or too much of it. Its best plan is to repeat the verbal sentence, if there was one, in which the object was expressed. (*Principles of Psychology*, 276)

Before we have opened our mouths to speak, the entire thought is present to our mind in the form of an intention to utter that sentence. This intention, though it has no simple name, and though it is a state, immediately displaced by the first word, is yet a perfectly determinate phase of thought, unlike anything else. (*Principles of Psychology*, 280)

Now I believe that in all cases where the words are understood, the total idea may be and usually is present not only before and after the phrase has been spoken, but also whilst each separate word is uttered. It is the overtone, halo, or fringe of the word, as spoken in the sentence. It is never absent, no word in an understood sentence comes to consciousness as a mere noise. We feel its meaning as it passes; and although our object differs from one moment to another as to its verbal kernel or nucleus, yet it is similar throughout the entire segment of the stream. The same object is known everywhere, now from the point of view, if we may so call it, of this word, now from the point of view of that. And in our feeling of each word there chimes an echo or foretaste of every other. (*Principles of Psychology*, 281)

## On John Dewey's relation to James

“Though insisting his philosophical inspirations derived from life experience rather than philosophical texts, Dewey made a special exception for James’s *Psychology*,” crediting it as the “one specifiable philosophic factor which entered into my thinking so as to give it a new direction and quality.” In particular, Dewey claimed that James’s “biological conception of the *psyche*,” whose “new force and value [was] due to the immense progress made by biology since the time of Aristotle,” “worked its way more and more into all my ideas and acted as a ferment to transform old beliefs” (LW5:157).” (Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness, A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 181)

## Principle of Continuity

The principle of continuity was applied as an continuum between organism and environment. The examples can be found in Dewey’s writing beginning at least from the middle 1910s, such as –The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy (1917), and continuing into his later works with *Experience and Nature* (1925) as the most representative in this sense. According to this principle, there is no separation between –mind and –world or –individual and –society. Seeing these concepts of distinction as existential divisions instead of functional discriminations creates –false dualisms. In the second connotation, Dewey meant the continuity of the life process as the development of a living organism in time or, more generally, continuity among increasing levels of organic functioning from the lower to the higher activities and forms. Recognizing that linguistic tradition both reflects and reinforces this separation, he complained that “we have no word by which to name mind-body in a unified wholeness of operation” that characterizes human life. Convinced of “the necessity of seeing mind- body as an integral whole,” Dewey willingly flouted conventional usage by lexicographically asserting their oneness through such locutions as “body-mind” and “mind-body”. (Summarized by Richard Shusterman: *Redeeming Somatic Reflection: John Dewey’s Philosophy of Body-Mind*, in *A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 180 -217.)

## Quotes John Dewey:

### Continuity and interaction

its meaning excludes complete rupture on one side and mere repetition of identities on the other; it precludes reductions of the ‘higher’ to the ‘lower’ just as it precludes complete breaks and gaps. The growth and development of any living organism from seed to maturity illustrates the meaning of continuity.

(John Dewey. *The Later Works, 1925-1953* [17 Vol.], Jo Ann Boydston (ed). Vol. 12, *1938: Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Kathleen E. Poulos (ed.), introduces by Ernest Nagel. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, p. 23)

“Any account of inquiry that supposes the factors involved in it, say, doubt, belief, observed qualities and ideas, to be referable to an isolated organism (subject, self, mind)

is bound to destroy all ties between inquiry as reflective thought and as scientific method. Such isolation logically entails a view of inquiry which renders absurd the idea that there is a necessary connection between inquiry and logical theory. But the absurdity rests upon the acceptance of an unexamined premise which is the product of a local 'subjectivist' phase of European philosophy. If what is designated by such terms as doubt, belief, idea, conception, is to have any objective meaning, to say nothing of public verifiability, it must be located and described as behavior in which organism and environment act together, or inter-act." (LW12, 39f.)

Unfortunately, however, a special philosophical interpretation may be unconsciously read into the common sense distinction. It will then be supposed that organism and environment are „given“ as independent things and interaction is a third independent thing which finally intervenes. In fact, the distinction is a practical and temporal one, arising out of the state of tension in which the organism at a given time, in a given phase of life-activity, is set over against the environment as it then and there exists. There is, of course, a natural world that exists independently of the organism, but his world is environment only as it enters directly and indirectly into life-functions. The organism is itself a part of the larger natural world and exists as organism only in active connections with its environment. (Ibid, 34)

## Situation

It is more or less a commonplace that it is possible to carry on observations that amass facts tirelessly and yet the observed „facts“ lead nowhere. On the other hand, it is possible to have the work of observation so controlled by a conceptual framework fixed in advance that the very things which are genuinely decisive in the problem in hand and its solution, are completely overlooked. Everything is forced into the predetermined conceptual and the theoretical scheme. The way, and the only way to escape these two evils, is sensitivity to the quality of a situation as a whole. In ordinary language a problem must be felt before it can be stated. If the unique quality of the situation is had immediately, then there is something that regulates the selection and the weighing of observed facts and their conceptual ordering. (LW 12, 73 f.; see also, "Qualitative Thought," LW 5, 247.)

Confusion and incoherence are always marks of lack of control by a single pervasive quality. The latter alone enables a person to keep track of what he is doing, saying, hearing, reading, in whatever explicitly appears. The underlying unity of qualitiveness regulates pertinence or relevancy and force of every distinction and relation; it guides selection and rejection and the manner of utilization of all explicit terms Dewey, ("Qualitative Thought," LW 5, 247f.)

Theoretical formulation of the process is often made in such terms as to conceal effectually the similarity of „conclusion“ to the consummating phase of every developing integral experience. These formulations apparently take their cue from the separate propositions that are the premises and the propositions that are the conclusions as they appear on the printed page. The impression is derived that there are first two independent and ready-made entities that are then manipulated so as to give rise to a third. In fact, in an experience of thinking, premises emerge only as a conclusion

becomes manifest. The experience, like that of watching a storm reaches its height and gradually subsides, is one of continuous movement of subject-matters. Qualitative Thought,“ (“Qualitative Thought”, LW 5, 271)

I have mentioned the extent in which modern philosophy had been concerned with the problem of existence as perceptually and conceptually determined. The confusions and fallacies that attend the discussion of this problem have a direct and close connection with the difference between an object and a situation. [...] In actual experience, there is never any such isolated singular object or event; an object or event is always a special part, phase, or aspect of an environing experienced world – a situation. (LW12, 72.V)

[...] To call it „implicit“ does not signify that it is implied. It is present throughout as that of which whatever is explicitly stated or propounded is a distinction. (“Qualitative Thought,“ LW 5, 247).

The reader, whether he agrees or not with what has been said, whether he understands it or not, has, as he reads the above passages, a uniquely qualified experienced situation, and his reflective understanding of what is said is controlled by the nature of that immediate situation. One cannot decline to have a situation for that is equivalent to having no experience, not even one of disagreement. (LW 12, 74.)

By the term situation in this connection is signified the fact that the subject-matter ultimately referred to in existential propositions is a complex existence that is held together in spite of its internal complexity by the fact that it is dominated and characterized throughout by a single quality. [...] The special point made is that the selective determination and relation of objects in thought is controlled by reference to a situation – to that which is constituted by a pervasive and internally integrating quality [...]. (“Qualitative Thought, LW 5, 246.)

Situation is a whole in virtue of its immediately pervasive quality. When we describe it from the psychological side, we have to say that the situation as qualitative whole is sensed or felt. [...] Stating that it is felt is wholly misleading if it gives the impression that the situation is a feeling or an emotion or anything mentalistic. On the contrary, feeling, sensation and emotion have themselves to be identified and described in terms of the immediate presence of a total qualitative situation.<sup>466</sup>

( LW 12, 73)

If it is not anything that can be expressed in words for it is something that must be had. Discourse may, however, point out the qualities, lines and relations by means of which pervasive and unifying quality is achieved. (Ibid, 75.)