

**TWO CONCEPTS OF EXPERIENCE:  
SINGULAR AND GENERAL\***

**Giovanni Tuzet**

*Bocconi University*

[giovanni.tuzet@unibocconi.it](mailto:giovanni.tuzet@unibocconi.it)

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of the article is to make a distinction between two concepts of experience, *singular* and *general*. They track two ways in which we connect experientially to the world. The former is captured by the idea of “having an experience”; the latter is captured instead by the idea of “having experience”. Classical and contemporary pragmatists contribute to this distinction, and the article explores some of their views. Finally the article indicates some consequences of the distinction. In fact, in the spirit of Peirce’s pragmatic maxim, those consequences are the very meaning of the conceptual distinction at stake, since they point out how we inferentially treat in different ways the fact of having an experience and the fact of having experience.

**Keywords:** empiricism; experience; law; pragmatic maxim; signs

On ne sait plus comment ramasser tout  
ce que l’on gagne  
à la loterie de l’expérience.  
Tous les résultats parlent à la fois...  
(Paul Valéry, *L’Idée fixe*)

The purpose of this article is to make a distinction between two concepts of experience. They track two ways in which we connect experientially to the world. In absence of better names, I would call the one *singular* and the other *general*. The former is captured by the idea of “having an experience”, be it religious, aesthetic, ethical, or else. The latter is captured instead by the idea of “having experience”, be it located in this or that domain of our life. The double use of “experience”, as countable and uncountable noun, signals the point I want to make. The relevant conceptual distinction will be presented and discussed in more detail in § 1 of the article.

In § 2 I will show how the classical pragmatists contributed to that distinction. I will pick some insights from the writings of Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead in particular. Moreover, I will claim that some

contemporary philosophers would profit from that contribution, for that distinction between two concepts of experience is somehow neglected in their work and it would likely strengthen their views if accepted.

Finally, I will explore in § 3 some of the consequences of the distinction. In fact, in the spirit of Peirce’s pragmatic maxim (CP 5.402), those consequences are the very meaning of the conceptual distinction at stake, since they point out how we inferentially treat in different ways the fact of having an experience and the fact of having experience.

### **1. The Basic Distinction**

Let me focus on the difference between (A) *having an experience* and (B) *having experience* (or *being experienced*). In (A) something novel is involved; it is a novelty for the person having the experience.<sup>1</sup> The subject-matter of the experience is an object, or a situation, or an activity which is novel to the person in question.

In (B) something past is involved. Having experience (or being experienced) means having some training, or practical skill, or valuable habit acquired with cognition and exercise.

Saint Paul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus has the character of (A). It was presented as a divine revelation, the experience of a blinding light, something that was entirely new to Paul.<sup>2</sup> The same is true of many forms of experience, though to a lesser extent. We have experiences in this sense when we attend a concert, when we taste some new food, when we visit a place we have never been to, when we face a puzzling ethical situation, even when we run a scientific experiment.

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<sup>1</sup> In some Continental languages the point is even stronger: *fare un’esperienza* or *faire une expérience* is stronger than *to have an experience*, for the latter sounds less active.

<sup>2</sup> On religious experience see, of course, James 1902/1985. Cf. Putnam 2017 and Misak 2017.

Instead, the surgeon's professional experience has the character of (B). A teacher, a performer, a veteran can be said to have this sort of experience. It is the experience which stems from training, exercise, habit. It requires time, repetition, cumulative receptivity. And intelligence of course.

Hence, (A) has a singular character. I shall call it *singular experience*. (B) has a general character. Therefore, not surprisingly, I will call it *general experience*. Consider the following examples:

- (1) Going to Tibet was an exciting experience;
- (2) The guide was quite experienced.

The two can refer to the same scenario, but they use different concepts of experience. (1) is about a singular experience, namely visiting Tibet. (2) is about the general experience of the guide. I don't see any reason to deny their obvious difference. But at the same time I wish to point out that there are interesting cases where the two are less easily distinguishable. Consider this:

- (3) I don't remember anything like that in my experience.

Is this a case of experience in the singular or in the general sense? It is not entirely clear. The reference to the speaker's experience alludes to something past, so it is in line with experience of kind (B). But the subject-matter of the statement is something novel, surprising, puzzling. So it is an experience of kind (A), in tune with the novelty condition pointed out above.

Perhaps, if preferable, we might weaken the novelty condition and use the concept of a singular experience to encompass any kind of direct acquaintance with something, including what we have already experienced (tasting a certain food for a second time, etc.). In this sense, any perceptual experience, aesthetic experience, or life experience concerning a singular object, situation, or activity, would be a singular kind of experience. I am doubtful on the usefulness of such a larger category, but

I am also ready to revise this attitude if presented with reasons for dropping, or at least weakening, the novelty condition of singular experience.

An interesting aspect of the matter is the degree of interdependence between the two. What our example (2) is about is the general experience of the guide, but this has developed out of the singular experiences of the guide. In order to be experienced, one has to have experiences. On the other hand, experiences of a certain kind are only possible if one is experienced. In order to develop some sensitivity to music one has to undergo musical experiences. But some musical experiences (for instance enjoying an innovative interpretation of a musical piece) are only possible if one has musical experience.<sup>3</sup> Consider this question:

- (4) Have you ever experienced a bass clarinet solo in a smoky jazz club?

The experience the question is about is singular, for sure, but the question presupposes the capacity to discriminate a bass clarinet from other instruments, let alone the understanding of what a solo is and what the atmosphere of a smoky jazz club is like. Thus, this kind of singular experience requires some general experience about musical instruments and places where jazz is performed.

The pragmatist insights that I am going to discuss show that our distinction is fruitful and unstable at the same time. Fruitful because it helps us give an account of different aspects of our life and connection to the world; unstable because the two forms of experience interact in several ways and make it difficult to separate what is singular from what is general.

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<sup>3</sup> For similar considerations on "now" and "here" experiential concepts, see Soldati 2016, 161-3.

## 2. Some Pragmatist Insights

First, I will consider some of the writings of the classical pragmatists that are relevant to our topic. Second, I will address some claims of other philosophers who are considered to have some family resemblance with pragmatism. Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead are the classical pragmatists I will refer to. Wittgenstein, Quine and McDowell are their relatives.

Of course, given space and knowledge limits, I will just address some aspects of their views. I don't pretend to be exhaustive. In a sense I will do injustice to all of them, for the benefit of conceptual reconstruction at the price of idiosyncratic simplification.

### 2.1. Classical Pragmatists

The early Peirce had a tendency to reduce individuals to general properties.<sup>4</sup> From his realist and anti-nominalist metaphysical standpoint, he contended that the cognition of an individual always depends on the ascription of some properties to it and, of course, the ascription of properties to individuals depends on the grasping of general properties instantiated in them. The most extreme version of this view has it that there are no individuals, properly speaking: there are only bundles of properties. This can be put into inferential terms, claiming that the cognition of individuals is always inferential: not only a judgment as "This is a chair" depends on the inferential categorization of what is perceived, but also a judgment like "This is my cousin Max" does so, for the thing indicated has the general property of being the speaker's cousin, known as "Max".

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<sup>4</sup> I refer in particular to his papers of the 1860s. The same tendency is shown, to a lesser extent, in the papers of the 1870s. His views changed significantly around 1885. Cf. Murphey 1961/1993, 299ff; Fisch 1986, 321ff; Short 2007, 46ff.

This is not the place to discuss that metaphysical standpoint of Peirce.<sup>5</sup> What is relevant here is the idea that experience is experience of general things. In this sense there are no singular experiences.

However, the later Peirce admits that individuals are not reducible to generals. He reaches this conclusion elaborating on his theory of categories and claiming that the category of "Secondness" (what exists, what is present, here and now) cannot be reduced to other categories.<sup>6</sup> What happens *hic et nunc* is not a mere instantiation of general properties. It is not entirely reducible to them.

If we look at the same issue from the point of view of semiotics, we realize that *indices* have a key role here. Such are the signs that bear an existential connection with their object (notably a causal connection). They are different from *symbols*, which can be used to describe real as well as imaginary things.

The real world cannot be distinguished from a fictitious world by any description. It has often been disputed whether Hamlet was mad or not. This exemplifies the necessity of *indicating* that the real world is meant, if it be meant. [...] It is true that no language (so far as I know) has any particular form of speech to show that the real world is spoken of. But that is not necessary, since tones and looks are sufficient to show when the speaker is in earnest. These tones and looks act dynamically upon the listener, and cause him to attend to realities. They are, therefore, the indices of the real world. (CP. 2.337, c. 1895)

The early Peirce conceived of semiotics as a general theory of representation (see W1: 169-70, 280ff, of 1865); at that time he was interested in the functioning of symbols as signs that represent their object and that, unlike other signs, allow the construction of arguments (CP 1.559, 1867). Around 1885, he became more

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<sup>5</sup> See among others Tiercelin 1985, 1997, 2016 and 2019.

<sup>6</sup> I deliberately set aside Peirce's phaneroscopy (the theory of what is "present to the mind, quite regardless of whether it corresponds to any real thing or not" – CP 1.284), since it would need a work on its own. Let me only say that categories have parallels in phaneroscopy. See Short 2007, 60ff.

interested than earlier in icons and indices. One of his reasons to go deeper into the study of icons was the fact that they allow certain forms of reasoning on possible objects (such as mathematical reasoning; see e.g. CP 3.363, 4.531, 2.267). And one of the reasons for focusing on indices (see W5: 111) was the fact that they are characterized by a direct relationship with an existing thing, something which is untrue of icons and symbols (see CP 3.361, 3.363).<sup>7</sup> Language hooks on to the world in virtue of indices.

The features of icons, indices and symbols can be also understood in terms of time experience:

An icon has such being as belongs to past experience. It exists only as an image in the mind. An index has the being of present experience. The being of a symbol consists in the real fact that something surely will be experienced if certain conditions be satisfied. (CP 4.447)

Now, the experience of a thing indicated and present in a given context is a singular experience. It has the character of Secondness, but also the character of Firstness if it is the experience of something novel (Firstness being the category of what is novel, fresh, spontaneous; see e.g. CP 1.302). So, if we insist on the novelty condition of singular experiences, they have, using Peirce's categories, the dimensions of Firstness and Secondness. If we drop the novelty condition from our account of singular experiences, Secondness suffices to characterize them. General experience, on the contrary, is indeed the domain of Thirdness (namely the category of what is general, mediated, rational; see e.g. CP 1.427).

Turning now to epistemology, Peirce stressed in 1877 that the felt quality of doubt (that is, the experience of it) is the factor that motivates inquiry, whose aim is the fixation of belief (CP 5.370-6). More specifically, he claimed that the "irritation of doubt" causes "a struggle to attain a state of belief" and he

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<sup>7</sup> See Burks 1949, 680ff. Cf. Thibaud 1975, 85, 166-8; Atkin 2005; Short 2007, 219-20.

named this struggle *inquiry* (CP 5.374). To the purpose of belief fixation he recommended the "method of science," which is superior to others (namely to the methods of tenacity, of authority and of the a priori) because by following it "any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion." (CP 5.384) He added in a passage of 1902 c. that inquiry "must react against experience in order that the ship may be propelled through the ocean of thought" (CP 8.118).<sup>8</sup> And he stressed in 1893 that what matters is "not 'my' experience, but 'our' experience" (note 2 to CP 5.402; cf. 8.101-2). What matters for science and inquiry is the social dimension of experience.

Notwithstanding these relevant insights, the notion of experience, in my view, is less central to Peirce's thought than it is to other pragmatists. James made of it something more substantial. In particular, in *A World of Pure Experience* (published in 1904 and collected in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* of 1912) he established a certain account of experience as the crucial point of his "radical" empiricism.

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system.* (1912/1976, 22)

Everything which is experienced is in the system (including relations between experiences), and everything which is not experienced is out of it.<sup>9</sup> The experiences James talks about are basically singular (which is in tune with his nominalist attitude). They

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<sup>8</sup> On inquiry and the ship metaphor, see Haack 2018. Cf. CP 5.51 (1903) on the "action of experience."

<sup>9</sup> "Direct acquaintance, knowing in its first intention, is not readily available to the philosopher in the way that concepts are (taken not as pure experiences, but as referring to them), but it is identifiable, James thinks, partly because of the unpredicted trail of novel determinacy it leaves behind." (Lamberth 1999, 43)

involve, epistemically, a form of direct acquaintance, or “knowledge of acquaintance”,<sup>10</sup> and they let novelty accrue to our account of the world. James’ insistence on the “that” of singular experiences shows quite well their indexical dimension (1912/1976, 8ff). The irony of it is that James, who was in a sense the most pragmatist of the pragmatists,<sup>11</sup> seems to neglect here the active or practical dimension of experience. Dewey vindicated it.

As it is for James, the complexity and richness of Dewey’s philosophy cannot be rendered here. Let me mention his *Art as Experience* of 1934, whose chapter 3 is entitled “Having an Experience” and addresses how singular experiences, distinct from experience at large, are “integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences” (LW 10: 42). Dewey focuses on the fulfillment or “consummation” conditions of singular experiences (eating a meal, playing a game of chess, etc.) and, in a subsequent part of the same work, he also stresses the role of what is stored from past experience, something therefore generalized (LW 10: 78). This general experience results in responses to present conditions and habits. Some habits develop into crafts and arts that make enjoying experiences possible (LW 10: 53), as, in a mundane example, the cook has some general experience and the consumer has singular ones.

Let me also mention one work of 1917, *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*, where Dewey claims that experience “is a matter of *simultaneous* doings and sufferings” (MW 10: 9) and he highlights five points that mark the distinction from the traditional and empiricist conception of it:

- 1) experience is not only a “knowledge-affair,” it is also the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment;

- 2) it is not a purely subjective thing, since it is the way in which the objective world enters into the actions and sufferings of men and undergoes modifications through their responses;

- 3) it is not only and not mainly the registration of past events, for in its “vital form” it is “experimental,” it is the “effort to change the given,” and it connects with the future;

- 4) it is not “committed to particularism,” because connections are central to it and to the effort of changing existing conditions;

- 5) it is not opposed to thought, for it is “full of inference” (MW 10: 6).<sup>12</sup>

I will comment below on the inferential dimension of experience. Now notice that, as experience is a matter of “doings and sufferings,” Dewey’s notion of “transaction” is similar, in that it conveys the idea of a balance between doing and receiving.<sup>13</sup> The word “transaction” is notoriously used in economics to name a kind of interaction between economic agents, namely an exchange of goods or services. In Dewey’s use it helps us give an account of our “exchange” with the world: we obtain information from the world, and, at the same time, we give structure to it and elaborate practical responses to it. Dewey emphasized the active and predictive (anticipatory) aspects of experience. Not only do we give structure to experience imposing concepts and relevance criteria on it, but we also take it in a practical sense (see also LW 10: 50). We anticipate what

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<sup>10</sup> See James 1890/1981, 216-8.

<sup>11</sup> Remember Peirce’s complaint (CP 5.414) about the kidnapping (presumably by James) of the term “pragmatism,” which led him to introduce a new term that was “ugly enough to be safe from kidnapers,” namely “pragmaticism.”

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<sup>12</sup> However, see Ryder 2005 (claiming that Dewey’s conception of experience remains epistemological, and expressing doubts on the idea that experience is “full of inference”). Cf. Cometti 1999, Shook 2000. See also *Experience and Nature* of 1925 (LW 1), and Reichenbach 1938 on the predictive aspects of experience.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. LW 12: 24, 105-6. Cf. Mead 1926 on aesthetic experience, and LW 10: 42ff on the relation, in having an experience, between doing and undergoing. See also Calcaterra 2003.

is meaningful to us, and we generally elaborate responses to it.

Mead contributed to this view. His nice example of the ball illustrates the inferential aspects of experience (beyond the strictly perceptual ones) and, for our purposes, shows how the singular and general dimensions intertwine:

We see a ball falling as it passes, and as it does pass part of the ball is covered and part is being uncovered. We remember where the ball was a moment ago and we anticipate where it will be beyond what is given in our experience. (1934/1967, 176)

It is the singular experience of a falling ball. But the anticipation of where it will be is driven by the general experience of the cognitive subject. This sort of predictive inference goes “beyond what is given in our experience,” where “experience” is taken in the singular sense.

In other passages, Mead addresses the dispositional properties of things and gives an account of them in terms of hypotheses of future experiences:

Our environment exists in a certain sense as hypotheses. “The wall is over there,” means “We have certain visual experiences which promise to us certain contacts of hardness, roughness, coolness.” Everything that exists about us exists for us in this hypothetical fashion. Of course, the hypotheses are supported by conduct, by experiment, if you like. We put our feet down with the assurance born out of past experience, and we expect the customary result. (1934/1967, 247)<sup>14</sup>

Such hypotheses about the hardness and other properties of things are “supported” by our general experience of how things work and how we react to them. But of course this experience is not a guarantee of

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<sup>14</sup> Compare this with the emphasis on *memory* in the following passage by Austin (1979, 92): “Any description of a taste or sound or smell (or colour) or of a feeling, involves (is) saying that it is like one or some that we have experienced before: any descriptive word is classificatory, involves recognition and in that sense memory.”

what will truly happen in the future. This is the point, as anyone knows, of Hume’s attack on inductive inference, and, more recently, of Goodman’s “new riddle of induction”.<sup>15</sup> General past experience, made of singular experiences, does not concern future cases and cannot make us sure about them. Still, it is what we have and it is our best resource to deal with the future, making testable hypotheses and anticipations of future experience.

Now, “our” experience, taken as something that we socially share, depends for Mead upon individual *physiological* processes:

individual experience and behavior is, of course, physiologically basic to social experience and behavior: the processes and mechanisms of the latter (including those which are essential to the origin and existence of minds and selves) are dependent physiologically upon the processes and mechanisms of the former, and upon the social functioning of these. (Mead 1934/1967, 1-2)

So, given the “social functioning” of the basic elements, physiological processes are just a part of the story. *Psychological* processes and behavior develop in a social dimension, where singular and general experience intertwine.

The experience and behavior of the individual organism are always components of a larger social whole or process of experience and behavior in which the individual organism – by virtue of the social character of the fundamental psychological impulses and needs which motivate and are expressed in its experience and behavior – is necessarily implicated, even at the lowest evolutionary levels. (Mead 1934/1967, 228)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “The problem of the validity of judgments about future or unknown cases arises, as Hume pointed out, because such judgments are neither reports of experience nor logical consequences of it.” (Goodman 1954/1983, 59) Goodman’s riddle is “new” because it asks not *whether* induction is justified, but *what* induction is so.

<sup>16</sup> “The biologic individual lives in an undifferentiated now; the social reflective individual takes this up into a flow of experience within which stands a fixed past and a more or less uncertain future.” (Mead 1934/1967, 351)

If I may briefly shift the focus, let me mention that some juridical discussions at the end of the XIX century, through the first decades of the XX century, run parallel to the philosophical ones I have recalled here. One example is Justice Holmes' "prediction theory" of law, according to which the law amounts to the "prophecies of what the courts will do in fact" (1897, 461).<sup>17</sup> To say that you have a certain right is to anticipate what a court will decide in given conditions, not very differently from anticipating sensory experiences when we say, borrowing from Mead, "The wall is over there".

Another example is Holmes' well-known dictum concerning the nature of the law: *the life of the law has not been logic, it has been experience*. Holmes' claim is worth quoting at length:

The life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience. The felt necessities of the time, the prevalent moral and political theories, intuitions of public policy, avowed or unconscious, even the prejudices which judges share with their fellow-men, have had a good deal more to do than the syllogism in determining the rules by which men should be governed. (Holmes 1881/1923, 1)

This is an appeal to general experience in the social sense of it.<sup>18</sup> In this context, general experience is social experiment, it is practical experience, habit, skill, craft. And it is also the transmission and refining of it through time, from generation to generation. Holmes' words had a large impact on legal culture and practice. Other authors, though, embraced a more conciliatory position as to logic and experience in the law. Max Radin, for instance, claimed that the "law as experience is desperately aware of its logical insufficiencies and the law as logic is uneasily conscious that its authority to

represent experience to the mind has never been ratified." (1940, 33) And Roscoe Pound contended that law "is neither wholly reason nor wholly experience. It is experience developed by reason, and reason checked and directed by experience." (1940, 367) Experience assesses logical constructions and legal means to social ends. It tests them over time, refining them or substituting them with new ones if needed.

In any event we need not take general experience as necessarily shared by a group of people. In principle it can be individual: the experience of the person with a certain habit, skill, etc. But it is generally true that individuals acquire competences and skills in social contexts where other people educate them and give them forms of feedback.

## 2.2. Pragmatist Relatives

Ramsey made Wittgenstein familiar with some pragmatist themes and claims (see Misak 2016, 155ff). Concerning the topic we are investigating, when in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein refers to the experiences associated with the act of pointing to something (1953, §§ 34-5), he plausibly uses the concept of experience in the singular sense. But when he refers to the habits and skills involved in language games or in forms of life (e.g. 1953, § 7), he presupposes some concept of general experience in line with the pragmatist emphasis on habits (natural or acquired) and on social interactions. Going backwards, the concept of experience more prominent in the *Tractatus* was the singular one,<sup>19</sup> but the general one had some room too:

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<sup>17</sup> Remember that Holmes was a member of the "Metaphysical Club"; see Fisch 1942. Actually the prediction theory has been criticized on semantic grounds by Hart 1994, 10-1; cf. Tuzet 2007 and 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Radin 1940, Pound 1960 and Hart 1963. In evidence scholarship, the phrase "general experience" figures in the title of a landmark work, i.e. Wigmore 1913.

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<sup>19</sup> For instance: "The "experience" which we need to understand logic is not that such and such is the case, but that something is; but that is no experience." (Wittgenstein 1922, 5.552) I leave aside the issue of "private experience" and "sense data," which is relevant to the concept of singular experience but would deserve a specific work that I cannot carry out here; see, however, Wittgenstein 1968.

The process of induction is the process of assuming the simplest law that can be made to harmonize with our experience. (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.363)

What Wittgenstein calls here “our experience” is the experience of generations, or at the least of some people through time, or of many people belonging to the same context. In any case, it is the general experience with which a law “can be made to harmonize”. Harmony with past experience is a first step and prediction of future experience a second step. Then future experience will confirm or refute such inductions.

The pragmatist attitude is more apparent in Quine’s work, as widely known. For our purposes I will focus on his celebrated paper of 1951 on the dogmas of empiricism, noting that an effect of abandoning these dogmas was for Quine a “shift toward pragmatism” (1951, 20).<sup>20</sup> Consider his attack on the dogma of *reductionism*, namely on “the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience.” (1951, 20) No reduction to immediate experience is possible according to Quine. On the other hand, experience is crucial for the testing of our statements about the world. To convey this idea he used the legal metaphor of a *tribunal* and claimed that the “tribunal of experience” works holistically. As he famously put it,

our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body. (Quine 1951, 38)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See also Quine 1981, where he distinguishes his own position from that of the classical pragmatists and of Peirce in particular. The key points, for Quine, are these: the shift of semantic focus from sentences to systems of sentences, methodological monism, and naturalism.

<sup>21</sup> Notice a second legal metaphor in the “corporate body” of our statements about the world.

Atomist reductionism is the critical target of this view.<sup>22</sup>

Abandoning such dogma does not mean, for Quine, abandoning empiricism. Empiricism remains the best option for those who wish to give an account of the world, but only if it is understood holistically. This holism makes sense of past experience and predicts future one.

As an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience. (Quine 1951, 41)

Now it seems to me that, notwithstanding his holism, Quine maintains a notion of experience which is basically singular. Experience is “sense experience” and it is of individuals. Actually the phrase “past experience” figures in the last quote, but it sounds to me as a summative view of singular experiences. Notwithstanding his appeal to a pragmatist “shift” as an effect of abandoning those dogmas, Quine does not truly discuss the practical aspects of experience, nor general experience as such. His views fit basically the singular dimension of experience. And perhaps a broader understanding of it and a distinction of the two relevant concepts (singular and general experience) would have made his conception even more interesting and more pragmatist.

In contemporary philosophy, John McDowell takes seriously the idea of experience as a tribunal of thinking, and claims that it cannot be so if it is conceived in a strict empiricist sense: “if we conceive experience as made up of impressions [...] it cannot serve as a tribunal, something to which empirical thinking is answerable.” (1996, xv) He wants to show that “the very idea of experience is the idea of something natural and that empirical thinking is answerable to experience.” (1996, xix) So, if strict empiricism is an unsatisfying position, what is the positive side of his story? He claims that humans acquire a second nature, in part, by being initiated into *conceptual capacities*, which are already operative “in the transactions in nature

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<sup>22</sup> “Taken collectively, science has its double dependence upon language and experience; but this duality is not significantly traceable into the statements of science taken one by one.” (Quine 1951, 39)



that are constituted by the world's impacts on the receptive capacities of a suitable subject." (1996, xx)<sup>23</sup> Experiences already have conceptual content and our conceptual capacities are active in judgment and passive in sensibility (1996, 10, 12, 39).

His thesis, in a nutshell, is that "experiences themselves are states or occurrences that inextricably combine receptivity and spontaneity." (McDowell 1996, 24)<sup>24</sup> This is a claim, again, about *singular* experiences. And it allows a parallel between experience and agency:

experiences are actualizations of our sentient nature in which conceptual capacities are inextricably implicated. The parallel is this: intentional bodily actions are actualizations of our active nature in which conceptual capacities are inextricably implicated. (McDowell 1996, 89-90)

McDowell criticizes Quine's view of experience as stimulation of sensory receptors. Despite his attack on the dogmas of empiricism, for McDowell Quine remained an empiricist as to the nature of experience. "Quine conceives experiences so that they can only be outside the space of reasons, the order of justification." (McDowell 1996, 133) This empiricist view renders totally opaque the process of empirical justification of beliefs and judgments. For McDowell it is fundamental not to separate conceptual spontaneity and sensory receptivity:

the idea of an interaction between spontaneity and receptivity can so much as seem to make it intelligible that what results is a belief, or a system of beliefs, about the empirical world – something correctly or incorrectly adopted according to how things are in the empirical world – only if spontaneity's constructions are rationally vulnerable to the deliverances of receptivity. (1996, 138-9)

<sup>23</sup> Notice the reappearance here of the notion of "transaction," echoing Dewey. Cf. Lindgaard 2008.

<sup>24</sup> See also McDowell 1996, 26 on experience as openness to reality. Cf. Senchuk 2001, 172-3 (contrasting Dewey's conception of experience as active with McDowell's view on the passivity of experience, notwithstanding McDowell's claims on the implication of conceptual capacities in experience).

This is singular experience, with the view that it involves conceptual capacities and constructions. So it is a broader understanding of singular experience, if compared to Quine's. But again the general dimension of experience is neglected. And its practical implications are neglected as well.

On the contrary, to my sense, a pragmatist is expected to incorporate both concepts of experience in a non-partial account of it, and to maintain their conceptual distinction at the same time. Hopefully faithful to the spirit of Peirce's pragmatic maxim, I will elaborate on their distinction in the last section of this work, where I point out some of their different consequences.

### 3. Some Consequences of the Distinction

What are the consequences of the distinction we made? They are various. Some of them are practical, some of them are not. All of them, in any case, are displayed in the inferences that we are disposed or supposed to make when we assume that a certain kind of experience is the case.

Consider the following examples:

(5) You attended a piano concert, therefore you can play the piano;

(6) You studied piano for years, therefore you can play the piano.

(5) is clearly an illegitimate inference, whereas (6) is legitimate on the implicit and acceptable assumption that a person who studies a musical instrument for years is capable of playing it (at least to a minimal extent). (5) tries to draw a certain consequence from a singular experience, but that consequence can only be drawn from the general experience of the person involved.

That is not to downplay singular experience. Someone who has made a singular experience is supposed to know what the character of that singular

experience was. (Or at least, they are supposed to have some justified belief about it). A specific knowledge of this kind is not involved in general experience. If someone tells me they attended a certain event, but then are unable to report me how the event was, I am entitled to put either their sincerity or their cognitive capacities into doubt. I would not be entitled to this if my interlocutor was simply claiming to have a general experience in the field: from such general experience no detailed report of a singular event is expected.

However, some inferences about singular cases are justified by general experience assumptions. If the police stops me while I'm driving a stolen car, they are entitled to make an abduction to the conclusion that I am the thief, or at least that I have something to do with the theft of the car. The truth is not necessarily so, of course. I might be really unaware that it was a stolen car; it might be the case that I was framed by someone, or so. In fact, abductive conclusions are hypotheses, not necessary truths. But if I am unable to offer any counterevidence or explanation, it is reasonable to believe that I have something to do with the theft. (More boldly, my being involved in it is the best explanation of the fact that I was driving the stolen vehicle). Now, why is it reasonable so to infer? Because it is a general teaching of experience that thieves have the stolen goods upon them, at least for a while after the criminal act.

The German jurist Friedrich Stein called *Erfahrungssätze* the statements reporting what experience has taught us about certain kinds of situations and independently from the case in hand (Stein 1893). The case in hand, for Stein, is to be decided using not only the evidence presented by the parties but also the knowledge that general experience gives to judges.

Many authors have addressed this evidentiary issue, often under different names. William Twining, a leading evidence scholar and legal theorist, has discussed the topic of "background generalizations" used in judicial reasoning and argumentation. He claims that

generalizations are *necessary* because every inferential step from particular evidence to particular conclusion "requires justification by reference to at least one background generalization" (2006, 334).<sup>25</sup> Every abductive inference, I would say, requires a major premise stating some generalization. Without it, it would be impossible to move from the minor premise reporting some evidence to the conclusion providing an explanatory hypothesis. Twining also claims that generalizations are *dangerous*:

Generalizations are dangerous in argumentation about doubtful or disputed questions of fact because they tend to provide invalid, illegitimate, or false reasons for accepting conclusions based on inference. They are especially dangerous when they are implicit or unexpressed (2006, 335).

Of course abductive inferences are invalid from a deductive point of view. They instantiate the "affirming the consequent" fallacy. Their conclusions can be false even if their premises are true. But we cannot dispense with them if we want to explain puzzling facts. In any case I agree with Twining on the importance of making them explicit.

Interestingly, Twining contrasts generalizations with "stories," namely accounts of particular facts (2006, 338). When witnesses tell such stories, they purportedly provide an account of their singular experiences (about the doubtful or disputed facts).<sup>26</sup> And when, using some generalizations, judges or juries draw conclusions from such stories, they make appeal to general experience.

Let us move now to thoroughly practical and normative consequences. Someone who has a kind of

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<sup>25</sup> Generalizations are a continuum that goes from scientific laws and well-founded scientific opinions, through commonly held, but unproven or unprovable, beliefs, to biases and prejudices (Anderson, Schum and Twining 2005, 102; cf. Dahlman 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps this is a kind of situation that provides a reason for weakening the novelty condition of singular experience: we don't want witnesses to limit their stories to what was novel, surprising, or puzzling; we want them to tell everything which is relevant to the case.

general experience may be liable for the consequences of the activity in which their general experience is used, or should be used. It is not so for someone who simply has an experience. In law the distinction is quite clear and contributes to the establishment of the (professional) standards of due care and liability.<sup>27</sup>

A surgeon is supposed to have some general experience concerning certain medical conditions and the ways to treat them. If a patient dies out of an omission the surgeon is responsible of (because they didn't intervene when general experience told them, or should have told them, to intervene), then that surgeon is morally and legally liable for the death of the patient. This makes sense if we assume that some general experience exists. It may be the experience of the person in question, or the experience of generations collected and synthesized in the medical science of the time. If the surgeon had it, or should have had it, they should have intervened to save the life of the patient. If they did not (because of negligence, laziness, or else), then they are liable. This is not the case if we imagine a young medical student facing a suffering patient. For sure the young student can have the painful experience of a patient who suffers terribly; but they are not supposed to intervene and save the life of the patient in virtue of their experience.

In brief, consider these inferences:

(7) You are an experienced surgeon, therefore you should have intervened;

(8) You are a medical student, therefore you should have intervened.

(7) is fine, (8) is not. The reasons are obvious enough, there is no need to restate them. Let me only stress one more time that the practical and normative consequences of general experience cannot be identical to those of singular experiences.

Practical knowledge (knowing-how) depends on general experience. And liability for an omission or improper use of practical knowledge is also dependent on it. It would be unreasonable, in any context, to hold liable a person who lacks the relevant practical knowledge and the general experience that is needed to successfully perform a certain act.

*Expertise* raises similar concerns. Legal systems usually have specific rules that govern the intervention of experts in legal proceedings and in trials in particular (for instance, Rules 702-6 of the U.S. Federal Rules of Evidence).<sup>28</sup> Experts are so because they are supposed to have experience. Being such, they are supposed to draw certain inferences about particular cases, and to take some course of action when needed. This is entirely foreign to the case of the person who simply has an experience. Of course it is general experience which is required in expert knowledge issues. And of course this knowledge doesn't come out of nowhere: it is the result of starting singular experiences – and of time, repetition, cumulative receptivity, training, etc. Such singular experiences are basic, but, in order to run scientific experiments and have the relevant experiences, experts need some kind of general experience. This enables them to perform the relevant operations and determine the relevant findings. So the two forms of experience interact, as we already pointed out. They do not occur in completely different contexts.

<sup>27</sup> For a philosophical discussion of the major liability schemes, see Coleman 2003, 212ff. With a "strict" scheme, there is liability when the victim has suffered a compensable loss and the injurer's conduct caused the loss. With a "fault" scheme, there is liability when, in addition to those conditions, the injurer's conduct was negligent.

<sup>28</sup> Rule 702, in particular, states that a "witness who is qualified as an expert by knowledge, skill, experience, training, or education may testify in the form of an opinion or otherwise if: (a) the expert's scientific, technical, or other specialized knowledge will help the trier of fact to understand the evidence or to determine a fact in issue; (b) the testimony is based on sufficient facts or data; (c) the testimony is the product of reliable principles and methods; and (d) the expert has reliably applied the principles and methods to the facts of the case."

The conclusion I would like to draw is simple: singular and general experience interact but remain different things. The different consequences they have, according to our inferences, show their different aspects and why we care about them. We care about singular experiences because we care about novelty, surprise, enjoyment. And we care about general experience because we care about learning, rationality, and responsibility.

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