

## John Dewey and Ralph W. Emerson: education, art and democracy

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### Abstract

The article aims to analyze John Dewey's conception of the interchanges between education, art and democracy, with the purpose of suggesting ways for a critique of the current pedagogical trends. To achieve this goal, we analyze John Dewey's theses on the intellectual production of Ralph Waldo Emerson, published in the 1903 essay "Emerson, the philosopher of democracy". The method used for this endeavor is the rhetorical analysis proposed by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. In line with such theses, Emerson's ideas are examined in the Sophistic light, in a version opposite to that assumed by Plato, with special attention to the notions of perception, power and democracy, which are related to the Dewey concepts of immediate experience, experience aesthetic and democratic experience. The article concludes that John Dewey's reflections inspired by Emerson suggest that education today must be guided by the transforming power of the imagination.

Keywords: John Dewey. Ralph Waldo Emerson. Sophistry. Aesthetics.

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### Resumo

O artigo tem por objetivo analisar a concepção de John Dewey acerca dos intercâmbios entre educação, arte e democracia, com o propósito de sugerir caminhos para uma crítica às tendências pedagógicas da atualidade. Para cumprir essa meta, são analisadas as teses de John Dewey acerca da produção intelectual de Ralph Waldo Emerson publicadas no ensaio "Emerson, the philosopher of democracy", de 1903. O método utilizado para esse empreendimento é a análise retórica proposta por Perelman e Olbrechts-Tyteca. Em consonância com tais teses, as ideias de Emerson são examinadas à luz Sofística, em versão oposta à assumida por Platão, com especial atenção para as noções de percepção, poder e democracia, as quais são relacionadas com os conceitos deweyanos de experiência imediata, experiência estética e experiência democrática. O artigo conclui que as reflexões de John Dewey inspiradas em Emerson sugerem que a educação na atualidade seja guiada pelo poder transformador da imaginação.

Palavras-chave: John Dewey. Ralph Waldo Emerson. Sofística. Estética.



## John Dewey y Ralph W. Emerson: educación, arte y democracia

### Resumen

El artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la concepción de John Dewey sobre los intercambios entre educación, arte y democracia, con el fin de sugerir vías para una crítica de las corrientes pedagógicas de hoy. Para lograr este objetivo, se analizan las tesis de John Dewey sobre la producción intelectual de Ralph Waldo Emerson publicadas en el ensayo "Emerson, the philosopher of democracy", de 1903. El método utilizado para este empeño es el análisis retórico propuesto por Perelman y Olbrechts-Tyteca. En consonancia con tales tesis, las ideas de Emerson se examinan bajo la luz sofista, en una versión opuesta a la asumida por Platón, con especial atención a las nociones de percepción, poder y democracia, que se relacionan con los conceptos de Dewey de experiencia inmediata, experiencia estética y experiencia democrática. El artículo concluye que las reflexiones de John Dewey inspiradas en Emerson sugieren que la educación actual debe ser guiada por el poder transformador de la imaginación.

Palabras claves: John Dewey. Ralph Waldo Emerson. Sofística. Estética.

### Introduction

The work of John Dewey (1859-1952) is certainly one of the most extensive and wide-ranging in philosophical literature. The themes investigated by him encompass areas usually considered as hermetic and incommunicable – psychology, education, logic, philosophy of science, history of philosophy, ethics, politics etc. – forming a whole unified under the umbrella of the Deweyan philosopher. –, forming a unified whole under the umbrella of Pragmatism. Dewey dialogues with authors of diverse theoretical affiliations and interacts with the social and cultural challenges of his time. These facts explain the difficulty that is presented to researchers, motivating several interpretations of his theses (CUNHA, 2008).

To face this obstacle, we propose to take as a starting point one of his early works and relate its contents to the study of other works of his authorship, in order to compose a broader conceptual framework. The text examined in this article, "Emerson, the philosopher of democracy" (DEWEY, 2003d), published in 1903, allows us to reflect on the interchange between art and education in Dewey's intellectual production. As we read in the title, it is a study on Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), essayist and poet recognized for expressing deep faith in the common man and in the ideal of freedom. Dewey often turns to

him as a source of inspiration, but this is the first text in which he quotes his name and the only one entirely devoted to his ideas.

Dewey's essay on Emerson will be examined in the first section of this article through the identification of notional dissociations, a method that allows us to observe the formation of antinomial pairs, constituted by terms located at diametrically opposite poles; in the development of the discourse, these terms articulate philosophical pairs that reveal the author's preference for one notion over another (PERELMAN; OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, 2002). This way of organizing reasoning usually results in dualisms, but, as we will try to show, it is a Dewey characteristic to dissolve the dichotomies created by his own argumentation.

The second section will specifically discuss Emerson's ideas with the intention of elucidating and extending the reflections made by Dewey in the essay, in particular the one that associates Emerson with the sophists. In this analysis, we will consider the achievements of the first generation of sophists – Protagoras (490-415 B.C.), Gorgias (485-380 B.C.) and Hippias (460-400 B.C.) –, following an interpretative line that opposes these thinkers to Parmenides (530-460 B.C.), whose theses gave foundation to the Platonic philosophy, which, in turn, is responsible for the many negative assessments that weigh on the sophists even today.

In the third section, we will try to relate the ideas presented in "Emerson, the Philosopher of Democracy", analyzed in the light of sophistry, with other Dewey's works. Our purpose is to show that certain Deweyan themes are inspired by the conceptions elaborated by Emerson's poetic language. Dewey, evidently, goes beyond the reproduction of the poet's formulations, as he makes a re-reading of his concepts, a procedure that will allow us to conclude this article by positioning the reflections of both men today.

## The philosopher and the sophist

Dewey (2003d, p. 185) characterizes in this way the problem he sets out to address in the text under review: "[...] It is said that Emerson is not a philosopher. I find this denegation false or true according as it is said in blame or praise, according to the reasons proffered [...]". We can note that there is no a priori rejection of the opinion that places Emerson outside the circle of philosophers, but rather a willingness to discuss the reasons that support it. The answers



offered to the problem reveal Dewey's own conceptions of what is philosophy, more precisely about the relations between philosophy and art. As it will be possible to notice later on, the key to the reasoning that now begins resides in the examination of the notions of philosopher and sophist.

Dewey (2003d, p. 185) informs that the aforementioned opinion is supported by the accusation that Emerson is guilty of "lack of method, of the absence of continuity, of coherent logic", because he is "a writer of maxims and proverbs, a recorder of brilliant insights and abrupt aphorisms", when what is expected from a legitimate thinker is an "long logic". Dewey counters this judgment with a definition of what is logic: "Logic is the procession or proportionate unfolding of the intuition; but its virtue is as silent method; the moment it would appear as propositions and have a separate value, it is worthless". And he adds a quote from Emerson that sums up his purpose: "There is no compliment like the addressing to the human being thoughts out of certain heights and presupposing his intelligence".

Dewey (2003d, p. 185-186) takes up the Emersonian purpose as opposed to an apparently rigorous, but actually empty, logic and issues a critical appraisal of philosophy: philosophers have been unsuccessful because they are stuck with the need to have "every reason carefully pointed out and labelled", an attitude that prevents them from taking any minimally warranted assertion. The target of his criticism, therefore, is not logical reasoning, but the narrowness of those who use it against the possibility of securing an independent proposition or beyond logic: it is possible, through intelligence, to take human thought to unimaginable heights. Dewey works with the notional dissociation intelligence-logic without categorically opposing the two terms, only warning about the risk of the second overlapping the first, depending on how it is conceived.

Dewey (2003d, p. 186) states, then, that "Perhaps those are nearer right, however, who deny that Emerson is a philosopher, because he is more than a philosopher. He would work, he says, by art, not by metaphysics". In this passage, a notional dissociation is evident separating the philosopher, the one who resorts to the metaphysical sphere, and the poet, the one who acts as "a maker rather than a reflector" – that is, as an artist. Dewey agrees with the hope expressed by Emerson that philosophy "will one day be taught by poets". "The poet is in the natural attitude; he is believing", while the philosopher needs "reasons for believing", which institutes the separation between belief and reason.

To the pairs *intelligence-logic* and *art-metaphysics* is added *belief-reason*, all serving the distinction between the poet and the philosopher. To the pairs is added that Dewey (2003d, p. 186) elaborates when analyzing the peculiarities of discourse: “[...] the thing uttered in words is not therefore affirmed. It must affirm itself or no forms of grammar and no plausibility can give it evidence and no array of arguments”. By themselves, words mean nothing; their effectiveness lies in the disposition to associate discourse with things, with the world that can be apprehended through perception, which is “more potent than reasoning”, just as the poet does.

This pair is crucial for establishing the distinction between action and discourse, as well as between *perception* and *reasoning*, denoting that the poet perceives the world and acts upon it, instead of only reasoning and discoursing, as the philosopher does. The poet makes use of the freedom provided by the exchange among speakers, which are “more desired than the chains of discourse”; he recognizes the value of his audience, as he makes use of the “surprise of reception”, which is “more demonstrative than the conclusions of intentional proof”.

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Quoting Emerson, Dewey (2003d, p. 186) mentions the silence that the poet often uses: “Good as is discourse, silence is better, and shames it. The length of discourse indicates the distance of thought betwixt the speaker and the hearer”; “If I speak, I define and confine, and am less”; “Silence is a solvent that destroys personality and gives us leave to be great and universal”. The elaboration of the *silence-discourse* pair always positions the poet in opposition to the philosopher, in the realm of interpersonal relationships, impossible to be captured by logic, reasoning, reason, the weapons of philosophy. This dissociation seems to build a definite and irreversible abyss between the philosopher and the poet.

But Dewey (2003d, p. 186) states that he does not intend to draw “hard and fast lines” between the two, even though one can identify “some distinction of accent in thought and of rhythm in speech” of each of them. After projecting so many dualisms, his intention now consists in dissolving them, guiding us through the difficult task of finding complementarity amidst difference. And then he reaffirms what essentially characterizes philosophy: “The desire for an articulate, not for silent, logic”, a method that constitutes “the only thing of ultimate concern to the abstract thinker”, whose interest does not turn to any kind of thought, but primarily to rational thought; he is not interested in “not things, but



the ways of things”; “not even truth, but the paths by which truth is sought”; the philosopher interprets “symbols of thinking”, dedicating himself “[...] to manufacturing and sharpening the weapons of the spirit” (DEWEY, 2003d, p. 186-187).

What lies beyond this concerns to art, whose developments do not disqualify, but rather expand the philosopher’s specific field. Transcribing Emerson, Dewey (2003d, p. 187) explains that the artist possesses “ a habitual respect to the whole by an eye loving beauty in detail”; his affection is directed to “ the meaning of the symbol, not to its constitution”, and by handle them he succeeds in forging “the sword and buckler of the spirit”. The artist’s disposition lies more in discovering than in analyzing, “to discern rather than to classify”.

We observe the use of carefully chosen words intended to build bridges between crafts that are distinguished only by accent and rhythm. The artist does not ignore the totality, which is characteristic of the philosopher’s gaze, but uses it to see particularities; while the philosopher is responsible for the creation of signs capable of giving meaning to the world, the artist works precisely with the handling of these tools; the artist produces discernments among things, evaluates them according to the clashes concerning the spirit, but this enterprise is only accomplished when the philosopher satisfactorily concludes the analysis and classification of these same things.

Dewey, therefore, disarms the dualisms that he himself instituted, considering that art does not oppose philosophy, but uses it to go beyond, expanding the field of reflection. The dissolution of the divorce between the particular and the universal means that the philosopher and the artist operate with the same elements: one prioritizes rational thought and the search for truth, manufacturing the spirit’s weapons in the face of totality; the other uses these weapons to discover the nuances of the specific in search of beauty. The problem is that many philosophers see “[...] way to truth for their truth; the method of life for the conduct of life – in short, have taken means for end”. Others, however, tread different paths, realizing that “means become identified with end”, which allows them to transform thought into life (DEWEY, 2003d, p. 187).

Dewey’s choice of approach between philosophy and art is clarified by the definition of the terms *philosopher* and *sophist*. Dewey (2003d, p. 187) states that “Language justly preserves the difference between philosopher and sophist [...]”, but that cannot limit either the definition of “thinker” or “artist” because both are moved by “interest, concern, caring”. The discussion initiated

by Plato, who “united in himself more than has another individual the qualities of both artist and metaphysician, is not essentially of objectives nor yet of methods, but of the affections”. And Plato was “divided in his affections” (DEWEY, 2003d, p. 188).

This last one is enigmatic, since Dewey does not elucidate the nature of the affective split suffered by Plato. What can be inferred is that, by producing the dissociation between the qualifiers of the philosopher and the attributes of the sophist, Platonic philosophy obstructed the identification that existed between the two terms. By elaborating this dissociation, Plato removes from the word sophist the “polysemy and the positive values it possessed when it was associated with the concept of wise (*sophos*)” (SILVA, 2017, p. 51). If the discussion is about affections, there is no reasonable justification other than affective for making the distinction between the philosopher and the sophist.

Assuming the Platonic dissociation, Emerson is not a philosopher, but a sophist; he is not a philosopher, but an artist. If the distinction is undone, Emerson is a philosopher, as well as a sophist, an artist. This is why Dewey begins the essay by saying that the accusation against Emerson can be false or true, accusation or praise, depending on the reasons given. Thinking like Plato, it will be accusation, and true: Emerson is not a philosopher, but a poet, a sophist. From the Deweyan point of view, however, Emerson is a philosopher – more than that, he is a poet, a sophist. What had the appearance of accusation then becomes praise.

In describing Emerson's attributes, Dewey also describes the general qualifiers of the philosopher who is also a poet, a sophist. Whoever takes up his conceptions assumes that history and the world depend on the ordering done by the human mind; he believes that a thinker poses a risk to the world because of his tendency to generalize; he is suspicious of anyone who aims to reveal the secret of nature, its ultimate cause. As a philosopher, a poet, and a sophist, Emerson makes his work “[...] a hymn to intelligence, a paean to the all-creating, all-disturbing power of thought” (DEWEY, 2003d, p. 188).

The Platonic thinker conveys an ideal educational based on the “immanence of absolute ideas in the World and in Man”, teaching “[...] that every thing and every man participates in an absolute Meaning, individualized in him and through which one has community with others”. In education, this ideal becomes not a truth for all, but [...] a truth of philosophy, a truth of private



interpretation, reached by some men, not others, and consequently true for some, but not true for all, and hence not wholly true for any" (DEWEY, 2003d, p. 190). In contrast, the sophistic poet and thinker acts differently.

Quoting Emerson, Dewey (2003d, p. 190) says that "truth in the highway", and teaching rests on the fundamental conviction that "every individual is at once the focus and the channel of mankind's long and wide endeavor". And he adds that these ideas are not empty statements, but "natural transcripts of the course of events and of the rights of man". In taking up Emersonian poetics, Dewey (2003d, p. 191) states that it is up to the philosopher to return "[...] to the common man that which in the name of religion, of philosophy, of art and of morality, has been embezzled from the common store and appropriated to sectarian and class use". In Platonic hands, "such malversation makes truth decline from its simplicity", becoming "a puzzle of an imposed law [...], of a romantic ideal gleaming only from afar".

These reflections clarify Dewey's conception of education and elucidate the theme that is directly linked to it – democracy. His definition of democracy assumes a poetic nature in the face of the statement that Emerson, although he did not design a philosophical system, became "the prophet and herald of any system which democracy may henceforth construct and hold by", and "when democracy has articulated itself, it will have no difficulty in finding itself already proposed in Emerson". The philosophy of democracy will establish "friendship with science and with art" and will not be rebuked by religion (DEWEY, 2003d, p. 192). The Being of this philosophy will be, as in Emerson, not the Platonic Being, but a being that is defined through a human attribute: the Character (DEWEY, 2003d, p. 193).

## **Emerson, the sophist**

These Dewey's reflections announce a new perspective for the investigation of Emersonian thought. We must approach Emerson to the ideas espoused by Plato's challengers and examine whether it is possible to establish discursive relations between them. To do so, we will use the identification of "discursive frameworks", a resource that allows to highlight common elements in discourses that express a certain "proximity of thought, revealing similar argumentative cores", even if their authors are separated by centuries (SILVA, 2017, p. 18). We

assume it is possible to identify similarities in the way certain philosophical and educational problems are answered by different thinkers, each using their own means, according to the context in which they are inscribed.

The first theme that stands out in Emerson concerns to how to understand the world. In the essay "Self-reliance", Emerson (2004) says that a world completed yesterday cannot be valued by today's man unless one adopts the thesis that the world is in constant formation, which will lead us to realize that our actions make a difference. When man acts upon a changing environment, his soul is involved in a constant actualization through his creations in the world, becoming distant from an independent truth. The world, therefore, must be interpreted as something in constant flux, dynamic, moving incessantly, and presenting countless possibilities for intervention.

The way Emerson presents reality is close to how the early sophists described the world in Classical Greece in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. The monism of Parmenides of Elea, who had characterized the world as unreal, in defense of the immobility and immutability of the abstract world inhabited by the Being, provoked the reaction of the sophists, his severe opponents (SILVA, 2017). Protagoras wrote a critique of the Elea people who "held the unity of Being", and Gorgias affronted the argument of Elea, turning it against its inventors (GUTHRIE, 2007).

The propositions of the early sophists evidence an understanding of the world through the Heraclitian way, in opposition to Parmenides, presenting reality as detached from determinism that defines life as a mere reflection of a metaphysical space and encouraging a plasticity that invites man to create. The sophists saw the fluidity of the world of the possible, the malleability of human experience; it's sure that they recognized the limits of this world, but, at the same time, they encouraged individuals to go beyond it in order to act (POULAKOS, 1995).

For Gorgias, if there is no metaphysical reality in which the Absolute Truth is anchored, as Parmenides defended, both the true and the not true depend on the agreements that men mutually establish; everything depends on the *nomos*, the common opinion reached through the debate between divergent opinions, until a unity of thought is reached, the *homonoia*. Protagoras' famous sentence affirms this position: "Of all things the measure is man: of those that are, that they are; and of those that are not, that they are not" (DK, 80 A 14). Truth



is plural and provisional, resulting from a consensus established and maintained as long as a given community consents.

It is on these sophistic principles that Emerson, in a more complex and elaborate way, builds his worldview and truth. For Emerson, as for the sophists, the search for truth is a constant, and truth must be “reinscribed within the circle of human labor” (KOOPMAN, 2006, p. 109). Emerson “does not refute those who oppose the truth he believes in – truth is plural, there is room enough for all” and we must hold to the agreements made in our community, without dismissing the truths asserted by other groups (KOOPMAN, 2006, p. 110). Every society has its theory about life, religion, philosophy, just as there is “the event of every moment, the bath, the steamboat disaster, the passing of a pretty face, the neighbor’s apoplexy”, and all these facts, once tested, form “the approximate result we call truth” (EMERSON, 1972, n.p.).

If at a certain point in our lives we renounce the search for truth and enter the “port of some pretending dogmatism, some new church or old church” says Emerson (1972, n.p.), all the uses of those new events “that are born out of prolific time into multitude of life every hour”. We can then be compared to a “bankrupt to whom brilliant opportunities offer in vain” since we have given up our freedom, tied our own hands, locked them up, and give the key to someone else to keep.

Emersonian notions of the mutability of the world and the provisionality of truth emphasize man’s action in concrete reality. By itself, truth “makes no provision for us”; that “provision is our action, our art”, since truth is the “efficacy of human effort, not a power that informs it from beyond” (KOOPMAN, 2006, p. 110). Emerson (2004) believes that it is from action that abstractions and artistic productions emerge, because it is through experience that we know the world and transform it: so much of life I know by experience, so much of the wilderness, I have conquered and planted. Like the propositions of sophistry, Emerson’s ideas dissolve the “debilitating dichotomies” between the abstract and the concrete, between thought and practical work, conceiving them as formed by complementary opposites that undulate as rhythmically as the inhalation and exhalation of air in our lungs (BICKMAN, 1994).

The Emersonian conception of democracy is based on the protagonism of man, in whose center resides the notion of power, intrinsically associated with the idea of *dynamis*, potentiality that is updated in the actions of man over

Nature. For Emerson (2004, p. 391), "all power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world", and the personal power, freedom and resources of nature" rest in all individuals (EMERSON, 2004, p. 394). This is the power of creation, man's ability to act in the world, seeking to transform both reality and himself. Some individuals develop this power excessively, which imposes on them the need to act, to challenge, to overcome limits all the time. If "the energy to originate and perform the work is deformed in excess, the axe cuts off our own fingers", but there is no evil without remedy. The medication for extremism is understanding, learning and channeling it into varied actions in the world.

For Emerson (2004, p. 400), there are men who do not have this overload of energy, and so they must be challenged day after day. For everyone to have the opportunity to develop their potential, everyone must be put in investigative and problematic situations that incite them to produce what is most valuable in the world, human creations. Physical strength has "no value where there is nothing else", just like snow in the snow banks and fire in volcanoes. The "luxury of ice is in tropical countries, and midsummer days", just as the "luxury of electricity, not volleys of the charged cloud, but the manageable stream on the battery-wires" (EMERSON, 2004, p. 398). When the individual is challenged, this "native power" gives an "astonishing pleasure", emerging "in conditions of supreme refinement, like the results coming from art" (EMERSON, 2004, p. 399).

For those who do not possess great "vivacity", Emerson (2004, p. 400) suggests two conducts to develop creative power: concentration and practice. Concentration is the "stopping off decisively our miscellaneous activity, and concentrating our force on one or a few points"; "the one prudence in life is concentration and the one evil is dissipation". Practice is daily exercise, the power of use and routine, which goes beyond mere repetition. A chemical phenomenon illustrates this argument: the galvanic current generated by batteries is slow, but continuous, possessing power equal to the electric spark; this is why it is the best instrument to be used in the arts of creation. The same is true of human action against the energy spasm; we compensate for it by continuing the daily exercise of action, dispersing the "[...] same amount of energy over time, rather than condensing it into a single moment" (EMERSON, 2004, p. 402).

This discussion of power reveals the value of human action in the world. Emerson (2004, p. 401) says that "[...] many men are knowing, many are apprehensive and tenacious, but they do not rush to a decision". However, considering the fluidity of the world and the constant modification of things, a



decision must be made at every moment, “the best, if you can; but any is better than none”. The man who has this presence of mind at the instant he needs to act is more valuable than a dozen men who delay in establishing and executing an action.

In Emerson’s political conception, the greatest expression of human power lies in acting for the sake of democratic government. Emerson (2004, p. 257) considers that all people “have equal rights in virtue of being identical in nature”. Although nuanced by the “qualities that set us apart”, this identity does not present itself only in exceptional individuals, but in all those who can realize their potentialities as human beings. Therefore, Emerson agrees with Madison, who believes that the tyranny of the majority is the greatest threat to republican liberty; and also, with Tocqueville, for whom the pressure of public opinion on the development and expression of individual liberty is dangerous.

This reflection brings Emerson closer to the sophist Hippias, for whom we are all similar by nature, but the “law tyrannizes humanity” (PROTAGORAS, 337d-e). Both share a certain strangeness before the immutability of laws and democratic institutions, and Emerson (2004, p. 255-256) points out that, when dealing with the idea of the state, we should always remember that its institutions are not natural, are not “superior to the citizens”. Each of them was once “the act of a single man: every law and usage was a man’s expedient to meet a particular case”, and so we must consider that they are all liable to change.

Emerson (2004, p. 256) believes that we determine the best form of government to the people based on what is appropriate to the habits of thought of the individuals that make up that collectivity. Democracy will be the best form of government if it matches the common feeling that it is the best way to respond to collective desires. Many believe that “laws make the city”, and that profound “changes in politics and modes of living, and employments of the population, that commerce, education and religion” can be decided by vote, without the adhesion of all the citizens; they believe that any measure, even an absurd one, can be “imposed on the people, if only you have can get sufficient voices to make it a law”. The wise men, however, recognize that “foolish legislation is a rope of sand which perishes in the twisting”, and that the “State must follow, and not lead the character and progress of the citizen”, because the only form of government that prevails is that which represents the “expression of what cultivation exists in the population which permits it”.

Emerson's argument allows us to understand democracy as a way of life shared by all the individuals who make up a society. If we want to get our children to act by means of coercion, we will achieve nothing. The same happens in democracy: if the democratic way of life does not bind each and every citizen, it cannot be exercised in its fullness, whose definition is sharing. Therefore, instituting and developing democracy are problems that can only be solved through character formation, through the growth of the individual in all his or her potentialities. Emerson (2004, p. 263) conceives character as "what all things tend to produce, what freedom, cultivation, sexual relation, revolutions will form and liberate". To "educate the wise man, the State exists; and with the appearance of the wise man the State expires", from which we conclude that the emergence of character makes the State unnecessary, since the "wise man is the State".

Emerson advocates a democratic ethos, a moral force uniting all men, taking the form of a sense of belonging and respect for others. However, "there will always be a government of force, where men are selfish", since even among the "most religious and instructed men of the most religious and civil nations", there is always lacking the "confidence in moral feeling" that would lead them to believe in a society without artificial restrictions, or that the "[...] private citizen might be reasonable, and a good neighbor, without the hint of a jail or a confiscation" (EMERSON, 2004, p. 265).

But Emerson also believes that "we are all better than we think and a lot better than we are usually told we are" (SHKLAR, 1990, p. 614). People are always trying to do the best for their city; "when they vote, they try to choose the best candidate, and everyone prefers the company of people they consider their superiors"; the "desire to improve is universal". It is "[...] unthinking and also cynical to see pure evil in those with whom we disagree or who may actually be totally wrong". Society [...] is better than it seems, and is ready to change when approached with patience and appreciation – democratically, in fact" (EMERSON, 2004, p. 265).

Emerson (1972, n.p.) sees education as the primary means for the formation of the democratic ethos. The world is always inviting man to "shining realms of knowledge and power", to act upon it and interpret the "infinite of his own consciousness", to always go beyond what he imagines. It is the task of education to awaken man to this potential. If he is a skillful man, education must enhance this quality; if he is a man capable of "dividing men by the trenchant



sword of his thought, education should unsheathe and sharpen it"; if he is a man who "cement society by his all-reconciling affinities, oh! hasten their action!". Whatever the individual may be, it is incumbent on education to develop in him all his potentialities, since society needs them all (EMERSON, 1972, n.p.).

Emerson echoes the educational goals of the early sophists, for whom education should be as broad as man, promoting and revealing all human potentialities. Formation in logos, advocated by sophistics, was intended to develop a democratic political disposition, a critical and creative positioning for the solution of problems faced by individuals as particular persons and as members of a society (SILVA, 2017). In line with this belief in the transformative power of education defended by the sophists, Emerson (1972, n.p.) believes that education must sound hope, must lose the "cold sound" that comes from educational treaties, expert lectures and formalized education systems. Education must to immerse into the deepest space of the individual and cultivate all that can blossom from his potential, not only by science, which touches only the surface of our being, but by poetry.

## Dewey, reader of Emerson

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West (1989) characterizes pragmatism as a search for the necessary foundations for a critique of culture in favor of the construction of a democratic and emancipated society, being Emerson its prophet and poet, the root of the genealogical tree of this philosophical movement, the reference source for all its dimensions. This is what motivates Dewey to update the Emersonian notions of perception, power and democracy, expressing them in his own works as *immediate experience*, *aesthetic experience* and *democratic experience*.

The value of immediate experience is understood in the considerations about logic, mentioned in the first section of this article: logic does not have a method separate from intuition, which is the ability to know, understand, or perceive clearly and immediately, without the intervention of reason. Dewey (2003g) states that to take experience as a starting point is to start not from a theory, but from what is previously given in our lives. Things are experienced as they are; in describing them, we must say how we experience them. If it is a horse, we should refer to the horse of the trader, or the zoologist, or the paleontologist, because those who deal with that animal know what it is as they experience it.

Since in each case there is a type of experience, varying in specifics, we will get a contrast not between reality and its approximations or phenomenal representations, but between the various real characters of experience. Immediate empiricism proposes that things are what they are experienced.

Dewey does not deny the need for mediation or reflection in knowledge, but he claims that in experience there is no dualism between the self and the objects of the world, but rather an active relationship that constructs the self. In fact, the self is nothing; only experience is something “given”, “effective”, and “immediate”, which is not presented in advance through theories (DEWEY, 2003g, p. 167). The notion of immediate experience should be used in philosophy following the example of the direct descriptive method of the natural sciences. The reality that supports theoretical constructions also serves as a basis for seeking evidence, and the return of theories and investigations to everyday life is the only way to avoid the addictions of philosophy, especially that of infertility.

By privileging experience, Dewey updates the Emersonian conception of perception, since he claims that it is possible to describe an experience with fidelity to the lived experience, free from all theorizing. The postulate of immediacy does not violate the principle of continuity and unity of experience, by which Dewey qualifies experience as process. Both self and reality are processes, not substances. Experience is always anchored in the present, and what we call past and future are derivatives of imaginative experience, the door through which the meanings arising from perception find their way to produce the conscious adjustment between the new and the old.

Imaginative experience is one of the components of aesthetic experience, a notion developed by Dewey (2003a) in *Art as experience*, in which are embodied the Emersonian qualifiers related to the idea of power, seen in the second section of this article – the creative power of thought, *dynamis*. An aesthetic experience is the experience in its entirety, and the imaginative vision is the power that unifies all the constituent materials of a work of art, composing a whole in full variety. This form of experience aggregates all our other experiences, which present themselves to the consciousness as a distinct element.

Dewey (2003h) offers an illustration of aesthetic experience in scientific making. His rejection of the Platonic division of the world between reason and sensory impressions, between theory and practice, between an ideal and



superior being on the one hand and an inferior material being on the other, also refuses the contemplative nature of knowledge. His rejection of all forms of dualism contains the valorization of change, which is abstracted from the common principle to the experimental sciences that knowing is an activity governed by intelligence: when operating with a given material, the scientist aims at the active control of nature and of experience itself, just as the carpenter does, who looks at things not as objects in themselves but with a purpose in mind, the transformations he wants to make, and it is in this making that he discovers the properties of objects. Both science and art draw on imaginative power, which, as we have seen in Emerson, lies in discovering and discerning, rather than in analyzing and classifying.

In the aesthetic experience, emotions fulfill a regulatory function, unifying the new and the old, what is presented to immediate experience and what comes from previous experiences. This idea is found in Emerson's critique, mentioned by Dewey, of the generalizing tendency by which philosophers despise the meanings derived from the particular and favor those that are presented as universal. Dewey's conception of art as experience combines imaginative and reflective power, since imagination is "the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction"; imagination is "the conscious adjustment of the new and the old" (DEWEY, 2003a, p. 277).

In both science and art, the gap between what is presented in the immediate and what can be glimpsed for the future is bridged by imaginative power. "Because of this gap, all conscious perception involves a risk; it is a venture into the unknown, for as it assimilates the present to the past it also brings about some reconstruction of that past" (DEWEY, 2003a, p. 277). Without the adaptation of the meanings of the present to the meanings of experiences, "there is no consciousness, the imaginative phase of experience" (DEWEY, 2003a, p. 278). In aesthetic experience, life becomes more intelligible, not conceptually, but coherently and intensely, enabling "meanings imaginatively summoned" to be "embodied in material existence that here and now interacts with the self" (DEWEY, 2003a, pp. 278-279).

Westbrook (1991) and Ryan (1995) consider that Deweyan aesthetic theory highlights the consummatory dimension of the work of art, conceptualizing all experience as artistic or aesthetic. There is, however, a strategic component to be considered, precisely that which takes up the Emersonian notions of *power* and *democracy* to consolidate the encounter of *aesthetic experience*

with *democratic experience*. Dewey's statement, mentioned in the first section of this article, that Emerson is the philosopher of democracy, is not mere praise, because it is in his essayistic and poetic production that Dewey's philosophy seeks inspiration to qualify democracy as "a mode of associated living, of joint communicated experience" (DEWEY, 2003c, p. 94).

The imaginative and communicative power of art gives the individual the ability to act in the public space for the construction of democracy as an aesthetic experience, in Dewey's terms. Like education, art can contribute to dissolve the obstacles that prevent the sharing of experiences, without which citizens do not effectively participate in political practices and deliberations. This impediment hits with special force historically marginalized individuals and groups, who are denied the right to citizenship. Dewey (2003f) analyzes the difference between a society, characterized as a simple association of individuals, and a community, a word that refers to the ideas of communication and communion, which have the meaning of conscious emotional and intellectual interaction. Without these attributes applying to everyone, there is no democracy.

The qualities of the democratic way of life are not natural, nor are they assimilated by individuals under the influence of any social environment. Their development depends on planned and guided action, a role that can be taken on by both education and art – both preferably associated. It is a deliberate political action, which we can also call pragmatic, in which a community strives to collaboratively solve common problems, establishing commitments and even militant behaviors of resistance and opposition. In Dewey's view, art has the potential to encourage political action, social criticism, the debate of established beliefs and behaviors, which is essential to democracy.

Dewey (2003b, p. 228) indirectly responds to one of the most serious problems of democracy, which is confrontation, dissent, by way "of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion". This is one of the practical issues that every living democracy faces and in which artists can cooperate. It is necessary to do more than protect the rights of minorities; it is necessary to work hard to develop a culture in which plurality and difference of opinion are promoted. With Dewey, we can say that without the existence of creative conflict, democracies risk becoming complacent and stagnant.



Artists can associate with teachers in the task of making debates more informed and intelligent, opening new perspectives for the exercise of power in the community. This kind of association was emphasized by Dewey (2003b, p. 226) as indispensable at the time of the rise and dominance of nazi-fascism, when he wrote: “the depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically”, as if our forefathers had bequeathed us “a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics”.

In those dark years, many artistic works produced the aesthetic experience of contestation, such as Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* and Diego Rivera’s murals. Crick (2019, n.p.) analyzes that the most important thing in Deweyan philosophy is “less the substance of the work of art but its effect – to expand our horizons of experience so that we can view the world from perspectives not our own”. Because of their symbolic and mobilizing effect, we can include in the expanded category of aesthetic experience certain movements that, though external to the professional circuit of the arts, drive people into imagined horizons.

In 1930, at the end of his long march towards the coast, Gandhi picked up a handful of salt, a simple gesture that was repeated by many people from then on, even under the brutal repression of the British police. Recently, similar marches, also repressed, went through several cities in the United States and other countries, making a simple gesture equally powerful: bending one knee and extending the arm with a clenched fist. The phrase “I have a dream”, uttered by Martin Luther King in 1963, was reborn in the voices of citizens shouting “Black lives matter” and “I can’t breathe”.

These movements and gestures, as well as certain works of art, although marked by an abrupt break with patterns of domination, represent consummatory moments that translate proposals to overcome the current state of the world. By portraying the horrors of war, Picasso provokes us to think about a world of peace; the stories drawn by Rivera tell the struggle of the people for a better life; by harvesting salt with his own hands, defying legal determinations, Gandhi translates the longing of a nation for freedom; the cry of Luther King and of all those who march against racism contains the aspiration for solidary coexistence among human beings. All these manifestations can be considered aesthetic experiences, unlike purely aggressive behavior, such as the Black Blocs, whose result is only more aggression.

Since there is not a democracy-producing machine, the task of building this way of life faces numerous difficulties, a situation that is aggravated by the fact that we are witnessing what Crick (2019) calls a *new era of fascism*, a fact that, in turn, demands the articulation of a new form of education – a pedagogy of democratic humanism. Articulation or rearticulation, indeed, since we are talking about political and educational actions that were practiced centuries ago by the sophists and more recently theorized by Dewey, inspired by Emerson, and other thinkers throughout history.

The path leading to democracy and the resumption of this pedagogy will involve clashes and conflicts before reaching its consummation, but the legacies of sophistry and Dewey teach us that “our most treasured and most meaningful experiences are shared experiences” and that the teacher must share his methods, his hope and his imagination with all who seek to begin again (CRICK, 2019, n.p.).

## Final considerations

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The ancient Greeks used rhetoric in three situations, basically: in assemblies, when they decided the directions to be taken by the city; in courts, when they deliberated commit offenses; and in commemorative or funeral situations, when they discoursed on events and persons relevant to the community. Aristotle (RHETORIC I, 3) characterizes the speeches delivered in the third situation, called *epideictic oratory*, as concerning the praise or the censure of values. In this case, the singularities of a fact or a person are used by the speaker as sources of inspiration for the exercise of citizenship.

As occurs in *epideictic oratory*, the Dewey essay analyzed here not only presents the singularity attributed by the speaker to Emerson, but also reveals the speaker’s own inclinations. Dewey reveals his choice of sophistry, both in the field of politics and education, as opposed to the figures of the philosopher and educator originating in Parmenides and Platonism. Dewey’s synchrony with the Emersonian sophistic heritage, thus revealed, concerns fundamentally to the values that define the relationship between educational practice, art, and democracy.

Such values translate the belief in the transforming power of imagination that is expressed in words, actions and small gestures that share intellectual



projects and feelings fed by the aesthetic experience, the only one capable of mobilizing the individual and the collectivity for the construction of a democratic way of life. These same values inspire resistance, when not the confrontation with the dehumanizing tendencies – represented by the revival of fascist ideas and practices – that invade all spheres of life and education in particular. In democracy, confrontation is not only inevitable, but essential if societal reform and social justice are to be achieved. Dewey offers us a way to welcome conflict with imagination and intelligence, making concrete commitments to problem solving.

## Notes

- 1 The collected works of John Dewey: 1882-1953, edited by Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, EUA, brings together 37 volumes with texts of various natures – books, essays, lectures, discipline programs, comments on authors etc.
- 2 Brazilian publications bring biographical information about Emerson - see, for example, *A conduta para a vida* (Emerson, 2003a), *Ensaios* (EMERSON, 2003b) e *Natureza* (EMERSON, 2011).
- 3 Dewey does not indicate the source of Emerson's transcriptions.
- 4 In *Experience and nature*, Dewey (2003e, p. 17) gives the name "denotative empiricist" to this method.

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