

## John Dewey's Reinterpretation of the Concept of Existence

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### Abstract

Existence is a core concept in traditional western philosophy. Traditional philosophy materialism, absolutizes abstracts and mystifies existence, attributes the manifestation of existence (the phenomenon) to an illusion, and strips human daily life which nurtures problems of existence out from existence, giving rise to a series of binary opposition problems. John Dewey, starting from the realistic and era mission of philosophy, based on the reflection of traditional opinions of existence, establishes a new opinion of existence. He believes that existence has empirical, historical and cultural characteristics

**Key words:** John Dewey; Existence; Reinterpretation.

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### INTRODUCTION

Dewey is a primary figure of "pragmatism" in the United States. An important prerequisite for the construction of Dewey's ideological system of pragmatism is his reinterpretation and reconstruction of the core concepts of traditional philosophy. In a sense, this process is a process to reinterpret traditional philosophy. In this way, he gives the philosophy of the pragmatic spirit of the times. Therefore, to understand Dewey's ideological system of pragmatism, we must follow his thoughts or approaches to reconstructing traditional philosophy,

from which we can see how he understands traditional philosophy and how he constructs the philosophy of pragmatism. "Existence" is one of the important concepts in traditional philosophy. Traditional philosophy materializes, absolutizes, abstracts and mystifies existence and strips thoughts on existence out of human daily life experience. Based on the reflection of the traditional philosophy's interpretation of existence, Dewey gives existence a distinctive feature of life and era connotation.

### 1. TRADITIONAL PHILOSOPHY'S OPINION OF "EXISTENCE" AND ITS PLIGHT

#### 1.1 The Questioning Way of Traditional Philosophy to Problems of Existence

"Existence" is the core of traditional Western philosophy. In Western languages, existence appears in the form of verb being. We cannot ask "what is existence" and we can only ask "how is existence possible". However, the question of the noumenon of the world is converted into how existence is possible. How existence is possible has been scientifically manifested in the first philosophy, theology and the presence of existence. In general, the answer to this question has formed the three important research fields of metaphysics: One is aetiology to explore how existence exists; one is teleology to explore why there is existence; one is ontology or religious theology to explore what is existence. Thus, "love for wisdom" is converted into "love for being". From Plato to Aristotle, an important task they have done is to materialize, absolutize, abstract, and mystify existence and attribute the manifestation of existence (the phenomenon) to an illusion, strip human's daily life experience which nurtures "the problem of existence" out of existence, i.e. speculatively to regard omniscience, almighty, eternity and infinity as divine attributes and

on the contrary regard limitations, defects, limited fight and variation as the attributes of human beings and nature and regard experience, history and culture as a magnification of established existence. Philosophical love for wisdom begins to become speculative, abstract or even mysterious.

This questioning way of existence has caused a series of binary oppositions such as material and consciousness, nature and phenomenon, theory and practice and etc... The real existence manifested in experience, history and culture has been forgotten. The problem of existence converts into speculative problem of the two fields to be reconciled through logic, which has caused the result that "the specific problems due to confusing and diverse combination of changeable and eternal things and necessary and unstable things in existence disappear and instead there comes the simple and all-embracing dialectical problem combining the feeling and thinking" (Dewey, 1958, p.48). Dewey believes that traditional philosophy "uses magic symbols to overcome the uncertainty and contingency of this world and dreamily believes the unity of the world, the unity of nature and the inherent rationality." (Dewey, 1958, p.88) The wisdom of traditional philosophy begins to become dogmatic, authority and even ignorant. Dewey evaluates the wisdom of traditional philosophy as follows: "This kind of wisdom is more like a management of the temporary, limited things belonging to human beings in the eternal and infinite things through dogma and superstition than control of things in life through realistic conditions."

## 1.2 The Basic Approach of Dewey to Consider the Problem of Existence

Dewey affirms the practical significance of traditional philosophical ontology. He compares it with primitive religious activities of human beings: "primitive ritual ceremonies and the atonement activities in religion are not believed triggered by supernatural powers; they are derived from the need of the action." In Dewey's view, "human's actions are an intrusion of unknown fields. Through ceremonies to atonement in the right season, human beings can avoid terrible consequences." Metaphysics of traditional philosophy has symbolic and instrumental color. Aristotle once said, philosophy is a product of the leisure class's thinking. Accordingly, leisure is not the motivation for human beings to pursue wisdom; on the contrary, wisdom is the result of human beings' thinking at leisure; however, in Dewey's view, the motivation of the pursuit of wisdom of philosophy comes from the uncertainty and insecurity the human group has when faced with experience context. This motivation, in short, is to look for unity and certainty and overcome heteropoly and uncertainty. Dewey believes that, "the state of existence itself indicates it's stable

and turbulent, determined and unpredictable, which is a complex mix of state. It is this state that promotes the pursuit of human beings to love of wisdom." (Dewey, 1958, p.59) Formal logic, as the core tool of traditional philosophical epistemology, makes "rhetorical declaims replace superstition" with the basic purpose of exhaustive understanding of the world. Accordingly, in addition to epistemological crisis, another big issue is that it has taken an attitude of escaping and even rejection of reality. Reality of history tells us existence as precarious unstable. These instabilities highlight human beings' efforts, struggle, thinking and fighting in this unstable living situation. No matter what aspect philosophy manifests, we should not forget its basic mission of responding to reality.

For this important issue of traditional philosophy, they just assume to discuss the unity and inner rationality of the world and don't discuss much about the heteropoly and instability of experience; although it seems that different philosophical schools' metaphysical assumptions about this world are so big, their shared mission is to deny the contingency of this world. Accordingly, a problem arises: We refuse contingency, pursue certainty, exclude temporality and hope for eternity; however, without contingency, there is no inevitability; without uncertainty, there is no certainty. Dewey reviewed traditional philosophy's questioning way of existence as this: "The true feature of the world of experience tells us that, it is impossible to get permanent certainty. Contingency and inevitability are relative."

Traditional philosophy self-proclaimed its science of wisdom, but on the contrary it became a kind of harm to wisdom; it took the answer to the question of existence and the solution of how to live a better life as a starting point; however, it has already locked people up in a cage and given life a yoke. The superior ontology from the beginning of the Enlightenment was out of tune with the times. When Nietzsche announced the death of God, when Kant claimed to dare to use your rationality in *What is Enlightenment*, when Marx declared that "action is great programme", when science began to progress fast, when the capitalist market economy burgeoned in the United States, when various problems emerged in this era, if we still deal with non-ideological problems with ideological ways, traditional philosophy can only become a laughing stock. Therefore, the real wisdom will not only keep the introspection of the fate of mankind, but also provide a package of programs to improve the human conditions. An important task that Dewey did in the construction of a naturalistic metaphysical system is to determine a new concept of existence through the reflection of the traditional concept of existence and raise this concept of existence to the spirit of the times.

## 2. DEWEY'S REINTERPRETATION OF EXISTENCE

### 2.1 The Cultural and Historical Features of Existence

Existence is cultural, historical and concrete. Dewey believes that "culture itself is comprehensive and holistic. Culture is neither completely determined, nor accidental; culture is neither entirely subjective, nor entirely objective; culture is neither past tense, nor completely present tense..." "An important feature of existence is the precaution and uncertainty which is highlighted by cultural phenomena." (Dewey, 1958, p.41) Dewey has conducted a biting sarcasm to the questioning way of existence beyond time and experience. He says that, "We use a magic thing to deal with the uncertainty of this world and thus deny the contingency of existence. We ambiguously believe the general rules, the causal relationship, and the unity of nature, the universal progress and the inner rationality of the world." However, the problem is that the uncertainty and precaution of the world are not changed, let alone eliminated, because, in Dewey's view, in the activities of the original experience, the distribution of good and evil is the same. The idea of taking kind things for granted and taking evil things for contingent is ridiculous and unhelpful for the transformation of the world. Regarding existence as a culture and a historical progress is a significant improvement of the concept of existence that Dewey has achieved.

### 2.2 The Unity of Certainty and Uncertainty of Existence

Traditional philosophical ontology attributes kindness to the nature of existence and puts evilness as a contingency; or it believes kindness is inevitable in this world. This concept is deeply rooted in the traditional philosophical creed. On the surface, although the differences of traditional philosophical understanding of the world are huge, they are family quarrels in different philosophical schools. Their shared aim is to deny the contingency of this world. Dewey believes that, "The status of existence itself indicates that it is stable and precarious, certain and unpredictable. It is a complex mixture. It is this status that promotes the pursuit of love for wisdom. In the second chapter in *Experience and Nature*, he uses the title of existence as precarious and stable. The uncertainty of existence manifests in the uncertainty and precaution that cultural phenomena highlight. The unity of the uncertainty and certainty of existence is that "the category of everything embodies both the sacred things and the cursed things and there is no exception for characters, vocabulary, places, time, and the direction of space, stone, wind and animals." (Dewey, 1958, p.41) In the second chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey describes the uncertainty of existence as follows: "This world is an

adventure. It is uncertain, unstable and incredibly varies. Its precaution does not make any sense and it is not often. We cannot tell its season and time. The precaution is ongoing, but it is also fragmented and unexpected. Before dawn is darkness. Pride can lead to failure. The most prosperous moments often lurk curses of doom, while for the eyes of evilness, it is the best time." "Disasters, famine, crop failure, diseases, death, and defeats are often very close and the harvest, strength, victory, festivals and festivities are also the same." (Dewey, 1958, p.33) When the problems in the situation are improved or solved and when experience is formed, existence shows its certainty. The alternative appearance of the uncertainty and certainty of existence is the norm. For this state, Dewey believes that we should hold a common heart and "we are neither over excited for temporary stability, nor sad for temporary instability." Dewey criticizes the way of thinking which attributes existence to an abstract kind cause and he believes that in life people are used to take kindness for granted; however, the distribution of kindness and evilness in this world is the same. "For the changeable feature of existence, we do not need to attribute existence to the field of phenomenon or idealize this kind of change into gods. Importantly, we should find an approach to control and manage this progress." Influenced by scientific concepts, Dewey believes that the state of the alternative interaction of the certainty and uncertainty of existence is continuous and regular and it can be controlled. He believes that "We live in a world which is abundant, complete, coherent, predictable and controlled and becomes a possible repeated regularity as well as a unique, ambiguous possibility of uncertainty and the indetermination of the consequences and some other processes." This kind of mixture of certainty and uncertainty is mainly manifested in the way of questioning context. Dewey gives an example: Take a chair as an example; if we just quietly look at the chair, there is no so-called certainty or uncertainty from the chair; however if the chair has a hold because of a nail or it misses a leg, the questioning context arises. The questioning context is the start for the exploration. This kind of questioning context is uncertain on one hand and it is challenging; on the other hand, the questioning context itself has the possibility of solving the problem and it provides a standing point for the solution of the problem. How we experience things depends on its associative way with the questioning context.

Dewey further believes that an important theme of philosophy and life is to concern the combination degree and way of the "precarious" and "certain", "unfinished" and "finished", "Repeated" and "changeable", "secure" and "precarious". (Dewey, 1958, p.75) Dewey believes this is the real wisdom of philosophy.

### 2.3 The Process of Existence

Dewey's new concept of existence believes that, existence is a continuous event or progress and this process has

a unique feature. It is the combination of instability and stability, settlement and unsettlement and certainty and uncertainty (Cochran, 2010, p.75). The progressive feature of existence means to regard the development of things as a continuous progress. Through this process, it is possible for the formation of a continuous history. In this sense, the world is a complete connection of “start” and “end” rather than a collection of examples. If existence is broken and isolated incidents, then it will become elusive and then it is impossible for the formation, accumulation, screening and improvement of experience. From the sense of epistemology, regarding existence as incidents or a progress, the cognitive result of “reality” is not traditional metaphysical “in-line” epistemology, i.e. regarding cognition as a reflection of existence and different levels of cognition correspond to different levels of existence and the result of cognition shows in the reflection of a series of events. The “reality” of cognition lies in the “functionality” of its context, i.e. to what extent the result of cognition promotes the progress of exploring activities and the accumulation of experience.

#### 2.4 The Experiential Feature of Existence

Similar to Aristotle, Dewey’s discussion on the problem of existence is also based on experience of things; however, Aristotle classified experience and then regarded existence as a system and picture in which “material” (experience) continues to leap forward to the “form” (essence). Each thing of experience tends to the realization of its kindness and the ultimate kindness of the universe (the purpose) comes from “entelecheia” (god). Starting from the analysis of the concept of “absolute experience” in traditional philosophy, Dewey believes that absolute experience comes from human’s daily life experience, but the problem of absolute experience is that

it pessimistically believes that our experience is limited and temporary, full of mistakes, conflicts and contradictions, and it admits the nature shown in history and the objects and connections constituting the nature are unstable. Absolute experience excludes things of experience out of real things. (Dewey, 1958)

Absolute experience comes from actual experience, and the function of actual experience seems to raise them to an absolute experience and reduce itself to an unreal and phenomenal thing. Dewey criticizes this dichotomy of philosophy. He believes that

the advocates who advocates dichotomy of experience in philosophy appeal to a logical standards and no matter

how wrong it is, it must fit this standard which excludes the consistency of any contradiction. In that way, the inner logic of this doctrine itself is worth noticing.

Dewey believes that existence is experiential rather than transcendent and existence is the unity of certainty and uncertainty rather than absolute or perfect. Existence grows in experience. Through experience in exploring activities and scientific logical exploration, existence shows us the infinite possibilities; the certainty and uncertainty of existence lie in experience. Experience gives birth to existence and enriches existence. As Dewey says, “We forget that it is the events which create hope that gives perfection meaning. Without them, a perfect world means an unchanging and pure presence.”

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### CONCLUSION

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Dewey’s reinterpretation of the concept of existence has great freedom and human values. In the first chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey raises experience to a basic philosophical approach. For existence, the meaning of experience is that: It is not experienced to “show” existence or “for” existence; instead, experience “enriches” existence and “shows” existence. Experience makes existence temporal, historical and cultural. Dewey’s reconstruction of existence manifests his deep concern of human fate in this uncertain world. In this sense, although Dewey opposes ontological metaphysical “teleological” meaning, he has the purpose to give his own ontology another meaning, which is to provide the possibility for the realization of another unity of human beings and the world through overcoming the binary oppositions of traditional philosophy. There is such a description of Dewey’s Experience and Nature and he says that,

Experience means the land we work on, the seeds we sow and the alternative of day and night, spring and fall, wet and dry and cold and hot as well as the things we expect, observe and fear; meanwhile, it also means the people who sow and harvest...it has a double meaning, since it means the connection of original action and material and the subject and object is seamless in the process of experience. (Cochran, 2010, p.63).

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### REFERENCES

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