

Martin Jay

Songs of Experience:

Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme

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‘Experience is the best teacher’ goes the cliché without ever making clear just what is meant by that slippery first term. ‘Experience is never remembered unaltered’ goes another. Is experience something to be undergone, like a journey, or is it perhaps the relational immediacy between organism and environment? What do we reference when we use the term *experience*?

Martin Jay, renowned intellectual historian from UC Berkeley, here examines these questions in a grand survey of the term’s use throughout the intellectual history of what was once called *Western Civilization*. Beginning with the ancient Greeks (of course), he reviews the surprising number of variations employed and assumed by philosophers, theologians, critical theorists, and right up to the poststructuralists. Jay knows his territory and reading this survey of it — for anyone with any sort of background in the history of philosophy — is often as pleasant as hearing a familiar symphony well-played in a unique way.

It seems ‘experience’ has meant many things to different authors over the years. The current English term derives from a Latin source meaning *to try* or *to test*, thus revealing its relationship with ‘experiment’. But there have been many other implied meanings from the distant past, some of which have been entirely forgotten. More recently, the meaning (or meaninglessness) of the term seems to have been a major point of contention amongst the

American pragmatists, the post-Marxist critical theorists, and the French poststructuralists. Nowhere, however, does he deal directly with the relationship between *experience* and *consciousness* (aka *conscious experience*), a much-disputed area, and this I consider to be the major failing of the book.

To frame his study, Jay early on explores the two German words with slightly different meanings that are both translated into English by the word 'experience'. *Erlebnis* contains within it the root for 'life' (*Leben*) and, according to Jay, 'is often taken to imply a primitive unity prior to any differentiation or objectification. ... Although *Leben* connotes the entirety of a life, *Erlebnis* generally connotes a more immediate, pre-reflective, and personal variant of experience...' (p. 11). This implies a meaning for experience that does not necessarily accord with our assumed meaning for *conscious* (from the Latin, *consciūs*, knowing together, also the root of *conscience*) in that *Erlebnis* is 'immediate, pre-reflective, and personal...'. Defining consciousness (or *conscious experience*) is the cause of much bickering, but David Cohen (1998), in his attempt to speak for mainstream psychology, suggests that 'it can be described as the state of mind that allows us to "know" our own mind, to entertain thoughts about thoughts, to monitor our selves and our environments, and to use this information to make plans and formulate hopes and fears' (p. 67). In this case it can be seen that *Erlebnis* as *experience simpliciter* is not the same as conscious experience. Like the unconscious of psychoanalysis, it may be thought of as non-conscious experience.

Erfahrung, the other German term we translate as experience, is on the other hand more associated with differentiating sense impressions or making cognitive judgments about them. 'But,' says Jay, 'it also came to

mean a more temporally elongated notion of experience based on a learning process, an integration of discrete moments of experience into a narrative whole or an adventure'. Its roots are found in the German word for journey (*Fahrt*) that may connote a journey into the unknown (*Fahrt ins blaue*), like the journey through life: 'As such, it activates a link between memory and experience, which subtends the belief that cumulative experience can produce a kind of wisdom that comes only at the end of the day' (p. 11). *Erfahrung* seems to be more in accord with our common understanding of experience, as 'the best teacher' or as the remembered present, which equates roughly with the consensus understanding of *conscious experience* (or consciousness, if you will).

Jay, as I say, does not deal directly with question of how *experience* and *conscious experience* may be related, if at all. Most often he seems to assume an equation of meaning, which is very strange in a book that has declared its intention to explore all meanings of the term *experience*. Some of the authors he reviews, however, do seem to have explored direct experience as the precursor and foundation of subjective consciousness. Jay refers to the 'paradoxical notion' (p. 129) of *experience without a subject* (or, sometimes, from another angle, *post-epistemological experience*) and notes the idea has been posited approvingly by no less than Schopenhauer, Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, Bataille, Foucault, Barthes, and possibly Oakeshott, Dewey, and the trickster of text, Derrida. Experience without a subject of that experience cannot easily be subsumed under the label of *consciousness*. It may be more along the lines of the non-subjective relational interaction between organism and environment. Finally, some of the poststructuralist or deconstructive authors cited like Lacan insist that experience, as such, cannot be posited as a meaningful term at all. As Lacan's translator, Alan Sheridan (1977), put it: 'What is

prior to the assumption of the symbolic, the real in its “raw” state (in the case of the subject, for instance, the organism and its biological needs), may only be supposed, it is an algebraic x' (pp. ix-x). This seems to imply that we cannot be conscious of non-conscious experience.

A further quibble: Every researcher has the right to pick which authors to include or omit in his survey, but it seems most strange to ignore the contributions of eminent philosophers in this area like Cassirer, Bergson, and Ricoeur. Surely any historical study of experience must be considered incomplete if it does not include Whitehead.

Finally, the reading was an enjoyable journey of experience (*Erfahrung*) on its own. But this reader felt that Jay’s failure to explore how direct experience (*Erlebnis*) relates to conscious experience destroyed much of its consequence.

Notes

Cohen, David (1998), *The Secret Language of Mind: A Visual Enquiry into the Mysteries of Consciousness* (London: Duncan-Baird).

Sheridan, Alan (1977), Translator’s note. In J. Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: Norton).

Gregory Nixon

British Columbia