
SHARING A ROOM WITH EMILE:
CHALLENGING THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR
IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

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Contemporary practitioners of experiential learning look to John Dewey and other progressives for the foundation on which to interpret, design, and facilitate learning through experience. And though Dewey's theory of learning through experience was greatly influenced by other educational theorists and practitioners of the 18th and 19th centuries,¹ by identifying parallels between Dewey's "experiential continuum"² and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's model of educating/creating the ideal man in *Emile*, a fascinating and troubling challenge to the role of the experiential educator surfaces.

If one cares to play along with Rousseau's presentation of a prescriptive handbook for educating the new man for the new society, they find that it begins with the teacher/tutor carefully crafting the child's earliest interactions. With light examination, one may find Rousseau's vision of the tutor and pupil relationship improbable and a bit disturbing,³ but what is not lacking is Rousseau's hearty dedication to the student's learning through hands-on experience. The author identifies "nature" as a significant source of this education, and defines this word to mean more man's inclinations than his habits.⁴ Further, the word "nature" becomes synonymous with the natural surroundings, or countryside, which Rousseau deems essential as the backdrop for young Emile's rearing.⁵ Though nature and natural consequences are to

¹ In his expression of schooling based on experience, Dewey draws highly from Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel, especially the latter's play and activity-oriented *kindergarten*. See John Dewey, *The School and Society & The Child and the Curriculum* (1907 and 1915; repr., Lexington, KY: Seven Treasures Publications, 2011), 70.

² John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (1938; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1997), 28, 33.

³ The instances of the arrangement's improbability or inappropriateness to the 21st century reader abound, but to list one: a tutor dedicating full-time commitment to the raising of one pupil, even to the point of sleeping in the pupil's room when he reaches adolescence, in order to "protect him from himself." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 334.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78. In her analysis of educational relationships and natural settings for learning, Morwenna Griffiths states that Emile as the "free-playing boy" becomes the archetypal "natural" boy found in other works of fiction embodied as Huckleberry Finn, Just William, and others. Morwenna Griffiths, "Educational Relationships: Rousseau,

instruct the young child, the tutor interferes with Emile's inclinations through staged scenarios, tricking the child into thinking he is encountering a real situation.⁶ Rousseau's touting the value of natural education while outlining pedagogy steeped in simulation and interference is the irony that I believe reverberates in the theories of Dewey and contemporary proponents of experiential learning.

EMILE AS THE IDEAL MAN

In *Emile*, Rousseau's vision for the student to be formed into the ideal "natural" man is well intentioned, but unsuccessful. If anything, Rousseau's Emile becomes a shell of a man, dependent on others for direction, emotion, and unable to fully participate in society without the guidance of others.⁷ Rousseau's demand for Emile's seclusion from society is precisely what made Emile's upbringing and embodiment so *unnatural*. In *The School and Society*, Dewey's description of the University Elementary School in Chicago echoes a great deal of Rousseau's experimental, natural, and experiential language and pedagogy. Like Rousseau, Dewey critiques tradition, specifically "traditional" American schooling at the turn of the 20th century,⁸ and provides a radical remedy, or reinvention. I detect the legacy of Rousseau's revolutionary thinking in Dewey's educational theory. However, where Rousseau falls short in the delivery of the new ideal man for the new society, Dewey provides a fix. And though contrary to Rousseau's principles, Dewey's inculcation of community-oriented, democratic values and processes into the learning structure of school⁹ is intended to turn children into adults who are more prepared to engage in their society in ways that Emile was entirely unable.

CONVERGENCE

As mentioned above, both Rousseau and Dewey are critical of "traditional" education. Rousseau rails against the rigid, uninspiring, and freedom-snuffing parochial schools and universities of his day.¹⁰ Dewey positions his view of education through the description of his University Elementary School in Chicago, which he purports to be unique and experimental: "To refuse to try, to stick blindly to tradition, because the search for the truth involves experimentation in the region of the unknown, is to refuse the only step which can introduce rational conviction into education."¹¹ His view is radical, and is critical of the traditional method of schooling for a

Wollstonecraft and Social Justice," *Journal of Philosophy in Education* 48, no. 2 (2014): 346.

⁶ Ibid., 13, 100, 173, 181.

⁷ Ibid., 475.

⁸ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 12.

⁹ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 15.

¹⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, 225.

¹¹ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 63.

number of reasons. To begin, he saw the design of the classroom, with desks in lines facing the lecturing teacher, as indicative of the misdirected emphasis on teacher-experts: “It may be summed up by stating that the center of gravity is outside the child.”¹² This is no compliment. In terms of content, Dewey writes that these traditional schools demonstrate a foolish “practical monopoly of learning”¹³ thus depriving children of the ability to develop interests and occupations of their own. Further, Dewey, echoing Rousseau, challenges the traditional school as “fracturing” learning within the subjects.¹⁴ To Dewey, reducing learning to content mastery in subjects is a misguided assumption, as he states with sarcasm: “Now give the children every year just the proportionate fraction of the total, and by the time they have finished they will have mastered the whole.”¹⁵ Instead of promoting a unification of learning as a single process into which content mastery can be explored, these traditional schools, according to Dewey, miss the mark.¹⁶

Dewey and Rousseau are also firmly aligned in their appreciation for a curriculum which is primarily hands-on, experiential, and experimental. Dewey writes:

That we learn from experience, and from books or the saying of others only as they are related to experience, are not mere phrase. But the school has been so set apart, so isolated from the ordinary conditions and motives of life that the place where children are sent for discipline is the one place in the world where it is most difficult to get experience—the mother of all discipline worth the name.¹⁷

Rousseau imagines taking his *Emile* into the country and woods to explore the world as an approach to content learning, such as in the investigation of the sun’s and moon’s appearance in the sky leading to *Emile*’s ability to comprehend astronomy.¹⁸ Without context and inquiry, the lesson is lost on the child. Dewey uses the same approach in his description of the University Elementary School’s emphasis on practical application preceding theoretical understanding.¹⁹ Rousseau and Dewey promote an active approach to learning,

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Dewey seeks to clear up confusion regarding his position on learning through experience in his opening chapter to *Experience & Education* titled “Traditional vs. Progressive Education.” Though he seems to want to avoid the “either-or” trap (p. 17), he is very clear on the danger of believing that the young are able to comprehend what is “imposed” on them through traditional education (p. 19).

¹⁷ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 15.

¹⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, 175.

¹⁹ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 66.

encouraging the children to explore outside, to use nature as the laboratory and toolkit, and to emphasize physical movement as a way to stimulate interest and drive: “there must be go, movement, the sense of use and operation.”²⁰

In addition, both Rousseau and Dewey endorse a holistic approach to learning. Though not stated explicitly in *Emile*, there is no separation between the child and learning. For Dewey, the child and the curriculum are unified, in balance, “a total one.”²¹ Learning by subject is not fractured and compartmentalized.²² Where there exists great difference between the two philosophers is in the role of the school. Rousseau wants *Emile*’s education to exist untainted by society and school; Dewey promotes a new way to democracy through, and deeply embedded in, structured schooling.

DEWEY’S “NATURAL” EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT / INTRODUCTION OF THE RUSE

In Dewey’s University Elementary School, the household is the center of life, creation, and learning.²³ He seeks to replicate the home in the design of the school in order to better prepare children for connections to the world: “saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious.”²⁴ The school has natural connections to the community and uses resources that are made relevant and ready for the students. In turn, as the students age, they are to better understand participation in the community outside of their school. However, for their years in school, they are replicating the democratic spaces to which they may feel drawn to participate once they graduate. The classic example of this space is the town meeting-like recitation room at the center of the school, “the social clearing-house, where experiences and ideas are exchanged and subjected to criticism.”²⁵ This space, not present in the traditional school, is given significant attention in order for the students to practice voicing their opinions. The use of this skill is to develop over time, and perhaps lead students to believe that speaking one’s voice in a democratic fashion is entirely natural and expected in the outside world.

Based on Dewey’s dependence on the school alone, we may have enough to identify the approach as incompatible with Rousseau’s. However, the use of Dewey’s “recitation room” indicates another unique connection between he and Rousseau. The need to design spaces and lessons through which the child is to “discover” their conclusions “on their own” is rather favorable to both. Dewey advocates for a certain degree of control and

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82

²¹ Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, 95–96.

²² Dewey, *The School and Society*, 63.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

direction by the teacher, as a contrast to the form of education that is entirely child-centered and directed. In criticizing the latter approach, Dewey writes:

The child is expected to ‘develop’ this or that fact or truth out of his own mind. He is told to think things out, or work things out for himself, without being supplied any of the environing conditions which are requisite to start and guide thought. Nothing can be developed from nothing; nothing but the crude can be developed out of the crude—and this is what surely happens when we throw the child back upon his achieved self as a finality, and invite him to spin new truths of nature or of conduct out of that. It is certainly as futile to expect a child to evolve a universe out of his own mere mind as it is for a philosopher to attempt that task.²⁶

This “spinning of new truths” is the danger that Rousseau was seeking to avoid in his education of Emile. He did not want his student to develop his own conclusions based on the strongest of his passions.²⁷ Rather, the passions needed to be controlled and tested in environments while the child was young and guided, so he would be properly equipped to handle emotion as an adult. Designing such an artifice to replicate the world that students may encounter as adults is not easy. And Dewey recognizes this as a potential problem: “How shall we retain these advantages, and yet introduce into the school something representing the other side of life—occupations which exact personal responsibilities and which train the child with relation to the physical realities of life?”²⁸

EXIT THE TEACHER / ENTER SOCIETY

When considering these models of education, the teacher plays an indispensable role. He or she is there to design, consult, guide, advise, deflect and direct the student. Rousseau’s tutor is intended to be the only person with whom the child has consistent interaction, making for a specified, if not magnified, role in the child’s life.²⁹ With this model, Rousseau is intending for the tutor to be omnipresent, omniscient, and the most important and directive voice in Emile’s life. This kind of full-time orchestration and commitment to the child’s development, from diapers to marriage, requires an unusual if not impossible form of dedication from a teacher. Rousseau intends for Emile to grow up being the most natural of men, dependent on his own reason, self-respect, and self-love.³⁰ Emile is to become a man who is not a part of society,

²⁶ Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, 102–03.

²⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 92.

²⁸ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 13.

²⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 55.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

but able to function in it, with strength that persists through the temptations of vice, corruption, pettiness, and lack of commitment.³¹ However, Emile's life is spent hidden from society; in his final constitution as a newlywed adult, he is utterly dependent on the gaze and guidance of his wife and tutor, thus making him not a truly independent or fully functioning adult. He is unnatural. If Emile were to be raised with the same training of his emotions, reason, and competencies in an environment surrounded by real people and situations, (not those fully staged, as with Rousseau's contrivances³²), he might have been better prepared to live and work in relation to society, and to accept the relationship between himself, others, and his government.

It is perhaps precisely what Rousseau keeps from Emile that could have truly saved him. Emile is to be the best form of man in society, but he has no early practice in it. This is where Dewey diverges greatly from Rousseau's model of education. For Dewey, the child must be raised in a social environment from the beginning, providing "the development of a spirit of social cooperation and community life."³³ The teacher, in Dewey's school, plays a different role than Rousseau's tutor. Both kinds of educators are charged with teaching children to learn through interpretation, and by encouraging children to apply understanding through experience—what Dewey calls "psychologizing."³⁴ However, the tutor is the sole individual on which Emile can depend, and must be incredibly well-trained and informed as to provide superior background for Emile's reference. This is not the case for Dewey's teacher, as this teacher exists in more of a balance between a "scientific" and "logical" content resource, who is concerned with inducing a "vital and personal experiencing" of this content.³⁵

THE NEED FOR CONTROL

Though Dewey departs from Rousseau's individual tutor model in favor of the school, the need for control by the teacher is still very present. I believe that Dewey has outlined a form of education that could better prepare young people to function in society than what Rousseau has done for Emile. Rousseau's dismissal of human interaction as important for the appropriate socialization and context building for the child is more than oversight; it is a wounding flaw. For this reason, I feel that Dewey churns out a more "natural" man able to function in a real society. Granted, Rousseau is preparing a man for a future society that did not yet exist. Dewey's approach is not future-oriented, rather, he outlines education as a "social process" for the present.³⁶ And though Dewey outlines a more "natural" approach to learning through the weaving of

³¹ Ibid., 84.

³² Ibid., 205.

³³ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 15.

³⁴ Ibid., 105.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 59.

context and content through experience in a community and embryonic society,³⁷ there is still a need for control by the teacher. Rousseau's level of control is perhaps over-calculated, as he cites the need for passion-controlling lessons to be carried out step-by-step, and even into the marriage of the student³⁸—an almost impossible charge. Dewey, on the other hand, doesn't insist on the prescribed curriculum with a child's future self as a goal, nor is he in favor of letting the child roam through his or her education with the goal of "self-realization."³⁹

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: WHEN THE TEACHER NEVER EXITS

In an effort to provide devotees of experiential learning with a challenge to the practice of experience facilitation, I aim to bring contemporary theories of experiential learning into light with the above conversation of Rousseau's and Dewey's philosophies of learning through experience. The term *experiential learning* is rather nebulous, used to describe learning through many different forms of activity, and quite often associated with any kind of learning outside of the classroom. Experiential learning is used interchangeably with, and as an umbrella term for, adventure education, environmental education, outdoor education, practical education, professional education, career education, and cooperative education. Though these above fields vary in interpretation and practice, one central element to these theories of learning involves a component and/or cycle of reflection. In the field of experiential learning, the oft-referenced model is that of educational theorist David Kolb. In his classic model, learning occurs in a four-step cycle in which concrete experience leads to reflective observation, which leads to abstract conceptualization, which leads to active experimentation in new situations, which then leads the learner to another concrete experience.⁴⁰ The learner's reflection on his or her experience is the essential catalyst to making what is at-hand more than an insignificant activity, or as Dewey explains, "The new facts and new ideas thus obtained become the ground for further experiences in which new problems are presented. The process is a continuous spiral."⁴¹ Other contemporary experiential learning theorists, like Donald Schön, base their understanding of the practical application of learning in a "looping" reflective practice, arguing that reflection is what makes the work professional.⁴² Dewey

³⁷ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 16.

³⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, 99, 475.

³⁹ Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, 98.

⁴⁰ David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984), 30. This four-step cycle was inspired by the learning models of Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget, but most closely Lewin.

⁴¹ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 79.

⁴² Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Vol. 5126 (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

also introduces a fairly coarse division of what makes the human experience different when thoughtful reflection and adjustment are absent: “The difference between civilization and savagery, to take an example on a large scale, is found in the degree in which previous experiences have changed the objective conditions under which subsequent experiences take place.”⁴³ And the cycles of cycles multiply, with Schön having a single-loop and double-loop reflective process,⁴⁴ Kolb inspiring the government of New Zealand to adopt an “experiential learning spiral,”⁴⁵ and other theorists generating even more models (with prodigious use of arrows) for educators to consider.⁴⁶

These models are mentioned not to critique their originality nor effectiveness at helping people better understand the process of learning, rather, I aim to suggest the quite significant way in which the educator is made even more essential to the learner in experiential learning. And though Dewey derides the overly controlling pedagogy of “traditional education,” in favor of a more student-oriented approach,⁴⁷ the language of contemporary experiential education theorists can appear to emphasize teacher-centered intervention. Reflection for the learner is not necessarily a solitary act, rather, there is often a facilitator embedded in the periphery of the experience, providing the probing questions to the learner. Teacher-centric or facilitator-dependent learning can be interpreted as the ideal in contemporary practices of experiential learning, as espoused by the The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE), a leading association for the field of experiential learning. NSEE propagates a training document called the *Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities*, which begins with the statement:

Regardless of the experiential learning activity, both the experience and the learning are fundamental. In the learning process and in the relationship between the learner and any facilitator(s) of learning, there is a mutual responsibility. All parties are empowered to achieve the principles which follow. Yet, at the same time, the facilitator(s) of learning are expected to take the lead in ensuring both the quality of the learning experience and of the work produced, and in

⁴³ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 39.

⁴⁴ Schon originally published the looping techniques for reflection on action with Chris Argyris in 1978. Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective* (Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley, 1978).

⁴⁵ Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb. “The Learning Way: Meta-cognitive Aspects of Experiential Learning,” *Simulation & Gaming* 40, no. 3 (2009): 310.

⁴⁶ Some other experiential learning theorists with unique or Kolb-inspired models include James Zull, J. William Pfeiffer and John Jones.

⁴⁷ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 38

supporting the learner to use the principles, which underlie the pedagogy of experiential education.⁴⁸

In what ways is “taking the lead” an impediment to the learner’s exploration of learning? Is it possible for the facilitator/educator to move from a “mutually responsible” role to that of essential, and in what ways does this process encourage the educator to over-engineer the learner’s experience?

Any classroom teacher worth their salt would not argue with the benefit, if not need, of an educator to a student’s process of discovery. Educators are the ones who assist the student in connecting one lesson to the next, or arranging the situation/content/activity through which the learner is to explore; this assistance is usually laden with particular assumptions about what the student is to gain. In the United States, all states have set standards of content and/or skills which are, by law, necessary for K–12 teachers to assist children in attaining. Dewey says: “It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading.”⁴⁹ The idea that learning must be structured is nothing new. Even in his development and defense of learning through experience, Dewey was sure to state that even though progressive education was a reaction to traditional education, it surely was not “planless improvisation.”⁵⁰ Even though the process of learning through experience is an interaction between the learner and his or her environment,⁵¹ the role of the educator is essential, to not only the arrangement of the activity, but also to the identification of what experience is of value.⁵² If that is the case, how are we to know what is of value? And from whose perspective? The state of Ohio says that there is certain information that is of value to learn,⁵³ and Dewey and other progressives might argue that there are “inherent values”⁵⁴ in learning through experience that better prepares individuals with an inclination for participation in a democracy.⁵⁵ It is here that I wish to reintroduce Rousseau’s design for

⁴⁸ “Eight Principles of Good Practice for all Experiential Learning Activities,” National Society for Experiential Education. Presented at the 1998 Annual Meeting, Norfolk, VA. Last updated December 9, 2013, <http://www.nsee.org/8-principles>. The key concepts of the eight principles are: “Intention,” “Preparedness and Planning,” “Authenticity,” “Reflection,” “Orientation and Training,” “Monitoring and Continuous Improvement,” “Assessment and Evaluation,” and “Acknowledgment.”

⁴⁹ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵² Dewey writes from the perspective that certain values are better than others: “Above all, they (educators) should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social that exist to extract from them all that they have to contribute to *building up experiences that are worth while*.” Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 40, emphasis added.

⁵³ Here I am referencing state standards, which until the introduction of The Common Core in 2013, were significantly topic- and content-based.

⁵⁴ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 35.

⁵⁵ Dewey, *The School and Society*, 21-22.

experiential learning, in which the student believes they are encountering reality, but in fact, an educator is staging the experience. When first considering the examples of the tutor arranging Emile's "lessons," I was appalled at the synthetic circumstances the teacher concocts in order for Emile to develop particular beliefs and dispositions, which were assumed to make Emile better function in an ideal society.⁵⁶ In addition, Rousseau's hope for a "natural man" is ironically imbalanced while he so intentionally designs each and every experience for the child. Considering this, one may see Dewey's and other contemporary experiential learning theorists' methods tinged with the same control-oriented and selective value-laden staging, or facilitating, of experience. The line between student-developed values and teacher-driven values is precariously thin. Though one should not assume that value-free or neutral understanding of learning and experience is possible, it is quite a different matter for students to not be able to thoughtfully identify the sources of their own opinions and values.

Jay Roberts, contemporary experiential education theorist, provides a critical layer to blind subscription to Dewey's framing of learning through experience. He recognizes the need to interpret the process of learning through the lenses of critical and feminist theorists like Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Michael Apple, Pierre Bourdieu, and Patricia Hill Collins, in which the learner can appropriately know to judge society, including the learning environment:

Thus, to Freire and others in this variation, the central aim of education is not a homogeneous form of associated living and social harmony, as sometimes argued by pragmatists, or a more individual and transcendent self-actualization as a Romantic and phenomenological position would emphasize . . . schooling (like experience) is not seen as a neutral process . . . any educational processes (including experiential ones) are immediately viewed with suspicion and a critical eye to examine the ways in which experience can be employed for hegemonic purposes.⁵⁷

Thus, judgment must be introduced in order to provide the learner with ways to not only challenge what they are experiencing, but to also better position and challenge the system and educators who are designing/facilitating the experience.

⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, 84.

⁵⁷ Jay Roberts, "From Experience to Neo-Experientialism: Variations on a Theme." *Journal of Experiential Education* Fall (2008): 27. In his blog, Roberts writes to counter the delivery of "shallow" experiential education, such as "The internship with no support, the boring field trip, and the disconnected service project." "Deep" experiential learning is intended to be quite intentional, and pulls students into critical reflection on the experience and their lives. These steps reference Dewey's work significantly. Jay Roberts Blog, <http://jaywroberts.wordpress.com>.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to not only highlight the contemporary inheritance of experiential learning theory from Rousseau and Dewey, but to also invite educators who identify themselves as experiential learning practitioners to reflect upon their own experiential pedagogy. Current practitioners and leading proponents of experiential learning, like the National Society for Experiential Education, espouse an “intentional” and natural or “authentic” learning arrangement, with the essential role of the educator as designer and director of the student learning experience.⁵⁸ And though Dewey warns against the dangers of teacher imposition at the expense of student curiosity and independence,⁵⁹ contemporary practitioners employing a facilitator-centric model could find themselves on the slippery slope of overcalculation and engineering, à la Rousseau’s omnipresent tutor sharing a room with Emile. Thus, with the invitation to practitioners to reflect on their own roles and intents in designing experiential learning for students is included the consideration of Roberts’s critical layer.⁶⁰ Neutrality, like Rousseau’s assumed “natural learning,” is impossible to obtain, but recognition of and reflection on the structures which involve the learning arrangement itself could provide some element for the student to better understand his or her actions and the role of the educator facilitating the experience.

⁵⁸ Here, I am referencing two of the principles of the National Society for Experiential Learning’s “Eight Principles of Good Practice for all Experiential Learning Activities”: “Intention” and “Authenticity.”

⁵⁹ Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 38.

⁶⁰ Roberts, “From Experience to Neo-Experientialism,” 22.
