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Reflections on the Croce–Dewey exchange

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The well-known dispute between Benedetto Croce and John Dewey had several elements at its origin. This article provides a systematic overview of the issues that impinged on this affair, and of the many studies which have dwelt on the exchange between these two philosophers. The underlying American anti-Hegelianism, the language problem and the actual differences in thinking on aesthetics are all fundamental to this mutual misunderstanding. The reasons why Croce had made a limited impact in the United States are discussed. The analysis concludes by highlighting the socio-ethical aspects of Deweyan aesthetics.

Keywords: Croce; Dewey; aesthetics; pragmatism; Hegelianism; idealism

Introduction

The well-known dispute between Benedetto Croce and John Dewey ran across the late 1940s and early 1950s, and injected those years with the intellectual passion of an earlier era. At the time it generated a fair degree of interest, more among American thinkers than Italian ones. Basic evidence of this comes from the first tool that the scholar employs when embarking on the research and reconstruction of a philosophical issue, the bibliography: a review of publications just after the opening of hostilities between Croce and Dewey – almost entirely consisting of short pieces and articles that appeared in various journals – indicates that America was the principal arena for the dispute. The fact that there are very few translations into Italian of articles published in the United States on this issue, in contrast to the situation across the Atlantic where there was much greater discussion, confirms this.

The Croce–Dewey affair will be reconstructed by retracing the most significant episodes of this clash. The starting point was Croce's review of *Art as Experience*, the important work by Dewey published in 1934. It is worth noting, to give an idea of the nature of the exchange, that this review came out a full six years after Dewey's book; its first appearance was in 1940 in *La Critica*, the journal that Croce himself edited, with the title 'Intorno all'estetica del Dewey', and subsequently it became the twelfth chapter of the second volume of Croce's *Discorsi di varia filosofia*, published in 1945 (1940, 1945). It was only in 1948, eight years after that first appearance, that the review finally became available in English: it was translated by Katherine Gilbert and published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, known internationally by the acronym 'JAAC', which was to

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become anything but calm waters for Croce and Dewey. Gilbert's translation of the Italian title was faithful: it became 'On the aesthetics of Dewey' (Croce 1948a).

However, the real point of interest, or at least its reverberations, lay elsewhere. In other words, the most interesting aspect of this initial phase of the affair was not the fact that someone had made a review by Croce, not even a whole book, available in English. This reflected the fact that Croce and his thinking had already been percolating through to the United States from the early years of the twentieth century, and perhaps followed from the interest that Croce aroused across the Atlantic. This interest was then amplified by the ambivalence, not to mention the ill will, with which Croce was often discussed in the United States: this is an issue that merits a full discussion. We might refer to just one of the main studies regarding Croce's penetration of America, by Frederic Simoni (1952), which also appeared in the *JAAC* and had the evocative title 'Benedetto Croce: A case of international misunderstanding'.

Croce, moreover, had been known about across the Atlantic even before the publication in 1902 of his *Estetica*. His renown dated from the point when the American journal *The Nation* showed an interest in his thinking, principally thanks to the young academic Joel Spingarn who was to become his first advocate in the United States. Although people knew about him, this did not necessarily mean that he was studied, or that his philosophy was well known or understood, as will become clear. The reason for the 'international misunderstanding' lays, in essence, in the poor understanding of Croce in America, which was related to various factors.

The real point of interest was instead the fact that the editors of the *JAAC* decided to publish a brief comment by Dewey (1948) on Croce's review of his book, as a supplement to Gilbert's translation. This was then followed by the Neapolitan's response, an inevitability given his character, which appeared in the *JAAC* in 1952 with the title 'Dewey's aesthetics and theory of knowledge'.[1] Here, at least as regards the two who were directly involved, the matter closed. It generated a small number of articles and contributions which, according to the main American followers of this affair, did not add much. The philosophical confusion, however, was not due to the qualitative or quantitative poverty of the studies which came out after the Croce–Dewey exchange, or at least not only due to this, as in fact some of these contributions were most certainly valuable.

As a perceptive American Croce scholar, G.H. Douglas, reminds us, the 'Dewey–Croce case' is complex not least because of its protagonists themselves: not so much for the part played by Dewey, which as mentioned above concluded with a brief comment on Croce's review, as for the two pieces by the reviewer, which 'although richer and historically more interesting than Dewey's [contribution], raise so many issues hastily and in such a general way that they do not by themselves provide sufficient insights into the key difficulties' (Douglas 1970, 497).

The principal aim here, alongside a reconstruction which brings some order to the range of documentation, is to discern whether Croce was right in stating the intellectual proximity, almost the shared nature of thinking and ideas, between himself and the American, first through his review and then in his reply to Dewey. Alternatively, it might be concluded that Dewey was in the right in his haste to label the Neapolitan's view as mistaken: he highlighted the many differences between the two of them, outnumbering and outweighing the possible similarities so completely as to render these merely incidental. However, as will be seen towards the end of this article, the attempt to grasp the

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convergences and divergences turns into an issue of a rather different nature: the autonomy of morality, or its socio-ethical importance.

Anti-Hegelianism

With the above aim in mind, the American cultural backdrop which characterised the first half of the last century has to be taken into consideration. It was pervaded by a radical anti-Hegelianism, which was not particularly covert. The issue thus seems to lie not in the actual divergences between the two thinkers under discussion, but elsewhere. It almost seems that the 18 points that Croce carefully identifies in the Deweyan theory of aesthetics, and which he reduces and traces back to his own thinking, are not the real object of the dispute, although his words sound unequivocal:

> Dewey expressly mentions my studies more than once in the course of his argument, not to make use of their concepts, for example of my criticism of the separation of the arts from each other; but more often to exorcise with horror, as I said above, my somewhat mad "idealistic" (or rather "organic") way of philosophizing. Even so, an Italian reader is pleasantly surprised to meet on every page observations and theories long since formulated in Italy and familiar to him. (Croce 1948a, 203)[2]

It seems instead to be very significant that Croce agreed with the position taken by S.C. Pepper (1939, 369–89), who saw Dewey's aesthetics as inconsistent with his pragmatism and almost better seen as a sort of organicism, and who therefore invited him to either modify his theory of aesthetics or else declare himself openly Hegelian. In any case, Dewey – Croce reminds us – states:

> ... that he remains a pragmatist and has not become an idealist because he does not deduce his aesthetic theory, but makes it spring from the examination of the material before him; moreover, that the terms which he uses, even if to be found in idealistic aesthetics, do not carry in his usage the same signification. In this way he tries to pass off a question of ideas as a question of vocabulary. (Croce 1948a, 205)

Although Pepper can be placed in the Crocean defensive line, there were naturally many more writers who supported Dewey, who had the advantage of home ground. These included Thomas Munro, the editor of the *JAAC*, which had sponsored the whole affair, who in a letter dated 31 October 1947 wrote to Dewey as follows:

> It goes without saying that I am on your side in this matter, and strongly opposed to most of Croce's theory in aesthetics. However, I know that you have always enjoyed a good controversy. I would not like to publish the Croce article without some assurance that you would answer it – if possible, in the same issue of the Journal. If so, I think the exchange of views would be very valuable to students who would like to get a clear idea of the relation between your views and those of Croce. Mrs. Gilbert [who translated Croce's review] brought back a recent photograph of Croce, which I have thought of publishing along with his article. May I have a recent one of you, or can you tell me where to get hold of one? (Munro 2005)

Two weeks later Dewey replied to Munro, enclosing the famous response to Croce, with a succinct note: '[i]f I said anything about the brevity of the enclosed it would only say over again that what I tried to do in the book [*Art as Experience*] and what Croce assumes I was trying to do are too far apart' (Dewey 2005a).

While Munro's position might be set aside because of its partisan nature, Pepper's had the merit of dissecting the issue, dwelling on the role of idealism. However, the problem

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was certainly not to do with Dewey's possible Hegelianism in Croce's eyes, but instead concerned the Hegelianism that in the United States was associated with Croce. Moreover, when Croce invited Dewey to reconsider his own thinking within the currents of idealism, he was not constructing an apologia for idealistic philosophy but instead distancing himself from this, in careful and measured fashion, explaining why Dewey had not grasped the true nature of his own philosophy:

> Perhaps his thought is dominated by the traditional Anglo-Saxon empiricism. Perhaps also the fanaticism and emptiness of the orthodoxy of the Kantians and Hegelians who were his first masters in America stirred in him a revolt which has not yet quieted down. Perhaps this feeling of revolt has prevented him from seeing that the Hegelian and related structures have fallen to pieces and that the Absolute which he found so forbidding, no longer exists as such, but has become one with the world, experience, and history; that the new philosophy has rejected the static elements of Hegelianism in order to preserve and develop the dynamic ones. (Croce 1948a, 207)

The wish to disparage pragmatism was overly strong in Croce, who said: 'I would not be honest if I did not say that Pragmatism does not seem to me to have the importance that it has been given in America and in various parts of Europe' (Croce 1952a, 292). As A. Granese points out (2002, 72), Croce was certainly not in agreement with Ugo Spirito who argued that pragmatism had been excessively and unfairly belittled, particularly in Italy.

The issue of Hegelianism therefore has to be addressed in order to unlock this complex matter. One of the most important studies of the Croce–Dewey exchange, by Simoni (1952), emphasizes this point. In Simoni's view, the lack of understanding experienced by Croce in his transfer across the Atlantic was related to his encounter with the anti-Hegelianism that was rampant in the United States, rather than to actual theoretical differences. Put another way, Croce had a poor reception in the United States because he was cursorily categorised and simplistically viewed as being aligned with Hegelianism, which was strongly resisted. According to Simoni's well-known study, this lack of understanding was mainly attributable to the philosopher Jorge (George) Santayana, born in Madrid: in 1903, Santayana reviewed Croce's *L'Estetica* in the *Journal of Comparative Literature*, which also owed its establishment to Spingarn, mentioned earlier. This review was heard as a condemnation in the United States, as the Crocean theory of aesthetics was written off as a model that suffered from 'the barrenness of any strictly transcendental philosophy' (Santayana 1903, 191). The Spanish philosopher was not in fact addressing Croce on his own, but instead situated him within a more miscellaneous grouping: '[i]ndeed, only a literary philosophy, like transcendental idealism and the "historiography" of Croce, Hegel, and Dewey, could have conceived that "Experience" was the one and only reality. For science, experience has conditions: for poetry, it is the stuff all the worlds are made of' (Santayana 2005). Croce not only rejected Santayana's opinion, but expressed his belief that Santayana had not even read his book in order to review it.

This is regarded as the turning point, an undeniably negative one, in the relationship between Croce and the United States, and it provides the backdrop to the Croce–Dewey exchange. It would be naive to think that a single review could be so important as to colour 50 years of philosophical judgements, but it would also be unwise not to recognise its real effect: the degree to which Croce was classified with undue haste by much of the American intelligentsia. The judgement in Santayana's review could just as easily have been formulated by any other American academic of the early years of the twentieth century, although – and this needs to be spelt out in view of what follows – Santayana, by

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birth Spanish but subsequently thought of as an American philosopher due to having spent about 40 years of his life in the United States, lived in Rome and spoke (and read) Italian without any difficulty. The impact of his review was amplified by the repetition of his negative assessment of Croce in an article that appeared the following year in *The Philosophical Review* (1904), and the re-publication of both pieces in the collection *Obiter Scripta* (1936). This was really unusual, considering that very few Italian books were reviewed in the United States, and that when this did happen they never had more than one review devoted to them.

The language issue

According to Simoni, once again, one of the main reasons for the uncomprehending reception of Croce's thinking in the United States, over and above the Hegelian problem, was very simple: Croce wrote, and wrote prolifically, in Italian. Anyone who wanted to explore his philosophy had to either know the Italian language, not a very common eventuality in the United States at that time, or, of necessity, read translations: these were limited in both number and quality. This is the picture that Simoni paints in 1952:

> Since few Americans read Italian, those who are interested are forced to read translations, which are few and on the whole not too readable, or they are driven to read unreliable or sketchy secondary sources, thus perpetuating the misunderstandings with greater force. (1952, 7)

The note that E.F. Carritt felt he should add to the introduction to *My philosophy*, the collection of various works by Croce, which he had translated and which came out in 1949, reads like a pre-emptive statement, almost as if he wanted to avoid any blame for improper translation:[3]

> The selection of these essays was not my own. Many of their metaphysical presuppositions and conclusions I am unable to accept. But my admiration for their author as a writer on aesthetics and politics and also as a man induced me to adventure their translation. Translations are notoriously frail; for, as the French proverb has it, when they are handsome, they are not faithful and when faithful not handsome. (Carritt 1949, 5)[4]

Simoni once again provides a valuable pointer, stating that the only good translation of the *Breviario* was produced by the London publisher Heinemann in 1921, but that not long after publication it went out of print and became unavailable.[5] Apart from this, the writing by Croce available in English was his entry on 'Aesthetics' produced for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.[6]

When we put together the full range of factors, namely the number of works written by Croce, the density of much of his production and the near-impossibility (for language reasons) of gaining access to a great deal of this, the result is very clear. Trying to understand Croce's thinking equipped with only the English language was like trying to understand an artist having seen only one of his/her pictures, or on the basis of random reports. All these ventures are doomed to an incomplete or flawed outcome, or to complete failure. It would certainly be unfair to think that every American scholar concluded that Croce's philosophy could not be of value because of its inaccessibility: the language difficulty provides a justification for going no further, which is not a crime in itself. There are the general mitigating circumstances of American anti-Hegelianism, against which backdrop Croce was labelled a Hegelian, but it is difficult to excuse the intellectual

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carelessness with which the view of Croce was reached. I am not intending to demonstrate here how much Croce wanted to distance himself from Hegel, starting with the logic, nor would it serve much purpose to revisit a debate which has long since run its course.

The political assessment

Judgment of Croce as a philosopher was at that point compromised to such an extent that Dewey, in his reply to Croce's review, did not extend his generosity beyond an admission that the Neapolitan's opposition to Mussolini was something that deserved praise:

> I fully appreciate the attention given *Art as Experience* by the distinguished Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce – as I appreciate his heroic resistance to the wave of Fascism which swept so many Italian thinkers and educators off their feet. That he should have read my book and then have taken the trouble to write about it for publication in another country commands and receives my hearty thanks. (Dewey 1948, 207)

This was not of course a judgement of Croce as a philosopher, but rather of Croce as a man and a political being. But even on the political level, this idea that Dewey expressed, while it might have attracted a degree of support, did not necessarily reflect general opinion. It was in fact one of Dewey's students, Irwin Edman, who was also a follower of Santayana, who crossed swords with Dorothy Thompson over her favourable review of Croce's *Il dissidio spirituale della Germania con l'Europa* (1944): according to Edman, Croce was 'very traditionally German, very much a follower of Hegel' (Thompson 1944, 33). Regardless of any assessment of the importance that Crocean philosophy might have had as regards the consequences of Fascism, it was not uncommon to encounter opinions such as that of the historian Destler, discussed by Roberts, who saw Croce as:

> ... not only the major source of a deplorable new presentism in historiography, but also the outstanding exponent of a dangerous new philosophy that stressed relativism in values, impressionism in the arts, subjective activism for the individual, violence as a mode of social action, and success as the supreme value in public affairs. (Roberts 1995, 26)

According to Destler, Croce 'helped lay the intellectual foundations of Italian Fascism' (1950, 504). This provides an indication of the charged atmosphere that had already been created around Croce before his review appeared in the United States, and that persisted for some years, given that many were quite happy to keep this going.

It remains a fact, however, that despite these colourful misrepresentations Croce continued after his death to be cited as one of the most important European intellectuals of the twentieth century, and among those who had had the most influence in the United States or, at least, had made the most positive impression. His *Storia del Regno di Napoli* (1925) was published in English in 1970 by the University of Chicago Press in a series dedicated to 'classic European historians', and in H. Stuart Hughes's acknowledged *Consciousness and society*, published in 1958, Croce was placed alongside Freud and Weber as one of the central figures in an extraordinarily innovative generation (Roberts 1994, 271). Although Dewey's tone was less emphatic, he certainly lined up with other admirers of Croce as a political figure and opponent of Fascism. When a request came from Spingarn to join in solidarity with Croce, whose house had been searched and his

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personal library destroyed by a squad of Blackshirts, Dewey was quick to reply, in a letter dated 12 November 1926, as follows:

> My dear Dr Spingarn, I shall be glad to join in such a protest as you have telegraphed me about. I am sure you can word it better than I can; certainly a strong reference to Croce's international standing and repute in the world of scholarship and thought is appropriate and the shock it has given us all that such things can happen to a man of his high position. (Dewey 2005b)[7]

Seen one moment as a bulwark of Fascism, the next (by Guido Calogero) as an authority against Marxism, and finally as an expert and perceptive observer of the 'German question' (in the light of his experience of the Nazis), Croce had a considerable impact in the United States, which was not matched by the dissemination and understanding of his philosophy. Other than in a few isolated cases, he was warmly appreciated as a political figure and an intellectual in America; as a philosopher he did not have the same success, winning limited acceptance and very lukewarm support. Those with poor sight and weak hearing can only comprehend the most obvious and well-defined gestures: it was much easier for the Americans to understand Croce's opposition to the Fascist regime than to grasp his philosophy.

These attacks should not have seemed particularly new to Croce, all things considered. He had frequently come under fire from the Futurists, and was in fact their favourite target: he was the dedicatee, for example, of the performance with ample musical accompaniment entitled 'I funerali di un filosofo passatista' ('The funeral of a fogeyish philosopher'). For the Futurists, Croce was the emblem of traditionalism. In their declaration of 29 November 1914, 'In quest'anno futurista', F.T. Marinetti addresses Italian students with the exaggeration that typified the movement, lashing out at Croce in the final lines:

> Let us erase the glory of Rome with the even greater glory of Italy. Let us therefore fight against Germanic culture, not so as to defend the Latin, but rather to oppose both these equally noxious cultures, in defence of the creative Italian genius of today. Against Mommsen and Benedetto Croce, we pit the worldly-wise Italian. Later, we shall settle accounts with antimilitarist pacifists and internationalists, who have converted, in greater or lesser measure, to the War. Away with all debates! All of one mind and en masse against Austria! Our great purgative war is not in the hands of Salandra, but in your own! Desire it and we shall wage it! Start by sweeping out of the universities their old Germanophile janitors (De Lollis, Barzellotti, Benedetto Croce, et al.) whom we have all jeered together! (Marinetti 2006, 237)

From 1925 onwards, disputes were to become routine for Croce: the conflict with Giovanni Gentile was followed by one with another Minister for Education, the moral philosopher Balbino Giuliano, who in 1931 was to put into practice Gentile's suggested introduction of an oath of loyalty to the Fascist regime as well as to the monarchy and the constitution. Finally, there was the 'intellectual' dispute with Mussolini in the pages of the Neapolitan newspaper *Il Mattino*.

Returning to Santayana and the judgement he expressed in the review of Croce's *Aesthetic* ('barren transcendental philosophy'), we should register another episode, albeit anecdotal, which illustrates how the whole 'Croce in America' affair encompassed many smaller but significant disagreements: that between Croce and Dewey, naturally, but also the one between Croce and Santayana. With regard to the latter it is interesting to read the observations by Simoni, who was lucky enough to meet both of them:

> When I was in Rome in 1937, I asked Santayana for an interview, casually mentioning that I was planning to study in Naples in the near future. His reply was as revealing as it was witty: "Are your researches at Naples next year, I wonder, to be concerned with Croce or with the

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> submarine animals in the Aquarium? The descent to Avernus was also there..." When I reached Naples and had the privilege of meeting and becoming acquainted with Benedetto Croce, I could not help but compare the two personalities. Santayana lived aloof and secluded in his room in the Hotel Bristol, Rome, and was more difficult for most people to see than the Pope.... Croce, on the other hand, is the most democratic man I have ever met. Every evening his home was full of friends, both young and old, and no introduction was necessary to meet him. They would meet to discuss democratically the problems of the day, and to ask his advice in various fields of scholarship.... When one reflects upon Santayana's preoccupation with the "realm of essence" and upon Croce's theoretical as well as practical concern with real historical events, one wonders to whom the phrase "transcendental philosophy" more aptly applies. (Simoni 1952, 9)

It is said that there is always a certain amount of truth in clichés and fables. It is clear that in the Croce–Dewey affair clichés carried great weight, while it was actually very difficult to unearth the truth which should in theory have lain somewhere within. In fact, as Douglas says:

> ...the truth is that Croce had at no time in his career fallen under the spell of the Hegelian dialectic and had from the start been developing an empirical philosophy of experience which is not greatly different in direction, however different in language and expression, from the kind of philosophy encountered in Dewey's *Experience and Nature*. But as far as Dewey and much of the Anglo-American philosophical world are concerned, Croce was never able to free himself from the Hegelian stereotype. (Douglas 1970, 499)

Concern about this certainly distressed the Neapolitan philosopher, who must have felt it weigh heavily, as he pleaded to be freed from the burden of Hegelianism:

> Since I had to find a name for my edifice, to the term 'idealism', which has become vague and equivocal, I preferred 'absolute history'.[8] I must protest against the identification of this philosophy, some of whose features I have indicated, with Hegelianism, and against its baptism as 'Italian neo-Hegelianism'. (Croce 1949, 19)

A dispute about aesthetics

It is not necessary to spend time here on Croce's overturning of Hegelianism; it should, however, be made clear that 'such gross misunderstandings are not current in Great Britain, where Croce's philosophy has received a sympathetic hearing, and has been interpreted by such careful scholars as J.A. Smith of Oxford and R.G. Collingwood' (Simoni 1952, 10). There were of course American studies and scholars who were more scrupulous in their consideration of Crocean aesthetics: Orsini (1953, 1961), Romanell (1949), and Gullace (1981), for example, were all interested in Croce even after his death, although they gave a lot of attention to particular, almost technical, aspects of Croce's theory of art while still skimming over his historicist vision. Some studies also emerged on his theory and history of literary criticism, including one by Wimsatt and Brooks (1957).

For complete fairness, it should also be acknowledged that Croce himself, in his evaluation of Dewey and his philosophy of aesthetics, was not entirely free of clichéd misinterpretations. Just as Dewey and the Anglo-Americans in general were convinced of Croce's Hegelianism, Croce entertained the idea that Dewey had made use of some Italian writers (and obviously this included reference to Croce himself) in the development of his thinking. This view is also taken by M.E. Moss, who states that 'Dewey was, probably, influenced by Croce: either directly, by reading English translations of his works, or

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indirectly, when he was at Columbia, through his dealings at the university with Professor Joel Spingarn' (Moss 2002, 25).[9]

Croce's idea that Dewey had a weak and confused acquaintance with his theory of art, which he made explicit in his review of *Art as Experience*, if anything provides evidence in favour of the American: it shows his lack of familiarity with Crocean thinking, rather than any bad faith. If Dewey's main sources had been the English translations of Croce's work, he should at least be conceded mitigating circumstances, given the quantity and quality of the translations available at the time, as discussed previously. It should be said that bad faith cannot be attributed to Croce either: he had, rather, probably formed his opinion on the basis of the numerous similarities that he himself identified between his own and Dewey's theories of art.

In any case, as Douglas suggests, rather than viewing those similarities as having arisen in an underhand way:

> [Croce] might instead have satisfied himself that they were merely harmonious with his own theories in a number of areas. Similarly, Dewey, in brushing off the suggestion that he had been influenced by Croce and other Italian writers, might well have been earnest enough to look at Croce's eighteen points of agreement and realize that they could be suggestive of a wide area of common sympathy and harmoniousness. (Douglas 1970, 499–500)

To make this more explicit: rather than entrenching themselves in extreme positions – Croce stating that the common ground between the two theories of aesthetics showed that Dewey was indebted to Italian thinking, and Dewey stating that there was no common ground between his own theory and that of Croce or of any other notional Italian inspiration – the two philosophers could have attempted to find some midpoint where they could agree. Both could have stated that the similarities between their two theories indicated nothing more than their shared wish to know and understand the theory of art. This, moreover, would not have required the use of insincere diplomacy, as it was simply the truth, or what came closest to a plausible and uncontentious truth that could be shared.

Dewey and Croce certainly differ in their use of terminology, and some developments that the former emphasises are not present in the latter at all, and vice versa. For Croce the aesthetic experience is not linked to any biological perspective, whereas it is for Dewey, who relates art back to the natural history of forms; and for Dewey, there is no development of the theory in terms of the Mind. Nevertheless, it is the case that for both of them the aesthetic experience is an existential one: aesthetic experience is the dimension within which human life realises itself. If one analyses *Art as Experience*, the idea of experience is very clearly defined:

> We have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. (Dewey 1934, 35)

It is in fact around the concept of 'experience', located in the title of his work, where Dewey believes the greatest misunderstanding of his theory arises, since the concept of experience is the victim of facile distortions by empiricists and historicists, who – as the pragmatic theory of knowing has shown – have a 'systematic failure to connect experiences

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with the processes and operation of human life AS life' (Dewey 1948, 208). Somewhat as the Futurists referred to Croce with their talk of 'old Germanophile caretakers' and 'fogeyish philosophers', Dewey is clearly referring to the Neapolitan when he mentions empiricists and historicists.

What Dewey criticises Croce for, getting to the philosophical heart of the matter, is the use that he makes of the term 'expression', inasmuch as it is closely connected to the term 'intuition'. It is not very clear why Dewey focuses on this latter term, as when Croce discusses expression he does this in clear contrast to the term 'impression', and simply formulates a view very close to that of Dewey: 'impressions' are collections of 'psychic facts', meaning that raw and unordered material that an uninterrupted flow of stimuli represents. These really are 'psychic facts', as:

> ... art is *vision* or *intuition*. The artist produces an image or a phantasm.... "Intuition", "vision", "contemplation", "imagination", "fancy", "figurations", "representations", and so on, are words continually recurring, like synonyms, when discoursing upon art.... But this reply of mine, that art is intuition... denies, above all, that art is a *physical fact*.... Another negation is implied in the definition of art as intuition: if it be intuition, and intuition is equivalent to *theory* in the original sense of contemplation, art cannot be a utilitarian act.... A third negation, effected by means of the theory of art as intuition, is that of art as a *moral act*. (Croce 1921, 8–13)

And then 'what function can a world of pure images without philosophical, historical, religious or scientific value, and without even moral or hedonistic value, possess in the spirit of man?... can it ever be art?' (Croce 1921, 23). But art is existence, and the aesthetic is life, and is real; this is perhaps the only real point that the two philosophers have in common, described by P. Di Giovanni as the third way in their clash (2002, 25). In Croce's thinking true art is not its physical manifestation, because physical objects, which are constructs of the intellect, are not the real works of art. Moreover the reduction of art to its physical features divests it of its real nature:

> ... turning from the sense of a poem and ceasing to enjoy it, we set ourselves, for example, to count the words of which the poem is composed and to divide them into syllables and letters; or, disregarding the aesthetic effect of a statue, we weigh and measure it: a most useful performance for the packers of statues, as is the other for the typographers who have to "compose" pages of poetry; but most useless for the contemplator and student of art. (Croce 1921, 10–11)

Spiritual activity, which occurs through expression, gives an organic order to the confused mass of impressions. In this, the two philosophers are not that far away from each other. As Douglas says, the idea that 'the human spirit is developed out of the flux of animal life by means of individuating expressive qualities is obviously a common shared belief of Dewey and Croce' (1970, 501). However, Dewey felt that he needed to counter Croce over this way of understanding experience, which was so closely connected to what is experienced. The fact that the latter connected 'expressions' and 'intuitions' so closely (Croce 1921, 41) led Dewey to fear that from a theory of intuitions one might derive a theory of knowledge and, particularly, of knowledge in relation to mental faculties independent of experience. The most extreme position within theories of the mind, which Dewey always opposed in his writings, hypostatises the mind, treating it as a distinct and autonomous entity which is capable of activity independent from its corporeal environment and from reality in general. Linking aesthetic experience to a theory of intuitions, that is to an absolute conception of the mind, implies the assumption that aesthetic

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experience is only a product of the mind, and leads to an emphasis on the distinction between aesthetic activity and other types of experience, which is to say a separation of aesthetic activity from the lived reality.

This is the issue which Patrick Romanell also emphasises. He reminds us why Dewey did not acknowledge any thinking shared with Croce: '[t]he reason given for the absence of common ground is that his critic's avowed attempt "to establish the place of art in the system of mind" and his own proposal to understand the place of art in the life of man are at odds in purpose' (Romanell 1949, 125). Dewey carefully opened his response to Croce's review by making it clear, with pointed subtlety, that this was not a reply as such:

> I regret that what I have to say is largely of the nature of a comment rather than being a reply in any distinctive sense of that word. For a reply, as I understand the word, requires a common ground on which both parties stand and from which deviations and departures can be measured. I do not find such a common ground in this present case. (Dewey 1948, 207)

In other words, as Douglas explains, accepting Croce's theory of aesthetics would have meant much more to Dewey than just accepting a theory of intuitions, which carried all the implications we have discussed; Dewey would in fact have had to accept Crocean historicism, which he saw as a philosophy to be rejected. In spite of this:

> There is some reason to suppose that if he had been able to think of the historicism of *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience* as his consistent philosophical position, he would have written with more sympathy of Croce's aesthetic and doubtless of the philosophy of spirit as well. (Douglas 1970, 504)

And yet, particularly in his *Aesthetic*, but also in the *Breviario*, Croce never considers intuitions as autonomous states of mind; by contrast, he associates them with the activity of expression. An intuition does not exist if an impression is not transformed into a completed image by the Mind. Clearly this does not necessarily mean the material realisation of the intuition: it is one thing to have the intuition of a sculpture or a symphony, and quite another to physically produce such works, but the difference is only in relation to the purely mechanical event: that is:

> ...it is possible to be a great artist with bad technique, a poet who corrects the proofs of his verses badly, an architect who makes use of unsuitable material or does not attend to statics, a painter who uses colours that deteriorate rapidly.... But what is impossible is to be a great poet who writes verses badly, a great painter who does not give tone to his colours, a great architect who does not harmonise his lines, a great composer who does not harmonise his notes; and, in short, a great artist who cannot express himself. It has been said of Raphael that he would have been a great painter even if he had not possessed hands; but certainly not that he would have been a great painter if the sense of design and colour had been wanting to him. (Croce 1921, 46)

If we return to the judgement that Dewey expressed on Croce's theory of aesthetics, the distance that he notes between their positions seems to be more the product of anxious preconceptions than the straightforward and clear-headed analysis of someone who has studied Croce. The very reservations that Dewey expressed regarding the concepts of expression and intuition also show that in the final analysis the two philosophers' ideas were not so different. In connecting art and experience, Dewey certainly goes beyond the implications of Crocean thinking; similarly, Croce creates a philosophical system of which no trace can be found in Dewey. However, we are not considering the equation 'Croce = Dewey', which would be an ill-founded exercise. All we are seeking to do is to identify

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similar thinking, or a sense of closeness, or some common ground between them. This is not with respect to some technical or specific issue, over which one writer can, on his/her own, often change position and even contradict him/herself, but rather in relation to a general *Weltanschauung*, or perhaps better a *Kunstanschauung*.

If we consider the detail, there are many differences. Just as Croce develops a sophisticated demonstration of the unity-distinction of intuitions and expressions, Dewey, for example, introduces two specific terms in his reply to Croce: 'aesthetic experience' and 'the aesthetic phase of life-experience'. In the first case we have a pluralistic idea of experience, as he defines experience as a sphere in which there are many specific experiences, among which the aesthetic is just one type: there is the gastronomic experience, play, the aesthetic experience, the erotic, spiritual, religious, and so on. In the second case, experience takes on a monistic meaning, since the aesthetic represents one of its aspects, or one of its specific events in interaction and connection with other equally specific aspects, and not an experience that stands on its own. The aesthetic experience, in this latter sense, is the experience obtained, for example, from moving through a museum during a visit, in which the whole aesthetic experience comes from a set of analogous and homogeneous experiences. One could say that in the first case the aesthetic is within experience, but in the second it is a phase of experience; or that in the first interpretation there are many experiences, or many types of experience, whereas in the second there are many phases of one single experience.

These details of either philosopher's thinking, however, do not preclude a consideration of their perspectives on aesthetics in relation to existence. It is here that we find them converging, or, if you like, the third way that Di Giovanni mentions. Moreover, Dewey puts the issue in explicit terms. Experience is something one goes through that is defined and distinct, that has a beginning and an end which allow us to isolate it, or rather identify and locate it, in such a way that it can always be found again in our memory:

> Experience in this vital sense is defined by those situations and those episodes which we spontaneously refer to as "real experiences"; those things about which, when we recall them, we say "that *was* an experience" .... There was that meal in a Paris restaurant about which we can say "that *was* an experience". It stands out as an enduring memory of what food can be like. Then there was that storm we ran into while crossing the Atlantic .... An experience has a unity from which it takes its name: *that* meal, that storm, that quarrel with your friend. (Dewey 1934, 36)

Now, art is exactly that type of experience: it *is* an experience. This is true for Dewey just as it is for Croce, whatever either of them might say about this. We can understand art as pragmatic flow or as intuition, but in both cases their theories of aesthetics are built on common ground, as both Dewey and Croce are convinced of the fact that 'in the poet's every inflection, in every thing that comes from his imagination, there is all human destiny, all the hopes and dreams, sorrows and joys, human greatness and baseness, the entire drama of the real, which becomes and constantly develops, suffering and rejoicing' (Croce 1948b, 122)

Taking stock, it can be said that:

- Croce had been very well known and recognized in the United States as an intellectual, but had not been understood as a philosopher because (a) he had been over-hastily labelled as a Hegelian, within a historical and cultural environment that attacked and rejected Hegelianism, and (b) the Italian language

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was not well known over the Atlantic and the translations of Croce's philosophical writings into English were poor in both quantity and quality;

- the Croce–Dewey dispute, which falls squarely within the established process of misunderstanding the Neapolitan's thinking, was marked by over-reactions and distortions, a good proportion of which can be directly attributed to the protagonists themselves.

In medio stat veritas: Dewey is not as far away from Croce as he maintains, and not as close as the latter claims. There are stylistic, technical and conceptual differences, but the premises of their theories of aesthetics, if not identical, are close. The real crux of the matter lies neither in the traces of idealism that Croce identifies in Dewey as similar to his own thinking, nor in the implications of Croce's theory of intuitions that the American indicates are unacceptable. We might agree with the Mexican writer Leo Weiczen-Giuliani, who in 1943 wrote to Sidney Hook (who was to be director of the Philosophy Department at New York University from 1948 to 1969) as follows:

> I was very impressed when, studying Dewey's "Logic" and your "J. Dewey – an intellectual portrait", I was able to state that the conception of History, the analysis of historical judgement, the idea of the actual, present validity and value of the historical reconstruction of the past, that all those ideas... are developed in the same way in Dewey's and in yours [*sic*] books on the one side, and in the last books of our old master, Benedetto on the other side. Naturally, Croce is loaded with the terrible heavy European Classic-Idealistic tradition; therefore he never could directly profit from Dewey's studies, even when he praises them very much.... But, in despite of [*sic*] the differences of cultural inheritance and – in the case of Croce – even of traditionalist deformation, the real fact of the coincidence between the analysis of historical judgement of Dewey and that of Croce remains and has a great importance.... What I would like to know – and I would be very grateful to you, if you could answer me on this subject – is if Dewey has known the former books of Croce, so the "Logica," published in 1904, the "Teoria e Storia della Storiografia," published in 1912.... As you surely understand, I am not searching for the paternity of ideas; what I would like to know is if there has been "interaction" between Dewey and Croce or if the actual coincidence is a completely new fact.

Apologising for his English, Giuliani adds a postscript:

> The coincidences are even far greater between Dewey and Croce's master, the Socialist-marxist thinker Antonio Labriola (1843–1904) who tried and partially succeeded to elaborate, in the historical and social field, the same "scientific philosophy" which is Dewey's aim. Do you think that Dewey could have had any knowledge of Antonio Labriola? (Weiczen-Giuliani 2005)

The moral nature of art

Although Giuliani raises valid and interesting questions, the pivotal issue in this affair does not relate to the possible similarities or actual differences, but to the independence of ethics. There is a pleasing anecdote relating to Croce's strenuous defence of this independence, which is worth a moment's consideration. During the International Congress of Philosophy held in Oxford in 1930, he listened to the former Soviet Minister for Education, Lunacharsky, commenting scornfully on bourgeois aesthetics (which of course included those of Croce) and praising the Marxist and proletarian equivalent. In reply, Croce argued that the expression 'Marxist aesthetics' is a contradiction in terms, as

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Marxism's economic determinism precludes aesthetic autonomy. Lunacharsky took the opportunity to then solemnly announce that an entire unpublished chapter of Marx's *Zur Kritik der politischen Oekonomie*, devoted specifically to issues of aesthetics, would shortly be appearing in a new edition of Marx's works. Croce responded once again, telling Lunacharsky that the Neapolitans had already examined every aspect of Marxism long before he and his Russian revolutionary comrades had been able to do this; that he, Croce, had studied under, edited and commented on Antonio Labriola, whom the young Trotsky had studied; and that he and Labriola had been the two people responsible for promoting the study of Marx in Italy.

Now, the independence of aesthetics allows Croce to state that:

> ... not only is there no penal code that can condemn an image to prison or to death, but no moral judgment, uttered by a rational person, can make of it its object: we might just as well judge the square moral or the triangle immoral as the Francesca of Dante immoral or the Cordelia of Shakespeare moral.... The end attributed to art, of directing the good and inspiring horror of evil, of correcting and ameliorating customs, is a derivation of the moralistic doctrine.... These are all things that art cannot do, any more than geometry, which, however, does not lose anything of its importance on account of its inability to do this; and one does not see why art should do so either. (Croce 1921, 14–15)

This is the real crossroads, from which the two philosophers take different paths. For Dewey, art is not independent at all; rather, 'the material of esthetic experience in being human ... is social. Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality of a civilization' (Dewey 1934, 326). A people's history, ideologies, customs and traditions use the aesthetic experience to become stronger and develop. The measure of the extent of a society's development should be its art, rather than its productive capacity, gross domestic product, number of licensed vehicles, activated mobile telephones, or satellite dishes installed. Art has a social function and a moral role, which it performs through its ability to crystallise human creative and productive impulses; this results in works that reflect the existential structures of the individual and the community. Not that which is rational is real, but rather that which – paradoxically and in a Crocean manner – is artistic.

> Just as physical life cannot exist without the support of a physical environment, so moral life cannot go on without the support of a moral environment.... Neither the savage nor the civilized man is what he is by native constitution but by the culture in which he participates. The final measure of the quality of that culture is the arts which flourish. (Dewey 1934, 345)

Let us consider Dewey's analysis of what we now call property speculation:

> And yet it is not merely slums but the apartments of the well-to-do that are esthetically repellent.... Their character is determined by an economic system in which land is used for the sake of gain, because of profit derived from rental and sale. Until land is freed from this economic burden, beautiful buildings may occasionally be erected, but there is little hope for the rise of general architectural construction worthy of a noble civilization. (Dewey 1934, 344)

Dewey certainly does not thereby mean to say that art directly influences the behaviour of a single individual, as to put certain artworks in relation to the conduct of a specific subject would mean detaching art from the context in which it is created; this would be seriously mistaken.

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The Deweyan idea is in fact rather different: art can have social and moral relevance, although this is not its primary aim or task. We can all agree with Croce when he criticises Lunacharsky and Marxist aesthetics, just as we turn away in distaste from the propaganda declarations of State art, whether sponsored by the Fascist Ministry of Popular Culture or by state socialism. This should also apply regarding the Church, because:

> ... the influence that counted in the daily life of the mass of the people and that gave them a sense of unity was constituted, it is safe to surmise, by sacraments, by song and pictures, by rite and ceremony, all having an esthetic strand, more than by any other one thing. Sculpture, painting, music, letters were found in the place where worship was performed. (Dewey 1934, 329)

And yet none of us would criticise Michelangelo's cupola, Bernini's colonnade or the Sistine Chapel as works of art commissioned by a power that wished to make use of art not just for aesthetic reasons. For Dewey art is an experience, and as such does not vanish once the aesthetic moment has passed, nor does it lose its authority if given a social or political function; Picasso stated that 'la peinture n'est pas faite pour décorer des appartements. C'est un instrument de guerre offensive et défensive contre l'ennemi' (Téry 1945, 6).

Moreover, how many objects originally created for specific purposes have slowly become works of art or items of aesthetic value? Nowadays the tie is no longer the piece of cloth that Roman legionaries or soldiers from Croatia ('cravatta' derives from 'hrvat', meaning 'Croat') used to wear, nor are shoes merely aids to walking, just as cars are not only means of transport. If this was the case, we would all wear the same type of footwear and have no reason to choose between moccasins, laced boots, high-heeled shoes, espadrilles and sandals; there would be no point in appreciating a sports car, or choosing between a cabriolet and a coupé; and finally there would be no need to select the right match of colours and textiles, and pick a striped or spotted tie. Instead, however, we have to agree with Lord Illingworth, who reminded Gerald that 'the essential thing for a necktie is style. A well-tied tie is the first serious step in life' (Wilde 1903, 91).

The issue of art's many uses and meanings is accompanied by a set of debates which have been very heated on the philosophical plane, and are therefore relevant in the context of the problem of the relationship between art and morality; too often, this is treated as if it were a problem that pertains solely to art, and as if the issue is solely how art should conform to an ethical system that has already been developed. For Dewey, however, the link between them – because there certainly is one – is imagination, because:

> Imagination is the chief instrument of the good. It is more or less a commonplace to say that a person's ideas and treatment of his fellows are dependent upon his power to put himself imaginatively in their place.... The historic alliance of religion and art has its roots in this common quality. Hence it is that art is more moral than moralities. For the latter either are, or tend to become, consecrations of the *status quo*, reflections of custom, reenforcements of the established order. The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable. (Dewey 1934, 348)

It is in this sense that art fully performs a moral function. And:

> It is by way of communication that art becomes the incomparable organ of instruction, but the way is so remote from that usually associated with the idea of education, it is a way that lifts art so far above what we are accustomed to think of as instruction, that we are repelled by any suggestion of teaching and learning in connection with art. (Dewey 1934, 347)

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From this we can understand why Dewey states elsewhere that the true artist is an educator:

> Now the teacher's own claim to rank as an artist is measured by his ability to foster the attitude of the artist in those who study with him, whether they be youth or little children. Some succeed in arousing enthusiasm, in communicating large ideas, in evoking energy. So far, well; but the final test is whether the stimulus thus given to wider aims succeeds in transforming itself into power.... If not, the zeal flags, the interest dies out, the ideal becomes a clouded memory. (Dewey 1978, 353)

The education system has to give a form to this artistic need, which is not just aesthetic but in fact civil, moral, economic and social.

Dewey never abandons the idea that art can perform an educative function, and therefore a civilising and moral one. He thus places himself within the Aristotelian tradition, which particularly saw the theatre and tragedy as capable of inducing a cathartic purification in the spectator:

> A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.[10]

Alternatively, as indicated by Leopardi, its effect might be to nourish the mind with the correct sentiments, as the poet's aim:

> ...should not be just to narrate, but to describe, to stir, to arouse images and emotions, to elevate and enliven the mind, to improve traditions, to excite to virtue, glory, and patriotism, to praise or reproach, to encourage emulation, to exalt the merits of one's nation, forefathers, and local heroes. (Leopardi 1921, 2205)

And yet neither Croce nor Dewey, although they harboured contrasting sentiments in this regard, ever deliberated this point in the consideration of their similarities and differences. The independence of art, or its dependence on ethics, does not seem to have marked the 'Croce–Dewey exchange'. Both always placed idealism, Hegelianism and historicism at the heart of the dispute and in the end fought their battle on more or less common ground, attracting the criticism of those who, like Santayana, saw their philosophies as too literary and poetic. Of the two thinkers, it was clearly Croce who always insisted on the proximity of their ideas, in tones that were almost fond. We find these same tones, here touching as well, when he wrote – putting himself in the third person – to the committee for Dewey's ninetieth birthday; within three years they had both died, within a few months of each other.

Perhaps the best way of understanding these two great minds, their relationship, and the nature of this non-dispute is to reproduce this letter:

> An Italian philosopher, who is also an old man, being nearly eighty-four years old, is glad to be able to present his tribute of respect together with his best wishes to John Dewey. He has always admired in Dewey the unfailing sense for truth that he carries into his philosophical research, and on innumerable points fully agrees with him, finding in such agreement comfort and trust. Only on one point he differs from him, which he has had occasion to state publicly. Dewey shows distrust and almost aversion for that tradition of philosophy which is customarily called idealistic, or, as he calls it, "organic", and which is what we Italians designate by the name of Giambattista Vico, and the Germans by the names of Kant and Hegel. The writer of this, on the contrary, feels that he has drawn strength from this tradition, in which there were, undoubtedly, great errors, especially in Hegel, but there remain truths

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forever acquired, such as the a priori synthesis and the dialectic logic, without which it is impossible to think about life and history in an adequate manner. Nevertheless this dissent on one point, however important it may be, does not disturb, but on the contrary renders more vital the certainty of truth on so many other points, as he made clear some years ago when examining Dewey's Philosophy of Art. All this does not reduce the warmth of the homage that he is presenting on this solemn occasion. (Croce 2005)

Translated by Stuart Oglethorpe

Notes

1. The original Italian version appeared in a collection of various works by Croce (1952a).
2. Gilbert's 1948 translation of Croce's 1940 review is quoted here and subsequently
3. No judgement is intended here on the actual validity of Carritt's translation.
4. The essays were actually selected by R. Klibansky.
5. The volume came out with its title altered to 'The essence of aesthetic'. The book is so rare that it can be found only with some difficulty, and at a price of about €350. Simoni reports an earlier translation of the *Breviario*, published by the Rice Institute in 1912, as less reliable.
6. The entry was a translation of Croce's 1928 essay entitled 'Aesthetica in nuce', and appeared in the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1929).
7. The letter continues by giving the names of some of Dewey's colleagues who might be interested in joining this protest. In the manuscript version some of these names are circled, or have question marks by them, or have 'no' written in.
8. While Carritt translated 'storicismo assoluto' as 'absolute history', 'absolute historicism' is the term generally used by subsequent commentators.
9. Moss also discusses this issue in an earlier work (1987).
10. Aristotle. Poetics. In *The complete works of Aristotle*, 2 vols, ed. J. Barnes; Section 1449b, lines 25–8. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

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