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The Deweyan concept of freedom in education and the development of contemporary ideological movements: veganism and feminism

### *Riassunto*

Il seguente saggio analizza il ruolo del concetto di libertà dalla concezione di John Dewey nell'educazione e, allo stesso tempo, come questo influenza la creazione di movimenti ideologici contemporanei, concentrandosi sul veganismo e sul femminismo. Ciò è dovuto all'interpretazione poliedrica che Dewey dà al concetto, essendo questa quella che ha ripercussioni sul piano morale, politico, ma anche educativo, poiché un tassello chiave per raggiungere la libertà autentica ha a che fare con queste decisioni che hanno ripercussioni sulla democrazia e sulle decisioni che vengono prese, affidandosi sempre all'educazione per garantire un cambiamento costante a favore delle nuove generazioni. Per quanto riguarda il veganismo, è presentato da Peter Singer, esplorando i punti di incontro in una libertà morale e le sue ripercussioni politiche, mentre il femminismo è esplorato nella teoria di Luce Irigaray e nel suo approccio a una libertà femminile che ha ripercussioni sul piano politico.

### *Abstract*

The following essay analyzes the role of the concept of freedom from John Dewey's conception in education and at the same time, how this influences the creation of contemporary ideological movements, focusing on veganism and feminism. This is due to the multifaceted interpretation that Dewey gives to the concept, being this one that has repercussions on the moral, political, but also on the educational level, since is a key piece to achieve authentic freedom, due to decisions having repercussions on

democracy, always relying on education to guarantee a constant change in favor of the new generations. As for veganism, it is presented by Peter Singer, exploring the meeting points in a moral freedom and its political repercussions, while feminism is explored in the theory of Luce Irigaray and her approach to a female freedom that has repercussions on the political level.

*Parole chiave:* Libertá, Educazione, John Dewey, Democrazia, Femminismo, Veganismo

*Keywords:* Freedom, Education, John Dewey, Democracy, Feminism, Veganism

### *Introduction*

Throughout the history of human thought, there have been thousands of ideas that have been preserved above others, because it is considered that these are the ones that have the capacity to shape humanity in the right way. Truth, justice, democracy belong to the world of ideas, but they only unleash their ontological truth when they are applied. Among them, freedom stands out, which in ancient times did not represent any problem, since for the Greeks or Romans it was possessed by whoever should do so, the free citizen; while in the Middle Ages, even with an important advance in the notion of freedom in the intellectual field, this remained stagnant in practice as only possible beyond death.

Over time, this dualistic vision was consolidated in modern times, because here a relationship is raised between the individual and the decisions he makes, so that the realization of the subject arises because of acting freely. Now, even if it is decided to put acting freely into question, contemporary discourse, especially in the social and political sphere, is impregnated with this “idea”, whether as democratic values, human rights, or equality, since they are expressions related to what was said above.

These concepts have provided a not always appreciable basis for the existence of the individual and his configuration in societies, since they are often thought of by the main ideologists of each generation and later in a very subtle way, they become part of the collective ideology.

In this framework, it seems that the most general idea of freedom is a contradiction to the act of educating, if it is not so, how can we expect to provide the human being with the capacity to act according to his will, if he has been restricted beforehand by indicating the way in which he should do it? Given this difficulty, we propose to present John Dewey's concept of freedom, due to its multifaceted nature, in which various elements intervene in search of a development whose apex is precisely education, to the point of being pertinent to discern the value of contemporary ideological movements, such as veganism and feminism.

### 1. *Freedom, moral, politics and education*

To do this, it is necessary to start from the conception of human nature as a set of formerly antagonistic visions – rational and natural elements –, to the point of forming a gear in Dewey's theory, giving emphasis to the “nature” of morality and its relationship with freedom. This is because the special phenomena of morality changes periodically with the variation of social conditions and the level of culture. The realities of desiring and proposing, of social demand and law, of sympathetic approval and hostile disapproval are constant. We cannot imagine that they will disappear while human nature remains what it is and while man lives in association with others. The fundamental concepts of morality are therefore neither arbitrary nor artificial. They are not imposed on human nature from outside but are born from the functions and needs proper to it<sup>1</sup>.

In this respect, although elements such as habit or impulses may be disregarded for being natural, they form part of an intricate machinery together with intelligence or reciprocal action, which in the first instance fulfil the function of structuring human action to make it simpler, and at the same time, modify actions, either suddenly or gradually in favor of making changes, which even lead to modifying a certain society.

<sup>1</sup> Dewey 1965, pp. 204-205.

The problem of the freedom of cooperating individuals is, therefore, a problem that must be judged in the context of culture. The state of culture is a state of reciprocal action of many factors, of which the main ones are law and politics, industry and commerce, science and technology, the arts of expression and communication, as well as morality, or the values that men esteem and their ways of evaluating them; and finally, although indirectly, the system of general ideas that men use to justify or criticize the fundamental conditions in which they live, their social philosophy<sup>2</sup>.

Following this line, we must mention freedom understood as a behavior, as a notion that allows us to live and develop, so that by insisting on the inseparable characteristic of sociability that revolves around it, we can speak of a moral freedom.

As a person becomes a different individual, he or she shows different desires and choices. Freedom in a practical sense develops when one realizes that possibility and takes an interest in making it a reality. The potential for freedom is a gift or inherent part of our constitution in that we have the capacity to develop it and to be keenly interested in the process and direction it takes. Real or positive freedom is not a natural gift but an acquired one. To the degree that we realize the possibilities of improvement and actively worry about keeping the paths of development open, to the degree that we fight against annihilation and fixation, thus making the possibilities of recreation of our beings real, we will be truly happy<sup>3</sup>.

Therefore, freedom is the element that allows us to choose between the various possibilities, but this with the idea of contributing to our personal development, specifically with a view of obtaining happiness. However, due to the social nature of individuals, this process is often influenced by external factors and results that an individual cannot get rid of, so creating mechanisms to make this process easier and guarantee its success is not only one of the roles played by the elements of the reason-nature duo, but fundamental in any society, especially

<sup>2</sup> Dewey 1989, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Dewey 1965, pp. 200-201.

for those that wish to provide free and conscious acts to all their citizens.

The creation of these conditions has a double role in the Deweyan ideal of a system of government and a way of understanding freedom, and although it emphasizes how the pinnacle of its possibilities can only be reached by conceiving it as a way of life, it is possible to speak of freedom as democracy. This is distinguished by being a community in which the extension of the interests of that group is shared by all members and by the plenitude and freedom with which it interacts with other groups<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, equality is highlighted as one of those conditions, and although there is a criticism of the supposed pretension – and inability – that men possess the same natural capacities, the democratic faith in equality is the faith that each individual should have the possibility of contributing to the extent of his capacity, and that the value of the contribution will be determined according to his place and function in the organic total of similar contributions, and not on the basis of any previous state (LW, 11:220)<sup>5</sup>.

It is then that equality must be understood in proportion to the recognition and enablement of the development of each of the individuals to the maximum of their capacities, this could refer us to the initial problem, interpreting the old idea of forcing men to be free, which by nature is opposed to freedom. On the contrary, it must not be something that can be granted to men as a gift from outside, be it benevolent dynastic despotisms of the old style, or dictatorships of a new type, proletarian or fascist. It is something that can only be achieved if individuals take part in its conquest and this fact, rather than a particular political tactic, constitutes the essence of democratic liberalism<sup>6</sup>. That is to say, the human personality must develop by exercising freedom, because each individual has managed to

<sup>4</sup> Figuero Castillo 2008, pp. 48-49.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of the citation concerning *The complete Works of John Dewey*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 37 vols., 1968-1992: it will be done according to the following abbreviations: The early Works, 1882-1898 (EW); The middle Works, 1899-1924 (MW) and The later Works, 1925-1953 (LW); which will be accompanied by the volume and page number.

<sup>6</sup> Dewey 1967, p. 151.

make it part of himself, but this process, far from being isolated, is a reflection of the environment, because this is the one in charge of said development and at the same time, it will only be possible if the individuals resulting from it make that of others possible, a cycle in which fraternity and equality are essentially necessary.

In this sense, the goal of all institutions, both educational and government, is to form the attitude, skills, and platforms that build a lifestyle that is reflected in a personality that, although not concrete, is participatory, open to discussion, and of a democracy immersed in it. Although we have initially emphasized how the concept of democracy is for our author something that resembles a community, this does not mean that it is far from the political or economic sphere.

Dewey pointed out that a genuinely free society is not only one in which individuals share control of the direction of their affairs, but that they must do so through law and government, which puts maximum emphasis on cooperation instead of coercion, free democratic authority instead of authority imposed from above. Equally important in a discussion about freedom is the problem of the economy<sup>7</sup>. Ergo, the participation of individuals will only be authentic to the extent that the ultimate forum to which their reflections aspire is a political plane, because the spheres of laws and governments are an example of a well-organized government.

Regarding the economy, the ultimate place of economic organization in human life is to ensure a secure basis for an orderly expression of individual capacity and for the satisfaction of man's needs in non-economic directions<sup>8</sup>.

So far, we have presented freedom from two fronts: one moral and one in relation to the concept of democracy. These can in turn be interpreted as an individual and a social approach, in which one cannot speak of complete autonomy, since one participates and is necessary in the formation of the other; in the development of these ideas, one that has not been able to be fully developed is that of the formation of individuals, specifi-

<sup>7</sup> Williams 1954, p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey 1963, p. 88.

cally how the educational process intervenes in freedom, and how they can coexist when apparently considered opposite elements.

The function of education as growth can be affirmed in the Deweyan proposal understood as development. This development must perfect the human being as the different modifications and corrections of previous experiences take place. In this way, the main task of education is to understand that the educational process is one of continuous reorganization, reconstruction, and transformation—of previous experience—<sup>9</sup>. Of course, education that claims to be based on the idea of freedom can become as dogmatic as traditional education was, against which it reacts, therefore, if it claims to be immutable, it will also fail in its content, becoming a means of repression and control.

The answer to this is to change the imposition from above for the expression and cultivation of individuality; external discipline is opposed to free activity; learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; the acquisition of skills and techniques isolated by training is opposed to the acquisition of those as a means of achieving ends that directly and vitally interest; static ends and materials are opposed to knowledge of the world subject to change<sup>10</sup>. Even with the value of these characteristics, they should be treated only as a principle, in which the character of change and development should be highlighted, and therefore the fruitful results in a certain period do not guarantee success forever, the touchstone to help understand the environment will then be experience.

About this, Ramón del Castillo points out that Dewey's educational progressivism was not so harmless. Dewey's strategy was not to transmit values, but to provide people, from school, with the means to acquire more and better experience and to know how to conduct themselves in an increasingly complex society. In its radical sense, "education" had to do with the development of a self-controlled society, a society that would manage to control industrial resources and especially communica-

<sup>9</sup> Romo López 2006, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> Dewey 1997, p. 22.

tion technologies that would forever transform private life and public opinion. (2003). In this regard, our author highlights the scientific method as the best tool to carry out this development, since it is not a peculiar progress of thought for some highly specialized purposes; it is thinking insofar as thought becomes aware of its own purposes and of the indispensable material to succeed in their achievement (MW, 6:78). In this progress, the idea of democracy intervenes, specifically because of the way in which the formation of a democratic life is the creation of the individual, distinguishing itself as the best process for educating, due to the search to insert each person in the participation and respect of their community, being a reciprocal respect, which allows this change and encourages it, due in large part to its foundations in fraternity, equality and freedom.

Although, given Dewey's anti-ideological past, it seems impossible to think of including contemporary ideological movements as part of his doctrine, we can affirm that to the extent that these participate and continue to enable the ideas of freedom set forth above, they can perfectly be part of it, because we cannot deny their nature of development in favor of making a discernment of what is best for a particular society.

Finally, let us illustrate the concept of ideology as: a) a set of ideas about the world and society that; b) responds to the interests, aspirations, or ideals of a social class in each context and that; c) guides and justifies the practical behavior of men in accordance with those interests, aspirations, and ideals<sup>11</sup>. We can put aside the pejorative burden since this is imposed to a greater extent by the prevailing system to which it is opposed. Furthermore, the importance of the pragmatic outcome, of projecting itself as a response in and by the environment makes it completely understandable to link it with Dewey, because the latter seeks to put aside the established in favor of an evolution of the systems that structure society, the individual and allow him to act freely.

As for the analysis of the ideologies in question, we will start from the following authors and visions. On veganism,

<sup>11</sup> Sánchez Vázquez 1983, p. 145.



mainly from the book that begins the tradition of moral and philosophical theories on the subject, *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer. As for the approach to feminism, it will be done by the hand of the French philosopher Luce Irigaray, largely due to her reflections on sexual difference as the foundation of democracy, so we will focus on her book *Democracy begins between two*.

The analysis of these two ideologies will consist essentially of pointing out how they intervene in the freedom of the subject through educational processes, and if by appealing to this freedom, they seek the benefit of the majority, considering this as the ultimate goal of a democratic community of reflection. We must note that in Deweyan terms, appealing to the freedom of the subject is to a greater extent to facilitate self-reflection and the discussion of knowledge. The choice of these authors represents to a greater extent an interest in them and is in no way a discredit or contempt of other theorists of each discipline. In turn, both have been chosen because of the apparent distance that both have, and the conflict that can result from assuming them within the same ideological framework.

## 2. *Veganism*

The touchstone of veganism is undoubtedly the relationship with animals, and the closest we have to it in John Dewey, is *The ethics of Animal Experimentation* (1926), where he mostly justifies experimentation in order to avoid human suffering, as it is also a defense of science, one of the vital points for his doctrine. So, does this mean that we are wrong when trying to study veganism from this author? Quite the opposite, because Dewey does not stop rejecting unjustified cruelty, in addition, to stagnate in his vision would be to go against what he himself established as a democratic thought, which is reflexive and must be developed over time.

Considering these questions on the Deweyan level is very simple: At what point do we begin to worry about the suffering of animals? And, furthermore, is it worth doing so? According to Singer, we should do so, because all animals, regardless of

order or class, possess the capacity for suffering, which is the basic characteristic that grants a being the right to equal consideration – or, more rigorously, to suffer and/or enjoy or be happy – is a requirement for having any other kind of interest, a condition that has to be satisfied before we can speak of interests<sup>12</sup>. Although historically the Indian and Greek cultures had a vegetarian lifestyle, or thinkers such as Pythagoras and Plato recommended this doctrine to maintain better health (Spencer, 1994). On this occasion we will focus on veganism, its political and ethical dimension, inaugurated in 1944 by Donald Watson (1944) in the first issue of *Vegan News*, a discussion that has gained strength in recent years, whose central question is how to avoid the consumption of animal products derived from a moral conscience towards animals and their suffering.

Let us recap: veganism arises as a moral awareness towards the suffering of non-human animals, which appeals to the ability to perfectly nourish oneself only with plants for this dissemination, and we understand this as a disposition resulting from an emerging culture, which necessarily involves education. This becomes more explicit if we consider Singer's chapter four, which talks about becoming vegan, where he deliberates the necessity to write to our political representatives to discuss these issues, raise awareness among our friends, educate our children, protest publicly to represent non-human animals, and of course stop eating animals<sup>13</sup>. Precisely veganism is a social construction that takes on the appearance of an ideology from the moment it modifies the way of assuming nutritional needs, and that aims to spread the ideas that support this modification to other individuals, which also involves a paradigm of social improvement and well-being<sup>14</sup>.

It is known that culture modifies needs, and these in turn are constantly modified by different factors, such as the availability of resources, trends, and of course ideologies; more recent changes are seen in the introduction of fast food, or the new way consume food related with the media.

<sup>12</sup> Singer 1999, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 203.

<sup>14</sup> Dewey 1989, p. 32.

We can see how components of human nature, innate or already modified, are reciprocally activated with certain defined components of a given culture; because the conflicts and concordances between human nature, on the one hand, and social customs and laws, on the other, are products of specifiable modes of reciprocal action<sup>15</sup>.

Let us remember that, for Dewey, seeking freedom is ensuring the conditions for it to exist in society, and in this the basic conditions are fundamental, which in this case is food, if citizens cannot count on the most essential, it is impossible to aspire to freedom and therefore to democracy. The thing that every individual must do is live; the thing that society must do is to obtain from everyone his contribution to the general welfare and try to ensure that he obtains, in turn, a fair reward<sup>16</sup>. Freedom must be exercised in society, and it achieves its ideal if it is exercised responsibly to guarantee a better quality of life for the community.

Although veganism is criticized in various spheres, the fact that it is presented as an option that aims at an improvement for most of the population, allows us to consider it within as an ideology, and this is achieved through awareness, which appeals to individual conscience, and it revolves around education, even if it is mostly in a personal sphere. Let us remember that for Dewey, freedom essentially means the role played by thinking – which is personal – in learning: it means personal initiative, independence in observation, judicious inventiveness, foresight of consequences and the ingenuity to adapt to them<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, we come to two conclusions regarding this section: first, veganism theoretically fulfills its objective of seeking the good for the majority, and also appeals to the three spheres of freedom that we have spoken about, by placing the individual as a moral subject, by positioning his or her decisions on a community level due to their effect on the lives of others, and finally, the effect of self-training in the perpetuation of this regime.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Dewey 2004, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 254.

### 3. *Feminism*

Feminism has a great diffusion and reach, which is not surprising if we consider that its representatives are or slightly exceed half of the world's population. Even so, most people are still unaware of exactly what the demands of this movement are, and while many have an idea (better opportunities, greater freedom, equality, or security), these are issues that, while not wrong, do not represent the dimension of the problem. And although we do not intend to make an apology for feminism or frame ourselves as experts, we do intend to point out that there is still a long way to go to fully understand what this movement is about, and that achieving its greatest diffusion necessarily involves an educational factor.

In turn, talking about it is an encounter with many thinkers who easily merit their own work, whether it is the precursor of Western feminism Christine de Pizan with her text *The book of the city of the ladies*, or the obligated reference Simone de Beauvoir with *The second sex*, who is probably the most famous of this list, or even Judith Butler, probably the most prominent current representative with her efforts to undo the restrictive concepts of the sexual idea and gender. However, recognizing the importance of the different feminist lines and their authors, we will comment on a very small sample, to contrast, with the help of Luce Irigaray, her vision of feminism, with the concepts of freedom that we have described so far. We must clarify that although, already in 1886 Dewey lamented in *Health and Sex in Higher Education* that women were educated almost exclusively to be wives and mothers or in 1911 in *Is Co-education Injurious to Girls?* defended the right of women to access all levels of education, (Vaamonde Gamo, Nubiola, 2016) we do not try to specify the points that connect with feminism in this author, but to see to what extent Irigaray's ideas have an influence in the sphere of moral, democratic freedom and emphasizing the educational factor.

To begin, we will define feminism with the help of Beauvoir, through three simple notes, in the understanding that Irigaray worked under these assumptions: One is not born a woman, one becomes one. The innumerable conflicts that confront men

and women come from the fact that neither assumes all the consequences of this situation that one proposes and the other accepts of “equality in inequality.” Woman is not defined by her hormones, nor by her mysterious instincts, but by the way she perceives, through the consciences of others, her body and her relationship with the world. Behind her is the past of circumstance, which prevents her from being something more than what she has been made for. (Beauvoir, 2005).

Irigaray points out that, in addition to the struggle for rights, for freedom of choice in aspects such as work or pregnancy and of course greater security, we are fighting to be recognized as women and we are trying to achieve a form of freedom corresponding to our feminine identity<sup>18</sup>. The concern for feminine identity is something developed by other authors, however, what is particular to Irigaray is the distinction of what is called feminism of difference, which is distinguished by a struggle that does not aspire to the same as men, that is, the same rights, responsibilities, etc.

She points out that, the activities, and achievements of women on behalf of women have become insipid, formulated in a neutral manner, expressing themselves as a claim to have the same rights as men. Many women have, in this sense, assumed an economic, political, cultural and political conditioning that corresponds to the masculine identity and history<sup>19</sup>.

The problem with aspiring to this equality is that its further subjects’ female identity to a configuration created by the patriarchy, since its role is not reformulated, but rather continues to be channeled in terms of the masculine. In addition, our author points out that aspiring to neutrality is eventually dangerous, because along with the difficulty of loving each other in a neutral way, such a society loses sight of the line that separates life and death.

As regards the first point, there are several connections with the philosopher from Burlington, starting with the already mentioned importance of culture in the formation of the individual, and therefore of habits and their relationship with na-

<sup>18</sup> Irigaray 2000, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 34.

ture, but in addition to this, both authors recognize that one must aspire to have the political sphere intervene in order to achieve the objectives of any movement, as we mentioned in the section that refers to freedom within the political-economic area.

The question of whether belonging to a gender is the effect of a biological destiny or of social conditioning does not take into account the fact that being or becoming a woman means acquiring a civil dimension that is appropriate to the “feminine identity,” a culture that corresponds to one’s own body and specific genealogy, one’s own way of loving and procreating, of desiring and thinking<sup>20</sup>.

It is in this way that Irigaray emphasizes that regardless of what the feminine identity is, it must develop effectively on a civil, political level, since this is the authentic way of deploying all the potentialities of women. Of course, this is not so simple. According to Dewey, the revolutionary does not realize the full force of the things he talks about most, namely, institutions as embodied habits. Anyone with knowledge of the stability and force of habit will hesitate to propose a rapid and radical prophecy of social changes. A social revolution can make abrupt and profound alterations in external customs, in legal and political institutions. But the habits that are behind these institutions and that, in any case, have been molded by objective conditions, the habits of thought and feeling, are not so easily modified<sup>21</sup>.

It is important to emphasize that even with the significance that the world of the political sphere may have, this is the result of the cultural constitution of the individual, the change of his habits, because it is what eventually modifies the laws. With this we do not mean that Irigaray bet everything on the political sphere, but that both knew the importance of these scenarios in the constitution of an ideology, which we can see in the configuration of a feminine identity. With respect to such drastic changes, such as the reconstitution of femininity, it must

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Dewey 1922, pp. 107-108.

face the political and reach it, without this meaning absolute success.

What we want to highlight in this research is that for any of these situations to happen, an educational process is necessary that intervenes in the freedom of the subject. To this end, we will continue with the configuration of this identity, which, although it is not defined, if characteristics are pointed out that should guide it, such as: not reducing two subjects as two opposite ways of being of a single thing, active and passive, for example. And that, to rediscover this identity, it is necessary to leave behind the limited way of feeling, to access a culture of sensitivity and thought<sup>22</sup>.

Although the viability of such a process is discussed, what has been said so far assumes that the intention to reconfigure the feminine participates in the three spheres of freedom. First, having an influence on the moral, because except as a result of a restricted evolution, there is no such thing as a fixed, already made and finished self. Every voluntary action is a modification of the self<sup>23</sup>, and as deep-rooted as our idea of femininity may be, change occurs constantly, and in this case, it is more than fulfilled as it is such a profound modification, which also entails a prolonged process of reflection.

### *Conclusions*

Regarding the reflection, let us remember the importance that Dewey places on the processes of freedom, and that because of this it is normal that supposed established models can be modified. This case is not the exception.

Progress proceeds in two ways, and freedom is found in that type of interaction that maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something. There are indeed forces within man, as well as without him. That although they are infinitely fragile compared to external forces, they can have the support of a foresighted and artificial intelligence. For this

<sup>22</sup> Irigaray 2000, p. 115.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey 1965, p. 102.

reason, Dewey considered the education as the tool to build a constantly idea of development that finds its conclusion in the politic, which must always allow to continue the progress and use of freedom.

Some of the implications that we can point out, and in which Irigaray's claim takes part, are in the Deweyan model of intelligence, which acts on habits to modify tendencies, and without which there would be no changes, nor freedom; At the same time, intelligence can only develop in an environment nourished by experiences, since it is from them that we learn. In this regard, Dewey poses a series of questions in relation to democracy, since in order to criticize the established order, it is necessary to appeal to the individual's capacity to criticize it, but a better way of reflecting must be cultivated in order to eventually criticize any system.

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