Experience in a New Key

Editorial

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Editorial Introduction for the Topical Issue "Experience in a New Key"

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In an attempt to illuminate the relevance of philosophical thought, this topical issue of *Open Philosophy* discusses the meaning of experience. Experience is usually considered a mental act that results in knowledge. In German and Danish, someone *macht* or *gør* ('makes' or 'does') an experience, which clearly reflects the view that the verb 'to experience' denotes a mental *act*. In English, the person *has* an experience, which similarly implies that the experience is a property acquired through an act performed by the individual having the experience. This notion of experience as a mental act is problematic as it prevents us from surpassing the splitting of subject and object that bedevils modern minds. The widespread tendency to regard subject and object as essentially separate makes it difficult to grasp the impressions of wholeness and connectedness that even nowadays are familiar to many people. Once experience is understood merely as a mental act we cannot formulate concepts of experience that are meaningful to people who know instances of profound movement that are not initiated and controlled by themselves, but which are productive of crucial insight. Regarded as mental acts, such experiences are judged devoid of truth no matter how obvious their existential importance appear to be. This topical issue of *Open Philosophy* is therefore devoted to the question of how we can develop our understanding of experience by surpassing the established subject-object paradigm and by desisting to view experience as a mental act. This probes the potential implications of such development for the undertaking of philosophical thought and the analysis of contemporary cultural and social phenomena.

In Aristotle's *On the Soul*, experience is identical to perception, but the word 'perception,' or in Greek *aisthesis*, encompasses more than it tends to do in our time. Whereas we usually identify perception with sense perception, the *aisthesis* described in *On the Soul* is both sensory and emotional. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's introduction of philosophical aesthetics in the 18th century was based on this width of the Greek notion of perception.[1] In the first paragraph of his *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten describes aesthetics as the philosophy of *cognitio sensitiva*, that is, sensitive cognition. Baumgarten's statement refers to his understanding of aesthetics as the philosophy of *aistheta* (perceptions), not *noeta* (concepts), and his recognition of *aistheta* as providers of an autonomous kind of cognition that is different from the logical cognition provided by *noeta*. Moreover, the truth that Baumgarten ascribes to sensitive cognition precisely relies on the not only sensory but also emotional quality ascribed to *aisthesis* by Aristotle. At the end of the 20th century, Baumgarten's aesthetics was subject to renewed interest, and in 2007, Felix Meiner Verlag released the first full translation of *Aesthetica* into German. In recent decades, Baumgarten's aesthetics has been subject to studies, reinterpretations, and developments conducted by German, Danish, and Italian scholars in particular. Nevertheless, many contemporary scholars still misinterpret Baumgarten's concept of sensitive cognition as a concept of sensory rather than sensitive cognition, which results in a reproduction of the dualism between sensory empirical experience and rational logical cognition that dominated the rationalism and empiricism of the 17th and 18th centuries, a dualism that is still dominant but from which Baumgarten's aesthetics departed.[2]

1 Jørgensen, *Den skønne tænkning,* 83-158.

2 Ibid.

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In the 20th century, hermeneutic and/or phenomenological philosophers like Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer also endeavoured to formulate concepts of experience that cannot be reduced to sensory empirical experience and which have cognitive value despite (or rather due to) their sensitive nature. Moreover, these hermeneutic phenomenologists consciously sought to transcend the subject-object paradigm presenting experience as a gift rather than an achievement; for historical reasons Baumgarten's aesthetics only conducted such transcendence partially and inadvertently. It is therefore understandable that philosophical aesthetics and hermeneutic phenomenology could coalesce in the actualization of philosophical aesthetics conducted in recent decades, that is, in the renewal of aesthetics that did not mistake sensitive cognition for sensory perception, and which resulted in, for example, 'neo-aesthetics,' the 'metaphysics of experience,' and various 'philosophies of atmospheres.'[3] Furthermore, scholars in both the humanities and the social sciences nowadays strive to integrate first-person descriptions of experience into their research; this is especially evident in anthropology. Often these scholars refer to philosophical phenomenology, not least Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but their inclusion of first-person descriptions is usually motivated by a wish to understand how subjects construct their worlds, and this wish conflicts with the essential aim of phenomenology to transcend the subject-object paradigm and is rather in accord with social constructivism.

When treating first-person descriptions of experience most contemporary scholars strive to integrate such accounts with a more or less impersonal stance but face difficulties due to their notions of science and experience. This problem originates in a widespread reproduction of the traditional notion of experience as a mental act and the consequential idea that first-person descriptions are purely subjective. Furthermore, there is also a widespread tendency to reproduce the traditional notion of science as impersonal methodical work and thus regard the result of such work as something that is or ought to be objective. Accordingly, doctoral students of both the humanities and the social sciences seldom learn how to identify and articulate the objectivity of subjective experience (its truth). Nor do they learn to consider the subjectivity of objective knowledge (its roots in sensitivity regarded as an in-between rather than as something that is subjective *or* objective) or the ontological nature of experience and knowledge (including its potential source in imagination regarded not as a subjective faculty but as a greater power). No matter how much young scholars of the humanities and social sciences are encouraged to take the social and cultural settings of human knowledge production into account, they are still not equipped to adequately bridge science and experience.

As long as experience is considered a mental act initiated and controlled by the human mind, it is categorized as subjective and thus potentially irrational, and it is therefore marginalized as a viable corrective for theory. Experience is reduced to a psychological phenomenon, Walter Benjamin stated as early as a century ago, and the consequences are devastating, he rightly concluded.[4] We need to develop a better understanding of humans as not reducible to their mental faculties and cognitive productivity nor reducible to their bodies or the structures that shape them. As humans, we are bodily present in the world and influenced by the cultures we produce, but our most precious experiences testify to the fact that human life encompasses more than only nature and culture. There is also a dimension that transcends and bridges nature and culture, be it termed 'ontological' or 'spiritual,' and which manifests itself in experiences historically termed 'aesthetic,' 'religious,' and 'metaphysic' experiences. Such experiences are not produced and possessed by us, but we take part in them and are moved by them. Experience in this sense of the word is thus not purely subjective and devoid of objectivity, and it requests innovative philosophical thinking to consider it adequately.

3 The term 'new aesthetics' refers to Gernot Böhme's philosophical aesthetics presented in, for example, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. The term 'metaphysics of experience' refers to my philosophy of experience presented in *Den skønne tænkning* [Beautiful Thinking], in particular, but also in *Poetic Inclinations* and *Imaginative Moods*. The term 'philosophy of atmosphere' refers to both the thought of the original philosopher of atmospheres, Hermann Schmitz, and the philosophies of contemporary scholars like Böhme, Tonino Griffero, and Andreas Rauh. See, for example, Schmitz's *New Phenomenology* and Rauh's and Griffero's contributions to the present topical issue on experience in a new key.

4 Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy."

The collection of essays presented in this topical issue of *Open Philosophy* is the result of an open call and personal invitations. As editor of this issue, I have invited descriptions, sketches, and discussions of notions of experience that would strive to differ from the established approach described in the previous section, including investigations of the methodological and analytical implications of the provided alternatives. Potential contributors were also offered the possibility of reflecting on which notions of emotional, intuitive, or immediate experience their attempts might imply, and which epistemological, existential, moral, aesthetic, or theological worth they themselves would ascribe to the understandings of experience they wished to present. How would they conceive of aesthetic experience, religious experience, moral experience, or philosophical experience, and what could the benefits of their ideas and methods be for the humanities and social sciences? The resulting 12 essays represent approaches offered by scholars from various countries (Germany, Scotland, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Finland, Canada, Turkey, Belgium, and the United States) who refer to different philosophical traditions (including pragmatism, phenomenology or neo-phenomenology, hermeneutics, aesthetics, and speculative realism). However, the intention of the call and the invitations was not to provide a complete picture of the ways in which contemporary philosophers understand experience. Accordingly, the collection gives an impression of the paths that some scholars choose to follow in their efforts to transcend the subject-object paradigm, and it demonstrates the presence of interdisciplinary thought in contemporary philosophy.

In the first essay, which is entitled "Experience: Its Edges and Beyond," Nicholas Davey offers a reflection on the notion of experience considered within the framework of relational ontology. The advantage of such a consideration is that it escapes the consequences of subject-object accounts of experience, accounts that either laud the cognitive subject as master of the experienced world or exile it to an existence in a world it does not experience as its own, states Davey. Setting experience within a relational ontology and developing a participatory epistemology around the concept offers an inter-active account of experience as an ontological process that is advantageous for two reasons. Considering experience as a mode of ontological inter-action offers an integrated account of knowing and being. This ends the traditional privileging of the human as a cognitive subject and opens the way to thinking of all elements within inter-active processes as interpretive agencies. Inter-active being is intelligent being. Davey's argument contends that finalising at a plausible account of experience involves re-thinking the concept as indicative of a participatory ontological process. Rather than isolating a knowing subject from the alleged objects of its experience, the notion integrates a subject or hermeneutical agency as a participant in the actual world of inter-active interpretive processes.

In "Religious Experience: Experience of Transparency and Resonance," Davey's consideration of the notion of experience as a participatory process is followed by Gerd Theissen's inclusion of theology in the debate. At a time when religion is breaking away from the normative power of its traditions and new forms of spiritual experience are emerging, the philosophy of religion must find criteria for what a religious experience is and how to judge its truth, claims Theissen. In their empirical critique of religion, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Rudolph Carnap accepted two forms of religious experience, which they described with an optical and acoustic metaphor. They denied the cognitive truth value of both forms of religious experience, but not their value for life. However, an expanded concept of truth that encompasses every correspondence between experience and reality can find truth in religious experiences of 'transparency' and 'resonance,' claims Theissen, who also finds that such experiences differ from aesthetic experience not only by the depth of transparency and resonance but also by their cognitive interpretation. What is experienced is cognitively referred to a final reality: a unity of 'being' and 'value' defined as a 'summum ens' in this world, this world in its totality, or something unknown beyond this world. Theissen concludes that religion makes everyday experiences transparent for an ultimate reality and motivates towards a life full of resonance to this reality.

With Andreas Rauh's "The Atmospheric Whereby: Reflections on Subject and Object" we return to secular philosophy, but a philosophy of atmospheres that is potentially compatible with a theology of transparence and resonance. In his essay, Rauh posits that atmospheres constitute an ordinary perceptual phenomenon that can become a new experience, as the former are more than the sum of single-sensory perceptual factors. Drawing on the terminological pair 'subject' and 'object' and its interdependencies, the atmospheric phenomenon can be approached in an essayistic fashion (and by means of applying an aesthetic focus in the broadest sense). In so doing, it becomes evident that the atmosphere serves as a

condition for the emergence as well as actualization of special perception. Based on Gernot Böhme, Rauh identifies specific (ontological) determinants and differentiates between the 'and', the 'in-between,' and the 'whereby' or 'in what way.' His considerations demonstrate to what extent perception precedes the separation of subject and object in that the atmospheric 'whereby' is responsible for creating tuned spaces and situations. Turning to the objects of perception and their concomitant ecstasies as well as the subject of perception with its reception helps to clarify which components of an atmosphere work in what way. In this context, methods of exploratory involvement and participation gain importance in order to explore atmospheres from a lifeworld perspective.

Tonino Griffero shares Rauh's interest in atmospheres but refers to the interpretation of this phenomenon presented not by Böhme but by Hermann Schmitz (who is the source of inspiration for Böhme and to whom Rauh refers). Moreover, in "Pathicity: Experiencing the World in an Atmospheric Way," Griffero focuses on the aesthetics that he himself has developed inspired by Schmitz's philosophy of atmospheres rather than on the latter as such. According to Griffero, the concept of 'atmosphere' regarded as a qualitative-emotional *prius* of human sensible experience and as spatially poured out allows for a convergence of many studies focused on the sensory experience of the qualitative aspects of our 'surroundings.' Based on Schmitz's neo-phenomenological theory of the atmospheric perception conceived as a first pathic impression and a felt-bodily communication, Griffero explores the relationship between atmospheres and expressive qualities presenting the key features of a general 'pathic' aesthetics. This aesthetics considers perceivers as beings that are emotionally and felt-bodily touched by atmospheric feelings. They are widespread in their (lived) space but, as affordances, also ontologically rooted in the things and the quasi-things of the lifeworld. By realizing how they (unintentionally) expose themselves to what happens, perceivers turn out to be not 'subjects of something' but rather 'subjects to something,' that is, human beings who are only 'sovereign' when they feel free from the dogma of rational and methodological autonomy imposed by Western modernity.

Not only the concepts of aesthetic and religious experience but also the concept of metaphysical experience potentially contradicts and transcends the established notion of experience as a mental act. Berkay Ustun's essay "Antinomies of Metaphysical Experience and the Experience of Death: Between Theodor Adorno and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe" represents an inquiry into the concept of metaphysical experience. This inquiry is conducted through a joint discussion of two authors and philosophers with different approaches that nevertheless converge in the reclamation of the concept of metaphysical experience, and who both rely on the experience of death as an example. Adorno and Lacoue-Larbarthe are guided by the central problem of how not to relinquish metaphysical experience to unscrutinised immediacy or a powerful conversion that enjoins subjection, putting it in contact with aesthetics and ethics at once, explains Ustun. Adorno situated metaphysical experience as a problem of the philosophy of history and devoted attention to the contemporary possibility of experiences that evoke transcendence. The transformations he identified in the concept also led him identify art as a domain in which metaphysical experience is alive. However, in the work of Lacoue-Labarthe, who in a dialogue with Maurice Blanchot presented the experience as deeply bound up with literature and its links to subjectivity, the implicit personal investment made by Adorno is more evident, writes Ustun. He argues that the main difference between the approaches of Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe are modal and temporal from the side of the object, aside from the different modes of interrogation recognized with the labels, 'deconstruction' and 'critical theory.'

Adorno invites not only a movement forwards to Lacoue-Labarthe but also backwards to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, especially when considering Adorno's concepts of experience, including his concept of metaphysical experience. In "Hegel's *Phenomenology*: On the Logical Structure of Human Experience," Joseph Carew focuses on Hegel's concept of experience but opens doors different from those opened in the previous essay. Carew argues that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is an attempt to prove that human experience displays a *sui generis* logical structure and explains this reference to our nature as rational animals who instinctively create a universe of meaning to navigate our environment. The perceptual content of our conscious experience of objects, the desires that motivate our self-conscious experience of action, and the beliefs and values that make up our socio-historical experience all testify to the presence of rationality as their condition of possibility. As such, Hegel's *Phenomenology* not only requires of us that we transform the

mission of logic into a description of the immanent logic at the basis of human experience, thereby making the task of logic 'anthropological.' According to Carew, Hegel's *Phenomenology* also presents us with a novel model of human experience. It demonstrates the rationality already instinctively at work in our bodily sensations, perceptions, and desires. It also gives an account of the origins of human society and history, and it makes human experience irreducible to cognitive processes in the brain, psychological mechanisms, and the biological imperatives of survival and reproduction.

Carew's contribution on Hegel's concept of experience in his *Phenomenology* is followed by Sanna Karolina Tirkkonen's demonstration of the importance of experience to Michel Foucault in her essay "Experience, Governing and Ethics in Foucault's Philosophy: Beyond the Subjective and Objective Notions of Experience." The French word 'expérience' has a whole variety of meanings, states Tirkkonen. Nevertheless, Foucault's thought is widely used in the humanities and social sciences for investigating experiences of madness, illness, marginalization, and social conflicts as if the meaning of the word 'experience' were obvious and indisputable. Tirkkonen therefore explicates Foucault's most relevant concepts of experience and their theoretical functions. She demonstrates how Foucault used the concept of experience to structure his research on ethical subjectivity and cultural practices of care, and she questions some standard interpretations of his work. According to Tirkkonen, Foucault referred to experience throughout his career, especially in his early texts on existential psychiatry from the 1950s and 1960s and in his late work from the 1980s. When Foucault reorganized his work in the 1980s, he looked back to his early work in his search for a new concept of experience, and what emerged was an understanding of experience not merely as a purely subjective occurrence nor as an event produced by discourses, concludes Tirkkonen.

Similar to the philosophy of Foucault, Sue Spaid's essay "Surfing the Public Square: On Worldlessness, Social Media, and the Dissolution of the Polis" also deals with the social sphere. Spaid employs Hannah Arendt's characterization of the social, which lacks location and mandates conformity, in order to evaluate social media's relationship to the social, its influence on private space, its impact on public space, and its virus-like capacity to capture, mimic, and replicate the agonistic polis, where "everything [is] decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence." Spaid first reviews Arendt's articulation of the political, private, social, and public realms using Arendt's exact language, so as not to subvert her subtle distinctions. After explaining how online activities resemble (or not) Arendt's notion of the social, Spaid demonstrates how the rise of the social – by her characterized as dominated by behaviour (not action), ruled by nobody, and occurring nowhere – continues to eclipse both private and public space at an accelerating pace. Finally, Spaid discusses the ramifications of social media's setting the stage for worldlessness to spin out of control, as the public square becomes an intangible web. Unlike an Arendtian web of worldly human relationships that fosters individuality and enables excellence to be publicly tested, social media feeds a craving for kinship and connection, however remotely. Leaving such needs unfulfilled, social media risks to trump *bios politicos*.

Whereas Foucault and Arendt are well known as political philosophers, and Foucault also as an interdisciplinary researcher, Raine Ruoppa in "John Dewey's Theory of Aesthetic Experience: Bridging the Gap between Arts and Sciences" presents Dewey's notion of experience as a basis of crossing disciplinary borders we still have difficulties crossing despite the currently widespread wish for interdisciplinarity. Dewey's philosophical pragmatism offers a reformatory approach to the arduous relationship between natural sciences and humanities, claims Ruoppa. Dewey intended to resolve the pre-Darwinian influence of classical philosophy upon various scholarly practices. Even in our day, ancient background assumptions permeate a considerable proportion of academic research and argumentation on both sides of the debate, including evolutionary accounts. In order to avoid the consequences of such archaic premises and provide an understanding of the proper function of aesthetic experience, Ruoppa examines Dewey's reappraisal of the concepts of art, science, and knowledge. In her essay, the natural constitution of aesthetic experience, which carries one of the intrinsic relations between art and science, comprises the core of the proposed solution. She suggests that the establishment of an integral aesthetic connection forms a fruitful basis for further bridging of the gap between the humanities and the natural sciences.

In "Sculpture and the Sense of Place," Jakob Due Lorentzen also pursues the broad and significant potential of aesthetic experience but following a different path of interpretation. Inspired by a reading of

Heidegger's reflections on sculpture, Lorentzen proposes a direction in which thinking enriched by artistic experience can unfold an alternative mode of being-in-the-world. Heidegger pointed out that, in contrast to a scientific understanding of space as an empty container, the special character of space in sculpture is characterized by a clearing-away (*Räumen*), which presupposes and points to an open, receptive attitude toward experience that is necessary for dwelling to take place. From Heidegger, Lorentzen proceeds in his essay to reflect on artworks by Eduardo Chillida and Janet Echelman, which offer concrete examples of how a thinking of sculpture can apply to different notions of place. While Chillida's sculptures present a sense of place as rooted and embedded in the landscape, Echelman's artworks explore an expanded notion of place through a multisensory sense of immersion. Applying Heidegger's meditations on *Räumen*, it turns out that the differences between the aforementioned artworks are of greatest significance in illustrating the breadth of the experiential space they share: an openness to dwelling and a receptivity toward being-in-the-world. In this way, Lorentzen unfolds Heidegger's reflections on sculpture in a contemporary context and establishes the potential of sculpture for a thinking of experience.

Lorentzen's essay is followed by a contribution by Jonas Holst entitled "Retrieving Experience: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study," the purpose of which is to develop an understanding of experience as in need of being continuously uncovered and recovered in order to consolidate itself. Through a critical dialogue with modern phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions, this consolidation process proves to be porous and discontinuous, states Holst, as experience contains caesuras and openings, which break and even fracture what is already known by individual consciousness in order to make room for something new to appear over the horizon. Thinking about how to engage with phenomena given in experience draws us into a dynamic movement at the limits of singular subjectivity and the world that transcends it to all sides. However, having followed and explored this movement, it remains a question whether all experience can be retrieved, concludes Holst, finally discussing this question, as well.

Similar to Holst's essay, Sandy Brander's "Being, Appearing, and the Platonic Idea in Badiou and Plato," which rounds this topical issue on experience in a new key, also discusses both ancient and modern thought. Brander considers the ambiguous sense in which Alain Badiou is a Platonist. He alleviates the ambiguity by considering how two characteristics of Platonism are treated in the metaphysics of *Being and Event*: first, the split between being/appearing, and second, Platonic Ideas. In a comparative study of Badiou's *Being and Event* and Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Phaedo*, Brander considers the comparability of the treatment of both characteristics of Platonism in the metaphysics of Plato and Badiou. Using concepts from Plato as well as Badiou, he explores three possible ways in which being/appearing and Platonic Ideas may be interrelated, thereby constituting a philosophy of experience. According to Brander, such explorations necessitate parallel consideration of how the sense in which Badiou is a Platonist is determinable by the interrelation of Platonic Ideas with being/appearing in his metaphysics. Brander determines that being/appearing and Platonic Ideas interrelate differently in the metaphysics of Plato and Badiou, and he thus questions whether Badiou is a Platonist in this sense. However, he also indicates an esoteric sense in which the latter is the case (the dialectic of the One and the multiple) and invites further consideration of this option.

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