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Main Article:

The Acquisition of High Quality Experience

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Abstract

The search for knowledge has continued to expand to new domains since its start in the seventeenth century. Some of them have proved unusually resistant. Methods have had to proliferate to deal with the obstacles, for example in the social domain. There also have been ideological reactions. Surprisingly frequently, methods and activities that appear to be effective in dealing with such domains are classified as “preliminary” or are distinguished by a “point of view” that has yet to be transcended to achieve “true” knowledge. One such activity is the acquisition of high quality experience. It is argued in the paper that it does not deserve being treated as a poor relative. It has a history of its own and can point to many successes, for example in the development of new values and emotions. Its only drawback seems to be that the search for high quality experiences has tended to be heuristic, or if one wishes, artistic. This situation is changing, however. In the paper the differences between the acquisition of knowledge and that of high quality experience are delineated. It is argued that facilitation of the latter’s searches requires the development of interactions between entities that generate and structure experiences--i.e., of human collectives that stabilise sufficiently to execute a collective action in their environment. They are characterised by the use of coordinating languages.

Keywords: high quality experience; knowledge; collectives; values; freedom

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1. Introduction

Experiences make us human. Without experiences, we are doomed to repeat ourselves and behave like machines, as Santayana mooted (in Schilpp, 1951). This is not necessarily a bad thing. Still, we tend to be happily surprised when we find ourselves

behaving in unexpected, hopefully witty, ways. We are able to vary and hence compare experiences. This makes it possible to create additional experiences--and hence to have a daily life, a life that we value not only for its repetition, but for its variation as well.

We even have ways to link and change experiences systematically--by analogy, metaphor, parable, myth, poem or story. One of the most well known activities of this kind is *knowledge acquisition*, a seventeenth-century invention that helps to recognise patterns in our experiences and identify what maintains them (e.g., the sun linking our experience of days and nights). This method has proved tremendously successful. The need to interpret why this is the case, or when, is filling the coffers of epistemology and ontology. Some mystery remains.

There is another activity that is a good runner up in terms of success (more than analogy, etc.), but has not received as much acclaim. We call it the *acquisition of high quality experience*. It involves linking experiences to create new ideas and feelings on the basis of previous ones, to resist what make us feel or do what we do not want, and to recognise our emotions in others. These links are not usually considered knowledge. They frequently change and make us forget earlier experiences. They also remain attached to their environments.

The relation between knowledge acquisition and this other form of acquisition is not a comfortable one. It tends to be strained by jealousy and dominance. Those acquiring knowledge seem jealous of those writing poems or creating fantasies and speculations--as these introduce new qualities, like beauty, that clearly go beyond the domain of knowledge. Those searching for new links and qualities feel belittled by those involved in knowledge acquisition--especially when they prove able to do things the latter are not equipped to do.

At present, the strain seems to have eased somewhat--possibly due to an increasing ability and "will" of those involved in the second activity to go their own way, and resist the dominance of the first activity. An example is Turnbull (2000), who glorifies the ability of Malaysian sailors to find their way over large distances as high quality experience. What may also have helped is the tendency to stretch the notion of knowledge more and more to cover both activities--making all parties behave as if aiming for the same goal.

The aim of this paper is to name and recognise high quality experiences and summarise how they may be acquired. These activities are related to what such experiences are used for. A distinction is made between two types of usage or action--actions that help maintain collectives of actors and actions that these collectives execute in some environment. The former contribute to the acquisition of high quality experience, while the latter provide the criteria to judge whether this has been achieved and how testing is to proceed.

Distinguishing between the acquisition of knowledge and of high quality experience has a number of advantages. Above all it allows for a concentrated development of its strengths. Among the latter is the solution of special classes of problems, like the commons problem (Section 5) and the testing problem (Section 2). It also helps to design the conditions that foster adherence to values like honesty and fairness. Further advantages include a clarification of the notion of freedom--and not to forget, also of knowledge (Section 6).

The paper contains the following parts. First, it is attempted to characterise the acquisition of high quality experience. Next some principles are presented, according to which both the acquisition of knowledge and high quality experience can be facilitated. They are used to identify methods specifically for the acquisition of high quality experience. Finally, it is concluded that these allow for results in practical areas where experiences do not appear bounded--and where engaged, dedicated, or attached resources are needed.

2. Knowledge versus Experience

Many authors have tried to identify how knowledge is acquired--often as a way of repeating its successes. They also have tried to subsume many, sometimes only vaguely similar results (including high quality experiences)--presumably to ensure success even further afield. Notwithstanding the ensuing variety and confusion, it seems possible to identify two enduring elements in the genealogy of these efforts. One is making distinctions, the other linking what has been distinguished such that the result satisfies typical criteria.

An early instance can be found in Galileo's work (Sobel, 1999). To him making distinctions meant identifying and collecting observations--i.e., experiences that can be written down, told to others and compared. Examples include his personal observations, like observations of a landscape or of beautiful beings, but also observations contributed by others, like their observations of the moons of Jupiter. One of Galileo's legacies is a preference for the latter type of links--which he required to be two-sided and a-symmetrical and hence storable.

The search for links that satisfy these criteria is still going on. For a link between experiences *A* and *B* to be two-sided, reporting an *A* should allow reporting its *B*; reporting a *B* should allow reporting (one of) its *A*. In an a-symmetrical link, many observations *A* are linked to only a few observations *B*. Once these criteria are satisfied (and testing has stopped), the links will be persistent over time. And also, if a link has been found, a person's effort to use it having heard about it, or re-use it, should be reduced (Rosen, 1993).

Testing whether a link satisfies the criteria often proves difficult. The experiences *A* may be indefinite or infinite in number--so testing their link to *B* (and a-symmetry) may take a long while. One cannot stop. Where this is the case, attempts to *deconstruct* the link, i.e.,

reconstruct *A* from *B* (two-sidedness), will also fail. Whatever is established at each moment thus will be but the result of a chosen stopping rule, i.e., some “point of view.” Redefining the rule only leads to a different point of view (Boje, 2002).

There have been many attempts to find effective stopping rules, i.e., ways to identify links that only refer to *A*'s and *B*'s, and hence stand on their own--rather than links, the quality of which depends also on a point of view, e.g., that of a dominant political party. What is left to claim is only that some stopping rules seem more efficient than others (Churchman, 1971; Popper, 1959). This raises the question whether imitating any of them guarantees success--in other words, whether *knowledge* of testing is possible.

The answer is no. To see this, it seems best to note that any answer to the question whether testing has finished must be ‘I don't know.’ The reason is that, testing refers to the creation of new experiences (*A*) with the risk that these do not link to *B*, i.e., the *act* of doing so. That is to say, whenever one might think to have found a link, the process of testing may destroy it as speculation. Testing thus is but the acquisition of experience--and ‘good’ or high quality testing will mean the acquisition of high quality experience.

The Malaysian sailors enact a similar activity. They test against the act of sailing (i.e., against the sequence of experiences of doing so), and thus continue to modify the experiences needed to arrive at their destination. Had they been interested in knowledge, they might have selected *B*'s that include the rotation of the earth and the measurement of time (as appears feasible nowadays). This would have helped them travel anywhere, including over land and in space--which the sailors do not appear interested in doing.

3. Design Phrases

The argument in the previous section has been relatively general--intentionally so. The aim was to characterise high quality experiences as different from knowledge, *whatever* the latter's definition (as long as it includes establishing links between experiences)--and its acquisition different from that of knowledge, *whatever* its alleged process of testing (as long as it includes satisfying some criteria). High quality experience results when we test against a series of (new) experiences, which we referred to as an act.

We conclude that there is a place for the acquisition of high quality experiences that is independent of the acquisition of knowledge. Testing is against an *act* or action, rather than against criteria like those of two-sidedness and a-symmetry. Moreover, to ensure high quality experiences, such testing will require high levels of activity and alertness, from moment to moment. Without continued testing, experiences may soon become insufficient, so the act does not stay on course, and becomes ineffective and inefficient.

The next step in our exploration will be to clarify how high quality experience may be detected and how its acquisition proceeds. We will use the same type of argument as before, and start from the notion of an act, which as argued, must be an enduring element in the genealogy of high quality experience acquisition. We refer to an act by way of a

phrase that instructs what series of experiences to expect given (other) experiences that an actor collects and uses to generate the elements of the series.

An example is the instruction to make a decision. It addresses individuals on how to choose (or create the experience of choosing) one alternative from a set. They have to collect experiences--their own or somebody else's (Varela & Shear, 1999)--that link to terms like 'probability' and 'utility', and choose the alternative that is highest on these terms. The selection is considered (fully) informed by high quality experiences if a decision or choice is made that does not lead to (or minimises the chance of) an act the actor did not intend.

If no such choice is possible, changing terms may help. For example, it may be necessary to delete the term 'probability' from the phrase (implying certainty about experiencing the alternatives), or change who is to be "addressed" (e.g., only managers), or add "ethical values"--i.e., constraints to avoid some elements from the set of alternatives. This process is expected to increase the quality of the experiences linked to those of the act. It may take a long time, just like acquiring knowledge (Jungerman & De Zeeuw, 1977).

Over time many phrases have been developed to execute the act of decision-making. The set of such phrases constitutes what is called the *theory* of decision-making, the terms of the phrases filling its dictionary. It is not a theory in the usual sense, however, as the phrases are meant to advise (rather than describe) on how to choose. It also cannot be called a language, in the way Quine (1951) proposed, as its structure (or grammar) functions like a phrase itself. It may be called a *design phrase*, or a facet sentence (Guttman, 1959).

Unfortunately, the design phrase of decision-making has not proved sufficient to collect experiences of high quality. Whenever it is applied, it proves necessary to "sweep in" additional terms (Churchman, 1971)--like the aim of the decision, the presence of other decision-makers, etc. (Weick, 1995). This has led to suggestions to stop sweeping in as soon as the experiences the terms collect "satisfice" (Simon, 1960). The same difficulty has been noticed in the case of other design phrases, like the one supporting problem solving (Newell & Simon, 1972).

4. Coordinating Languages

To address this problem (of under-determinacy) one may consider the case of two people carrying a heavy piece of furniture up narrow stairs. Each will modify his or her act and the supporting experiences on the basis of what the other is doing. The two carriers constitute a collective that develops by continuing to check that the furniture arrives as intended. Various phases may be distinguished, characterised by increasing coordination--like a start phase and possibly a stable end phase (when swearing at each other stops).

Two types of design phrases play a role. The first helps to structure individual acts to interact in the collective (that of the furniture carriers). Members will select terms from

the phrases' dictionaries to acquire the experiences needed so the second type may help to structure the collective act (moving the furniture). This implies that the collective self-organises. When it eventually stabilises (self-maintains), it provides the high quality experience for the collective act to become efficient and effective (Axelrod, 1984; Von Foerster, 1970; Reason & Bradburn, 2001; De Zeeuw, 2003).

When stabilisation occurs, the exchange of experience must be self-correcting, via changes in the phrases' terms. This means that the resulting combination of phrases constitutes a *language*, the collective's *coordinating language*. It links the acts in the collective so that each generates the experiences other acts require, and all together generate the experiences needed to execute the collective act. Without a coordinating language individuals will not be able to provide the relevant experiences and under-determinacy will continue to occur.

Having identified high quality experience, the next step is to explore how to facilitate its acquisition. This meets with a conceptual difficulty. Self-organisation clearly is a spontaneous phenomenon; it starts itself (Hayek, 1945). It will be disrupted, therefore, if one would aim to speed it up by the introduction of some coordinating language. This prohibits any facilitation of the acquisition of high quality experience. Still, most of us will have experienced some form of successful self-organisation, starting from an external origin.

Examples include self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and similar support groups (Van Haaster, 1991). Usually there is an originator. Eventually the group stabilises, having developed some coordinating language, including rules of membership. At that moment the contribution of the external originator is forgotten--he or she only "stands" at the start of the self-organisation. In other words, self-maintaining collectives remember only the (high quality) experiences relevant to their collective acts.

Another example is the formation of communities to achieve testing. They have to be self-maintaining collectives (testing cannot be known; see Section 2). Many have been identified--often referred to as paradigmatic communities (Kuhn, 1962). In the natural sciences, the most frequently used coordinating language is the *language of variables* (Kerlinger, 1970). It comes with a highly selective memory. Collectives forget everything that is historical, "standing at" particular initial moments.

We have identified what to look for in the process of acquiring high quality experiences. This suggests a research design. It starts with some coordinating language, which continues to be modified until a collective develops to perform the desired task (and forgets its origin). There is an added benefit. The design also may serve to avoid or resist undesirable languages--like those used by state-organisations that become totalitarian and force their members into what they do not want to be, i.e., poor, ill-educated and without rights.

5. Advantages of Acquiring High Quality Experiences

The above concludes the intended argument. It was argued, first, that there is a place for the acquisition of high quality experience, independent of that of knowledge. Second, acquisition is characterised by the referent that is used: experiences are to be collected that allow for the effective and efficient execution of some collective task. Third, high quality experience is not achieved by individuals, but only by a special kind of collective, that which achieves stability as part of executing its collective task.

What remains to be done is to explore a number of details and consequences. This task faces difficulties as many attempts that aim for the acquisition of experience have been categorised or even presented as forms of knowledge acquisition. Some disentanglement is required, therefore--as well as a re-attribution of successes. This may inspire further conflict and jealousy (see Section 1). There also may be positive effects. What is especially important is the possibility of an independent design of acquiring high quality experience.

It has also become clear that the acquisition of high quality experience may be successful in cases where one would not even attempt acquisition of knowledge. It does appear possible, for example, to acquire a high quality experience of smells (as in the perfume industry), and of touch (as in physiotherapeutic methods that emphasise tactile stimulation, or haptics). In contrast, knowledge acquisition appears to have restricted itself to dealing with only a special kind of experience, i.e., reported observations--including observations of the reactions to smells (rather than smells themselves).

Another example concerns what is referred to as the *commons problem*, a class of problems Hardin (1968) identifies as “no technical solutions problems,” i.e., problems that no type of knowledge that is based on criteria can help solve. The problem arises when *individual rationality* (a phrase advising individuals to extend the use of reported “free” resources as much as possible, like the shared meadows in a village) makes *collective rationality* (a phrase suggesting long term free use by everyone) impossible, and vice versa.

Hardin identified two types of solutions. One is to put collective rationality in the background, and emphasise and introduce private property. The other is to de-emphasise individual rationality, and introduce state inter-vention. Relevant to the present paper is a third possibility--where individual actors self-organise to achieve a collective, able to execute the collective task. Various languages have been developed to help collectives of, for example, fishermen to stabilise and have “mostly free” but long term access to fish (Dietz, Ostrom, & Stern, 2003; Pretty, 2003).

These languages emphasise mutual communication--in the form of self-policed rules as well as in the form of an infrastructure, like roads, telephones, and the like. Both help to monitor and maintain the resource. To prevent defection from stable collectives--i.e., the criminal use of rules and infrastructure--languages may have to be changed, for example

by adding or deleting terms. One may facilitate this change by “nesting” collectives, providing each with a context from which to communicate additional terms (Simon, 1981).

There is another kind of nesting. It refers to the self-organisation of stable collectives. It is not just one process, but rather a series of three overlapping ones. In the first process of acquisition a boundary is created that distinguishes between experiences of disturbances and of the changes needed to resist them (Varela, 1984). The other two processes help to initiate the latter by developing the coordinating language and stabilising the collective. All three processes require members to refresh their contributions continuously (Disch, 1996).

6. Further to the Growth of Experience

Such continued refreshment suggests that outsiders (i.e., non-members or members when not busy contributing as members) may find it difficult to interpret members’ activities. They may appear unsystematic or even chaotic--but not ritualised (Waldrop, 1994). The collective itself is quite different. Being stable, it will *be* the high quality experience needed for some task, and recognisable as such. This means that collectives are in people’s daily life--unlike knowledge, which stays apart (De Zeeuw, 2001).

Stable collectives will constitute a “certain thing,” therefore (term taken from Collingwood, 1938). The same holds for knowledge. This suggests that neither is a “kind of” the other. Both are able to combine experiences, whether contributed by one or more persons or not, and in reducing future efforts (Rosen, 1993). There is a big difference, however, in that people may *have* knowledge, while stable collectives *are* high quality experience. Collectives have an identity that is recreated continuously.

In view of this activity, any destabilisation of a collective should be easily noticeable--such as when members do not contribute what is required, hence do not error-correct and do not communicate. Conversely, if there is error-correction, members will continue to have a sense of fair play and show loyalty without ulterior motive (Mangan, 1986). Facilitating the acquisition of high quality experience thus helps to induce and maintain such values, something knowledge has not been able to contribute yet.

Contributions from the members of a stable collective will be “qualified.” When the collective is stable, it facilitates the contribution of certain experiences rather than of others. Members will be competent, therefore (qualified and skilled), as the self-organisation implies that the qualification will fit to what they can provide. This competency is the result of the use of the coordinating language, and may change, therefore--for example when languages are changed to increase competence in the collective task (De Zeeuw, 1991).

It is possible that collectives develop into totalitarian ones, i.e., into collectives that do not allow multiple memberships. Examples include national states that absorb all

contributed experiences from their citizens, and hence dominate their actions, usually to develop a strong army rather than a strong economy. One may thus expect a need for policing, as such states are not stable. In contrast, stable collectives will be interested only in what contributes to make them so. Members will be “free” to contribute elsewhere, i.e., to other collectives.

This notion of freedom implies a paradox. If one becomes a member of a stable collective one subjects oneself to constraints--as expressed by the terms of the coordinating language and of the values generated by being a member, such as being honest and moral. Becoming a member thus means losing freedom. Alternatively, one may become a member of many stable collectives in parallel--and in this way gain the ability to freely choose what high quality experiences to acquire and when.

This second form of freedom may easily be increased, therefore. In contrast, adding knowledge does not increase freedom at all except by enabling everyone to do anything at will (like creating and dropping bombs). Acquiring high quality experience implies that one gains freedom the more one loses it. This would not happen, of course, if people were not able to endlessly add and express experiences. This is in line with Sartre’s existential claim that people are responsible for (rather than users of) what they experience (Sartre, 1946).

7. Concluding Remarks

It has frequently been attempted to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge in new domains--to repeat its successes in the natural sciences. The result is an excess of methods that are difficult to compare and order. Moreover, it is not clear yet what successes have been achieved or may still be achieved in the social sciences. Sometimes results are considered “not yet” knowledge; sometimes they are seen as special kinds of knowledge. Alternatively, one may ask whether results are not (any form of) knowledge at all, but something entirely different.

In this paper the alternative is called *high quality experience*. It was questioned what good such experience is and whether systematic acquisition is possible. It was defined as what makes it possible to execute a task effectively and efficiently. It was argued that systematic acquisition requires the development of self-organising collectives that actively search to achieve stability, using the collective task as a referent. Stable collectives provide the high quality experience required. They *are* such experience, as part of daily life.

These methods have been in use for many centuries, with great success--but awareness of their independent nature may have lapsed because of the more recent (since the seventeenth century) dominance of knowledge acquisition. As argued in the introduction to this paper, this often has led to high quality experience being seen as a form of knowledge, albeit a weak one. Increasingly it is realised that this view is unjustified. High quality experience can be useful and possible in situations where knowledge is not.

Among these situations are those exemplifying the dilemma of the commons (Hardin, 1968), where a solution (continued use of free resources) is possible only by accessing high quality experience. Other situations where this is the case are those where what is to be linked proves difficult to reconstruct from the linked, and where the former has to be identified by providing it with a voice, the voice from below. This process is referred to as deconstruction (Boje, 2002). Success requires the acquisition of high quality experience.

There are many other areas where the acquisition of high quality experience is re-gaining status. They can be found as part of searches for support--for example, to help the disadvantaged gain a voice, to fight the bureaucracy of daily life as well as reduce differences in power. They are similarly used in the development of volunteer work, to support the disabled, and to manage organisations. Various new coordinating languages (to stabilise collectives) appear in the making, e.g., the *language of complexity* (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003).

An important characteristic of high quality experience is that self-organising collectives are part of people's environment. They may stabilise and *be* high quality experience (contain it, present it). This means that they enrich people's daily life. They induce acting without ulterior motives, honestly and fairly. They provide coherence and continuation to daily life. Collectives may continue as long as there is interest from members. Their existence facilitates people's activities--they make them more efficient and effective.

Stable collectives contribute in more unusual ways as well. They contribute to the development of high quality experiences in smelling, touching, tasting, and hearing--unlike knowledge which depends on reported experiences, and hence on (reported) observations. They also contribute to the development of emotions and feelings--of inclusion, of happiness, of local control. These are part of being able to communicate what experiences are necessary to maintain a collective and support collective action.

The most endearing property of the acquisition of high quality experience may be that it is anti-domination. It advocates the development of parallel collectives, in that individuals may contribute to more than one collective. This implies that the freedom to choose increases as more collectives develop. This stands in contrast to presently usual ideas of doom: the more knowledge there is, the more totalitarian daily life may become--dominated by knowledgeable and powerful players such as states and large companies.

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