

EXPERIENCE

The old association between **experience** and *experiment* can seem, in some of the most important modern uses, merely obsolete. (The relations between the two words, until 1C18, are described under *EMPIRICAL*.) The problem now is to consider the relations between two main senses which have been important since 1C18. These can be summarized as (i) knowledge gathered from past events, whether by conscious observation or by consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from 'reason' or 'knowledge'. We can give a famous and influential example of each sense.

Burke, in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), wrote:

If I might venture to appeal to what is so much out of fashion in Paris, I mean to experience . . .

This is a conservative argument against 'rash' political innovation, stressing the need for 'slow but well-sustained progress', taking each step as it comes and watching its effect. We can see how this developed from the sense of experiment and observation, but what is new is the confident generalization of the 'lessons of experience': particular conclusions as well as particular methods. Someone in Paris might have replied that the Revolution itself was an 'experience', in the sense of putting a new kind of politics to trial and observation, but for all those older implications of the word it seems certain that this would have been overborne, at least in English, by the riper and more gathered sense, then and now, of 'lessons' as against 'innovations' or 'experiments'.

That is **experience** past. We can see **experience** present in T. S. Eliot (*Metaphysical Poets*, 1921):

a thought to Donne was an experience, it modified his sensibility.

What is implicit here is a distinction between kinds of consciousness; to some people, it seems, a thought would *not* be an experience, but a

(lesser) act of reasoning or opinion. **Experience**, in this major tendency, is then the fullest, most open, most active kind of consciousness, and it includes feeling as well as thought. This sense has been very active in *aesthetic* discussion, following an earlier religious sense, and it can come to be contrasted, over a wide area, with the kinds of consciousness involved in reasoning and conscious experiment.

It is evident that the grounds for reliance on **experience** past ('lessons') and **experience** present (full and active 'awareness') are radically different, yet there is nevertheless a link between them, in some of the kinds of action and consciousness which they both oppose. This does not have to be the case, but the two distinct senses, from 1C18, have in practice moved together, within a common historical situation.

It is very difficult, in the complexity of the emergence of these senses from the always latent significances in much earlier uses, to mark definite phases. The general usefulness of **experience** past is so widely recognized that it is difficult to know who would want to challenge it while it remains a neutral sense, permitting radically different conclusions to be drawn from diversely gathered and interpreted observations. But it is of course just this which the rhetorical use against *experiment* or *innovation* prevents. It is interesting that Blake, at almost the same time as Burke, used **experience** in a much more problematic way: less bland, less confident; indeed a troubled contrast with *innocence*. So far from being an available and positive set of recommendations, it was 'bought with the price of all that a man hath' (*Four Zoas*, II, c. 1800). No specific interpretation of **experience** can in practice be assumed to be directive; it is quite possible from **experience** to see a need for *experiment* or *innovation*.

This might be easier to agree than the problem of **experience** present. It is clear that this involves an appeal to the whole consciousness, the whole being, as against reliance on more specialized or more limited states or faculties. As such it is part of that general movement which underlies the development of *CULTURE* (q.v.) and its directly associated terms. The strength of this appeal to wholeness, against forms of thought which would exclude certain kinds of consciousness as merely 'personal', 'subjective' or 'emotional', is evident. Yet within the form of appeal (as again in

CULTURE and ART) the stress on wholeness can become a form of exclusion of other nominated partialities. The recent history of this shift is in aesthetics (understandably so, when we recall the development of AESTHETICS itself), but the decisive phase was probably in a certain form of religion, and especially Methodism.

The sense develops from **experience** as 'being consciously the subject of a state or condition' (OED, 4) and especially from the application of this to an 'inner', 'personal', religious experience. While this was available within many religious forms, it became especially important within Protestantism, and was increasingly relied on in later and more radical Protestant movements. Thus in Methodism there were *experience-meetings*, classes 'held for the recital of religious experiences'. A description of 1857 records that 'there was praying, and exhorting, and telling experiences, and singing . . . sentimental hymns'. This is then a notion of SUBJECTIVE (q.v.) witness, offered to be shared. What is important about it, for a later more general sense, is that such **experiences** are offered not only as truths, but as the most authentic kind of truths. Within theology, this claim has been the matter of an immense argument. The caution of Jonathan Edwards – 'those experiences which are agreeable to the word of God are right' (1758) – is among the more moderate reactions. It is clear that in C20 both the claim and the doubts and objections have moved into a much wider field. At one extreme **experience** (present) is offered as the necessary (immediate and authentic) ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis. At the other extreme, **experience** (once the present participle not of 'feeling' but of 'trying' or 'testing' something) is seen as the product of social conditions or of systems of belief or of fundamental systems of perception, and thus not as material for truths but as evidence of conditions or systems which by definition it cannot itself explain.

This remains a fundamental controversy, and it is not, fortunately, limited to its extreme positions. But much of the controversy is confused, from the beginning, by the complex and often alternative senses of **experience** itself. **Experience** past already includes, at its most serious, those processes of consideration, reflection and analysis which the most extreme use of **experience** present – an unquestionable authenticity and immediacy – excludes. Similarly, the reduction of **experience** to material always produced from elsewhere depends on an exclusion of kinds of consideration, reflection and analysis

which are not of a consciously separated systematic type. It is then not that such kinds should not be tested, but that in the deepest sense of **experience** all kinds of evidence and its consideration should be tried.

See EMPIRICAL, RATIONAL, SENSIBILITY, SUBJECTIVE

EXPERT

Expert is from fw *expert*, oF, rw *expertus*, L, past participle of *experiri* – to try. It appeared in English, as an adjective, in IC14, at the same time as the closely related **experience**. It is characteristic that it began to be used as a noun – *an expert* – from eC19, in an industrial society which put increasing emphasis on specialization and qualification. It has continued to be used over a wide range of activities, at times with a certain vagueness (cf. *qualified* and the more deliberate *formal qualifications*). It is interesting that *inexpert*, as a noun in the opposite sense, was occasionally used from IC19, but the main word in this sense is, of course, *layman*, generalized from the old contrast between *laymen* and *clerics*. *Lay* is from fw *laicus*, L – not of the clergy, from rw *laikos*, Gk – of the people. There is a comparable movement in *profession*, C13, from rw *profiteri*, L – to declare aloud, which was originally an avowal of religious belief, becoming the basis of two nouns; *professor* – a ranked teacher, C14, an avower, C15; and *professional*, C18, in a widening range of vocations and occupations. *Amateur*, fw *amatore*, It, rw *amator*, L – lover, and thence one who loves something, developed in an opposed pairing with *professional* (first as a matter of relative skill, later as a class and then monetary distinction) from C18.

See INTELLECTUAL