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From Mythology to Logic

Dewey's View of Modernity and the Linguistic Nature of Experience

Roberto Gronda

- 1 When Dewey started working on *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* (UPMP), he was well aware that the main aim of his new book should have been that of providing a clear and comprehensive exposition of the philosophical views that he had formulated in his previous works. At that time – around 1939 – Dewey was in his eighties and he had already published almost all the great books that contributed to establish his reputation as the most distinguished American philosopher. However, his thought was still difficult to understand, partly because of the terminology adopted and partly because of the seemingly counter-intuitiveness of many of his theses. This is the reason why some of his students asked him to attempt to better clarify the way in which the different aspects of his thought hold together in a consistent whole. UPMP is Dewey's answer to that felt need.
- 2 It is far from strange therefore that to a reader well acquainted with Dewey's thought the book may appear as a kind of recapitulation of the theoretical results obtained in his later works – say, from *Experience and Nature* to *Logic: Theory of Inquiry*. Consequently, one may be led to conclude that nothing really new can be found in UPMP apart from a different – and quite likely, a better – exposition of what Dewey has already said in other places. Such a conclusion is correct – at least in a certain sense. After all, it would be very strange if Dewey had decided to dramatically change his philosophical orientation after more than fifty years of philosophical investigations. Nonetheless, there is something deeply unsatisfactory in that remark. Indeed, it seems as if something very important passes unnoticed when the issue of the originality of UPMP is dealt with from that perspective. The point is that the criterion is too restrictive: if one believes that the originality of UPMP should be evaluated in terms of the number of assumptions and theses that cannot be found in Dewey's previous texts, he would fail to appreciate what its trait of distinctive novelty is. What Dewey tries to articulate here is something more important than a new set of theoretical concepts. His aim is rather to define a standpoint from which to describe both the spirit and the direction of the process of emancipation from beliefs that

is usually referred to as “modernity” (170). As will be shown in the following pages, the definition of such a standpoint represents one of Dewey’s most remarkable theoretical achievements since it enables him to ground his post-Kantian account of meaning in a consistent philosophy of history.

- 3 Dewey’s entire theoretical work revolves around the search for a reliable standpoint for philosophical reflection. Already in his early articles published on *Mind* in 1886 the adoption of the idealistic notion of experience was functional to the development of a general theory of meaning according to which what is real is properly defined as what *can* reveal itself in human experience. To be (semantically) real is to have a meaning, to be significant for human behavior. This is how Dewey understands – and accepts – the fundamental idealistic insight that objectivity and subjectivity are essentially interwoven. However, the naturalistic character of Dewey’s thought prevents him from relapsing into those unfortunate habits of speech that caused much of the confusions traditionally associated with German idealism. This because Dewey’s naturalistic version of idealism does not aim at questioning the independence of reality as far as its *existence* is concerned. It is an idealism of meaning and not an idealism of existence that Dewey tries to work out, since what the activity of thinking is able to affect is the value that a thing has for us, not the brute fact of its facticity.¹ The existence of the world is a mystery, Dewey states in an important passage of UPMP, because it is impossible to explain why an event has a certain feature rather than another. What science aims to explain is not the particular quality that a thing presents, but the correlations holding between two different classes of events. Such regular correlation – where “regular” refers to a normative content that can take the form of concept or habit, depending on whether the norm is apprehended reflectively or unreflectively – is the very nature of meaning: meaning is a form, a universal; being a universal, it is a relation which “supervenes” on the particular things in which it is somehow “embodied”.
- 4 The notion of mystery is particularly important in the economy of Dewey’s thought because it provides the ground for the concept of humility. Humility means that thought is not constitutive but reconstructive, that human beings live in a world that they can modify according to their needs only through practical work, not through manipulation of words. Dewey is very clear on this point: reason does not supply us with a privileged access to the essence of reality; all the knowledge that can be acquired about the world (both internal and external) is the outcome of a process of inquiry. But humility also means that the world can be understood if we do not pretend to project our categories on it. The concept of experience as formulated in the first chapter of *Experience and Nature* is a powerful statement of the possibility of knowing things as they actually are.
- 5 The core of Dewey’s naturalistic version of idealism is therefore the rejection of the metaphysical assumption that experience is essentially severed from reality. It is in the light of this fundamental thesis that the conceptual clarification of the nature of modernity – modernity being for Dewey that tendency of human reason to “get everything out into the open where it can be seen and examined” (169) – acquires its distinctive philosophical import. The search for autonomy – which is at the very same time a search for freedom at a moral and political level – makes it possible to give a satisfactory account of the struggles that have been scanning the rhythm of the life of reason, as well as of the role that Dewey believes contemporary philosophy should play in that process. The history of Western philosophy is the history of a movement from mythology to logic, where logic means here the genealogical inquiry into the roots of

meaning.² The human world – the world that human beings have been building up throughout their history – is grounded on some fundamental categories that are, in turn, the product of human semantic creativity. There is no myth of the given in the space of reason since there is not a single moment in which the organism is purely receptive of events happening in the external world. Dewey's exposure to the discoveries of contemporary biology – which was, and this point is worthy of notice, extremely indebted to the theoretical achievements of German speculative philosophy – prevents him from admitting anything essentially meaningful outside the scope of human activity. In more technical terms, since meaning is a relation, there is nothing simpler than a relation to which the latter can be reduced. Now, according to Dewey, modernity is precisely that standpoint from which it is possible to recognize the *semantic* primacy of human creativity.

- 6 Dewey's aim in UPMP is to subject the vocabulary of philosophy to rigorous criticism in order to throw out from it everything occult, everything that does not have the necessary credentials to be authoritative for itself. The most interesting application of this principle is the semantic analysis of the notions of object and objectivity. Its theoretical relevance is due to the fact that Dewey's semantic conception of object represents the point of coalescence of three important lines of reflection: the pragmatist emphasis on *practical* activity as the backbone of meaning, the idea of the neutrality of experience, and the thesis of the linguistic nature of experience. According to Dewey, objects are linguistic patterns of action, or, as he openly states in *Human Nature and Conduct*, are "habits turned inside out" (MW 14: 127). Consequently, in the remaining part of the present paper those three issues will be addressed with the aim of understanding how the – and the semantic conception of objectivity that stems from them – contribute to the process of development of the modernity. In particular, the next section will be devoted to discussing the relation existing between activity and neutrality. Its goal is to answer the following question: why is the controversial assumption of the neutrality of experience necessary to formulate a sound pragmatist conception of meaning? The final section will tackle the thorny problem of how Dewey conceives the relation between language and experience. After Rorty's plea for a linguistification of pragmatism, many interpreters have argued for the importance of the notion of experience in the economy of Dewey's thought. It is a fact, Rorty has correctly observed, that in the last years of his life Dewey decided to drop the concept of experience in favor of that of culture (LW1: 371). But Dewey's decision of replacing the former with the latter should not be read (as Rorty suggests) as a confession of error and as an implicit acknowledgment of the lack of viability of a philosophy of experience. Dewey never changed his mind on that point, but simply realized that his vocabulary centered around the notion of experience was too idiosyncratic to convey the ideas he wanted to express. Interpreters as Koopman and Hildebrand are therefore right in criticizing Rorty's too easy dismissal of a concept that runs throughout Dewey's entire work (Koopman 2007; Hildebrand 2003). Nonetheless, the reinstatement of experience as the fundamental category of Dewey's naturalism cannot be the last word on this issue because there is a strong sense in which one is entitled to say that, in Dewey's eyes, experience is language. Dewey's long quotation from Malinowski's article on *Culture* published on the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* stresses the interrelatedness of custom and artifact, ideal and material, experience and language. "[T]hat which is called material and that which is called non-material," Dewey argues, "cannot and do not exist apart from each other" (291). The point is then that of understanding how these two seemingly contradictory theses hold together: a) that

language is the source of the meaningfulness of human experience, and b) that the scope of experience is broader than that of language since the latter is a *particular* way of creating and transforming meanings which depends – as its condition – on the existence of a larger context in which only words become significant. As will be pointed out, the possibility of combining them in a consistent account of meaning and objectivity relies on the exploitation of the *metaphysical* (in Dewey's technical sense) category of potentiality – along with the correlate notion of *effectiveness* – which constitutes one of the ways in which the general principle of continuity is articulated.



- 7 The second, more theoretically oriented part of *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* opens with a long discussion of the philosophical meaning of the English empiricist tradition from Locke to Hume. According to Dewey, classical empiricism failed because of its incapacity to get rid of the epistemological and metaphysical biases that have plagued Western philosophy. Locke and Berkeley were still committed to the idea of substance as something lying behind phenomena, whereas Hume did not manage to free himself from the belief in the “inherently mental character of the immediate data of knowledge” (175). However, if they had been able to consistently develop their argument as required by the logic of the discourse, they would have been led to conclude that “observed events and their connections are entirely neutral with respect to any distinction that can be drawn between ‘physical’ and ‘mental’ and that if such a distinction is to be drawn, it must be drawn upon grounds that are extrinsic to the observed data” (175). In doing so, they would have been led to endorse that particular version of empiricism formulated for the first time by William James in his *Essays on Radical Empiricism*. In particular, they would have recognized the fact that experience is neutral in respect to the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity.

- 8 As is well known, this is a point which Dewey has already drawn his attention to in the first revised chapter of *Experience and Nature*. In the context of this text, as well as in the general economy of Dewey's thought, the reference to James' conception of experience is preliminary to the definition of a new philosophical vocabulary in which it is impossible to assume the separation of thought and reality, subject and object as an original and irreducible fact. On the one hand, the realization of the identity – on a semantic level – between things and thoughts entails the logical inconsistency of skepticism and, on a broader scale, of the whole epistemological factory. The content of the ideas that we have in mind is the same content that we find in the objects that make up the world which we live in, and it is only because the semantic identity of things and thoughts is there from the very beginning – and it is not a goal that we have to create *ex nihilo* by bringing together two independent realities – that it is possible for our acts of reflection to be effective in reconstructing our transactions with the environment. On the other hand, the idea of the primacy of experience compels us to reject any dogmatic approach to the question of the validity of the concepts (and habits) that make the worlds of common-sense and science possible. Thus, the fact that the most fundamental element that structures human experience – the distinction between subject and object, thoughts and things – can be accounted for in functional terms indirectly confirms Dewey's thesis of the dependence of meaning on human activity.

- 9 Such issue has already been discussed at some length above in connection with Dewey's conception of modernity, so it is not necessary to dwell further upon it. What is important to note here is rather the sense in which experience can be said to be neutral. Indeed, it is important to remind that the kind of neutrality that Dewey advocates is not metaphysical, but epistemological. Dewey is not interested in arguing for the metaphysical thesis that the ultimate elements of reality are bits of pure experience. As Dewey says in *Experience and Nature*, the goal of metaphysics is not that of discovering the hidden nature of phenomena, but that of describing the generic traits of existence (LW1: 50). Consequently, the neutrality that Dewey takes from James has nothing to do with the attempt to establish how things *really* are. To say that experience is *epistemologically* neutral means only that subject and object are logical distinctions created within the broader sphere of experience, so that there is nothing – no meaning, no concept, no relation – that can be said to precede experience.
- 10 When seen from this perspective, however, the concept of epistemological neutrality starts showing its revolutionary force. In the ninth chapter of *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* Dewey addresses the much-discussed issue of the subject of experience. Echoing a well-known passage of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey criticizes again those who ask “Whose experience?” whenever experience is mentioned (191; see also LW1: 178). But the argument that Dewey offers in support of the belief that that criticism is unwarranted is new and more theoretically powerful than the one formulated in *Experience and Nature*. Surely, Dewey still accepts the explanation of subjectivity in terms of responsibility. But he adds an important epistemological consideration in favor of his view. He notices that it would be meaningless to appeal to experience for verification if experience were a purely subjective event. The reason why we look to experience as a means to settle a disputed matter is because we are persuaded that experience is the place in which things reveal themselves to us for what they are. “An experience that was only mine,” Dewey correctly states, “could yield only opinions that are private to me”. Consequently, “it would follow that experience would be incapable of furnishing the ground for any belief deserving the name knowledge (191).
- 11 The thesis of the epistemological neutrality of experience implies therefore the recognition of the fact that the latter is not of the nature of the objects of which we have experience. Using a terminology that is not Dewey's own, it can be said that experience is the possibility that nature has to bring about meanings, thus constituting a realm of being which is semantically different from that of causal explanations of physical events. So, to treat experience as if it were an object would mean to lose sight of its constitutive role, which is that of making meanings available. Dewey had already drawn the attention on that particular feature of experience in the *Introduction* to the *Essays in Experimental Logic* where he distinguished – following Scudder Klyce – between terms, on the one hand, and “infinity and zero” words, on the other hand. While the former refer to what is usually called an object – that is, a section of the continuum of experience –, the latter is a sort of reminder of the “taken-for-granted whole” on the basis of which only objects are possible³ (MW 10: 324). Experience, situation and context are instances of “infinity and zero” words.
- 12 What is new and particularly remarkable in UPMP is the insistence on the naturalistic and biological character of experience –an insistence that enables Dewey to better explain the “mereological” relation between experience and object. In the last chapter of the book, significantly entitled *Experience as Life-function*, Dewey *postulates* a definition of

experience as a particular kind of life-functions “whose nature is most clearly and fully presented in human living,” that is, a group of life-functions happening in a socio-cultural environment. In other words, experience can be defined as a linguistic activity – this is the sense of the reference in the very definition to the socio-cultural environment –, the language being the medium which opens up the access to the realm of meaning. Such an essential intertwining of biological and cultural aspects is adumbrated in the first part of *Logic: Theory of Inquiry*, but here it is the physiological ground of the unity of culture and nature that is brought to the fore and strongly emphasized. The linguistic activity to which we give the name of experience is the totality of the physiological activities that take place in the organism at a given time, the linguistic activity to which we give the name of object is a particular line of action which, being identified by a specific name or description, is repeatable and, consequently, of the nature of universal. The structural similarity between habits and concepts – their difference being a difference of function – that lies at the basis of what has been called here Dewey’s idealistic naturalism is a direct consequence of this fact.

- 13 As is evident, the insistence on the centrality of body is an echo of the Jamesian idea of the organism as a sounding-board. That revolutionary idea is developed in the light of a general philosophy of meaning, thus acquiring a new heuristic function and a broader application. Dewey says that “the *common* material out of which both of these objects [persons and things] develop” is both affective and intellectual, the distinction between these two moments of experience being a matter of “progressive physiological and functional differentiation and specialization within the background of body-sense as a relatively undifferentiated whole” (193). Here the two perspectives, functional and genetic, are significantly fused together: the difference of function – which concerns the dimension of validity – is structurally identical to the process of differentiation – which obviously concerns the dimension of genesis. But what is important to note is that the functional and genetic distinctions necessarily relies on the unity within which differentiation occurs. “Any form of an organic structure which develops and operates without the control of the processes and requirements of the whole organism,” Dewey argues, “is an injurious abnormality” (193).
- 14 The *dialectical* unity between experience and things should now be more clear. Their unity is provided by the notion of activity; the tension that makes their relation dynamic is the tension existing between background and focus, singular and universal, undetermined and determined. In every possible course of action there is something which is unexpected, irreducible to everything that has happened before. The particular qualities of a thing – say, its color, or its shape –, the spatial and temporal positions of the organism doing experience; all these aspects vary from time to time and make the singular situation just what it is. On the contrary, the meaningfulness of the situation is due to the persistence of habits of perception and action – and, consequently, of concepts of reflection – that supply the agent with the means necessary to anticipate the expected consequences of his acts, thus making it possible to perform an intelligent course of behavior. Habits work by picking out some elements of a situation and treating them as determined *potentialities*. “The qualities of a spade as perceived and named,” Dewey states, “are the consequences that would result if it were used (or will result when it is used)—they are anticipations of what is future at the limited and limiting date of perception; and those of a shovel express the somewhat different consequences that result from use of a similar device that effects somewhat different ends” (239).

Accordingly, objects are means, instrumentalities, general pattern of behavior that are “distinguished and identified on the ground of what, in a given interaction, they do to us and we do to them”⁴ (239).



- 15 When it is made clear that an object is not a *Gegenstand*, something essentially opposed to a subject, but is an entity whose content is entirely determined by the rule that specifies the relation between an action and its consequences, a great step has been made towards a more modern conception of object and objectivity. Indeed, it follows from this constructivist insight that there is no real cleft between subject and object, self and world, since the world is semantically homogeneous to thought. What makes the passage from one to the other possible is, evidently, the notion of meaning. Constructivism of meaning is therefore one of the privileged ways of access to modernity because it shows how to get rid of all the principles of authority whose validity cannot be traced back to the activity of human beings living in a society. We should not accept anything which is not recognized as created by us to solve a problem and, more importantly, which does not prove itself *now* to be effective in directing our life.

- 16 It is difficult to deny – even from a historical point of view – that constructivism represents the element of greatest affinity between Dewey and German and British idealists. However, Dewey was well aware that idealism does not provide an adequate explanation of the origin of meaning. To be a consistent philosophical position, a revised idealism – that is, an idealism that has made the framework of contemporary biology its own, and has been able to incorporate its fundamental principles – has to account for the genesis of meaning in a clear and understandable way. As is well known, according to Dewey language is the origin of meaning. In *Experience and Nature* Dewey openly states that “[w]ithout language, the qualities of organic action that are feelings are pains, pleasures, odors, colors, noises, tones, only potentially and proleptically” (LW1: 198). The function of language is that of making the “objectification” of feeling and the constitution of object and objectivity possible: by being objectified, “they are immediate traits of things” (LW1: 198). This issue is taken up again and further articulated in UPMP, where it is said that “ordered discourse does more than preserve and transmit the funded wisdom (and foolishness) of the past” because it “is the only agency by which reflection, inquiry, is liberated” (274). As usual in Dewey, there is a significant shift from unreflective to reflective apprehension of meaning – a shift which amounts, in the last analysis, to a collapse of that very distinction. Such a collapse is very problematic, but it testifies a genuine tension in Dewey’s thought between the emphasis on the unity of experience in all his possible forms – primary and secondary experience are just different ways of experiencing meaning – and the attention for the reconstructive role of reasoning, since the latter presupposes something that has to be reconstructed. But what Dewey has in mind is made clear by what he writes in the last chapter of UPMP: “The fact that meanings accrue to sounds during and because of social interaction and social interception gives the hypothesis that language as a socio-cultural medium is the source of the existence of meaning and of understanding-intelligibility factual standing” (318). And then he concludes: “The fact that definition of language as “expression or communication of thought” sets forth a secondary and derived function of language and not its primary office supplies indirect confirmation of the view that the social interaction

of which language is an inherent constituent is the observationally verifiable foundation of meaning and understanding” (319).

- 17 The striking similarity between the two texts shows that Dewey never changed his mind on the dependence of meaning on language, and consequently on the linguistic nature of the objects that make up our world. At the height of 1942-43, he was still convinced that meaning originates in and by the use of language, as well as that the proper function of language is that of “influencing and regulation of behavior of beings who are engaged in conjoint undertakings of friendly or hostile, cooperative or competitive quality” (319). One may be perplexed by such a strong continuity of views. Provokingly, one may be even led to conclude that Dewey did not make any significant progress on that topic in the twenty year period that separates the publication of *Experience and Nature* from the composition of UPMP. It is likely that Dewey believed that the linguistic account of meaning – drawn largely from Mead – was a completely satisfactory explanation of the origins of meaning and objectivity, and that therefore nothing remained to him to do but to accept it and build on it. However, it is difficult not to be dissatisfied with his attitude towards these issues. The fact is that Dewey’s linguistic account of meaning and objectivity risks to relapse into myth if the relation between experience and language – between the larger world of which we have experience and the utterances that we make – is left undetermined.
- 18 An example may help to elucidate this point. Dewey was deeply impressed by Malinowski’s description of the linguistic confusions caused by the ambiguity of context. It is not enough to tap the table and ask “What is this?” to get the desired answer because different respondents may interpret “this” as referring to very different things: the table, the shape of the table, its material, the act of tapping, and so on. Words, Dewey says, “mean what they mean in connection with conjoint activities that effect a common, or mutually participated in, consequence” (LW 12: 59). As should be clear from what has been said above, these activities are what Dewey usually calls “experience”. Consequently, the very possibility of linguistic agreement relies on the existence of a context, a situation, an experience, which provides the semantic coordinates necessary to establish the reference of the word to its object. What is worth noting is that the context, the situation, the experience, must be loaded with meanings since, according to Dewey, meaning cannot be ground on something different from itself.⁵ In the language of Dewey’s *Logic*, symbol and meaning cannot be boiled down to sign and signification (LW12: 58-60). Now, being loaded with meanings, the background experience is of linguistic nature. Dewey seems to acknowledge this fact when he writes: “Chair, spade, or house are meanings as well as physical things. And this statement means more than that the words have meaning. It signifies that the things called by these names have meanings and that if we eliminate or exclude the meanings, the things in question are no longer spades, chairs or houses” (294).
- 19 The problem with that position is that, having started with the assumption that language is the only source of meanings, we are led to conclude that – *at least in a certain sense* – everything is language. But by blurring the distinction between language and the larger context in which only the use of language is possible we do not enhance the explanatory power of the theory, but rather we dramatically affect its validity. This is the difficulty which we have hinted at above; a difficulty that, to my knowledge, Dewey never explicitly discusses in his texts. Nonetheless, one particularly promising approach seems to emerge from the tenth chapter of UPMP, in which a certain number of insights originally

formulated in *Experience and Nature* are developed. In the remaining part of the article I will try to provide a consistent picture of that rather sketchy outline of explanation.

- 20 It is evident that the key to the solution to this difficulty is a correct interpretation of the sense in which one is entitled to say that “*at least in a certain sense everything is language*”. To recapitulate: Dewey maintains that our world is a world of qualities that are organized and structured in objects only because these qualities are perceived as potentialities of action. But the biological “potentialities” that make the experience of meaningful objects possible are habits of behavior. Dewey is clear on this point: “As objects of perception they not only are not isolated qualities but they are not sets or arrangements of qualities of the organs immediately engaged save as these organs are what they are in virtue of modifications undergone in previous interactions of use and enjoyment: that is, they are what they are by virtue of attitudes, tendencies, and dispositions that are acquired and now habitual” (239). And then he adds: “The qualities of a spade as perceived and *named* are the consequences that would result if it were used (or will result when it is used) – they are anticipations of what is future at the limited and limiting date of perception” (239, italics added).
- 21 This passage has already been quoted above, but it is worth quoting it again because of the importance of the equivalence introduced by Dewey between perception (*perceived*) and language (*named*). The function of language is to give a name to the possible consequences of an action, thus enabling the agent to abstract from the particular conditions in which the object is experienced. In the light of this consideration, Dewey’s argument can be reconstructed as follows: there is a strong *functional* continuity between experience and language, context and linguistic utterances, since both are meaningful transactions with the environment – stated differently, both are ways of making experience of meanings. Every acquisition of concepts presupposes and entails the acquisition of a new set of words that modify our vocabulary. Words are ways in which a cooperative action is brought about and a *community* is established (320). Through linguistic utterances the agent selects a part of the general situation in which he and the other organisms live as particularly remarkable with respect to a specific purpose, and in doing so he constitutes an object that different agents can share in a common experience.
- 22 It follows from what has been said that in the passages mentioned above Dewey reads the conceptual couple actuality/potentiality in the light of the psychological distinction between focus and background. Accordingly, the notion of potentiality plays a twofold role in Dewey’s account of meaning. On the one hand, the qualities of organic action are structured in different objects because the habits acquired in previous *linguistic* transactions with the environment bring to light their semantic potentialities. The constancy of our habits supplies the basis of the meaningfulness of our world. On the other hand, when these qualities are explicitly named they are *further* objectified, and a *common* world is created out of an undetermined horizon of possibilities. By uttering a word or a sentence, the potentiality of a very limited section of the situation is emphasized, and the attention of the participants is called to the possible course of action that the utterer wants to carry out or oppose. So, conversely, there are two different ways in which potentiality can be realized and turned into actuality. The first one consists of the actualization of the potentialities of nature. Experience is the name that Dewey uses for this first-level actualization. Indeed, it is a central aspect of Dewey’s naturalism that the (linguistic) constitution of meanings should not be conceived as a subjective act of will, but as the realization of forces already at work in nature. The

second-level actualization is performed when the utterance of a word or sentence selects an object – that is, of a group of qualities viewed in terms of their potentialities – out of a background which provides the general context in the light of which only that actualization is possible.

- 23 There seems to be something paradoxical in the conclusion that the modern conception of object and objectivity developed by Dewey is ultimately grounded on the old conceptual couple potentiality/actuality. It is contradictory, one may argue, to criticize modern philosophy for not having been able to get rid of pre-modern categories, and, at the very same time, to reintroduce notions that have been fatally undermined by the scientific revolution. But it is not the old notion of potentiality that Dewey aims to reinstate. Rather, it is a semantic version of the relation between potentiality and actuality that Dewey tries to formulate. To say that the relation between potentiality and actuality is of semantic nature means that it is not biologically determined, even though it is biologically-grounded. There are many different possible ways of actualizing a set of natural potentialities; in different contexts of action different potentialities of the situation stand out as relevant, and ask for actualization. The act of constitution of an object is an act performed by an organism that, to be effective, has to be respectful of the “objective” potentialities of the situation. The conceptual couple potentiality/actuality acquires therefore a completely new significance in the framework of Dewey’s philosophy: it is the single theoretical hypothesis that justifies the adoption of an experimental method of inquiry, and paves the way for a naturalistic explanation of certain extremely complex organisms’ capabilities to enter into meaningful transactions with their environment. Far from being a relapse into unmodernity, it is the way in which it becomes possible for philosophy to get rid of a limited and unsatisfactory conception of object and objectivity which is rooted in the dogmatic and pre-modern separation of soul and body, and whose influence has hindered the development of an experimental approach to the comprehension of the world that supports or frustrates our activities.

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NOTES

1. The theoretical advantage of Dewey's naturalistic way to idealism can be easily appreciated if attention is focused on the distinction between actions and acts: the latter are mechanical responses to stimuli while the former are bits of behavior characterized by the unity of a purpose. Now, the difference existing between an act and an action is all the difference that is relevant – at least from a pragmatist perspective – between reality and unreality. Reflex acts do not possess meaning – or, better said, are not instantiations of meaning – since there is no unity of action and consequences that can be discovered in them: in all these cases, indeed, stimuli are not interpreted in the light of possible responses which they can bring about. There is a causal rather than a rational relation between them. This very same point can be expressed in many other ways: it can be said for instance that reflex arcs are not meaningful because nobody pays attention to them in normal – that is, no pathological – transactions with the environment; or it can be said that acts as simple as the blinking of an eye or the jerking of a knee are not part of our experience because it is impossible to transform them into a sign of something other. What is common in all these remarks is the insight that reflex acts cannot be said to be real because they have no semantic value: they do not tell us anything relevant about our world.

2. This is not how Dewey employs the notion of logic in this and other texts, but there is a sense in which it is possible to say that that use of logic grasps an important insight that undergirds, Dewey's thought, that is to say, the idea that the goal of every act of reflection – whose structure is clarified by a logic of inquiry as that espoused by Dewey in his logical texts – is that of revising old habits, thus creating a more intelligent and "self-conscious" pattern of activity. The definition of philosophy as a "generalized theory of criticism" makes sense only in this context (LW1: 9; see also UPMP: 315-6).

3. "[T]he words 'experience,' 'situation,' etc., are used to remind the thinker of the need of reversion to precisely something which never can be one of the terms of his reflection but which nevertheless furnishes the existential meaning and status of them all" (MW 10: 324). For an analysis of the extremely controversial relationship between Dewey and Scudder Klyce, see (Rockfeller 1991).

4. From what has been said one may be led to conclude that experience – that is, totality of the physiological activities taking place in the organism – has nothing to do with the constitution of meaning since meanings are particular, well-determined habits of behavior. Now, an objection along these lines is unwarranted for two reasons. Firstly, it presupposes the possibility of distinguishing in a systematic way the part from the whole, while it is this very difference that is criticized by Dewey with the emphasis on the primacy of activity. Secondly, it relies on a profound misunderstanding of the nature of meaning. Indeed, it is important to remind that according to Dewey – and this is undoubtedly one of his permanent Hegelian deposits – the universality of a general rule turns out into abstractness – which means uselessness in Dewey's practice-centered thought – if it cannot be realized in and by the particular qualities on which it accrues. A meaning is real only when it is an object of which we make experience in a particular situation. Even concepts – which are by definition hypothesis – acquire semantic validity only

when they show their effectiveness in reconstructing a problematic situation. It is for this reason that Dewey puts so much emphasis on the notion of quality and qualitative thought: the universality of meaning finds both its realization and its origin in the singularity of the encompassing situation.

5. It is not possible to deal with this problem in detail here, but it has to be remarked that one of the greatest difficulties of Dewey's linguistic theory of meaning is precisely that of understanding why he rejects so fully the very possibility of there being a meaning outside and independently from language. The point is that, according to his views, meaning is a relation between antecedents and consequences. Now, a relation of this kind can be established (and preserved) on a purely biological level by the capacity of retention of body (habit). Dewey correctly argues that thanks to language we objectify a feeling, thus turning it into the quality of an object. But he does not explain why the process of objectification cannot be performed by purely biological habits. Dewey only indicates the difference between animal needs, impulses, and appetites, on the one hand, and the ways in which human beings articulate these organic manifestations, on the other. In an unpublished manuscript that Phillip Deen has been kind enough to show me, Dewey writes: "The transformation of hunger, of the methods of satisfying it and the qualities of enjoyment that attend the latter are a case in point. The physical gnawing of extreme hunger may become a highly emotionalized apprehension for the fate of loved ones or of one's community; the method of satisfying it may consist of highly indirect processes of agriculture, transportation and trading—together with all the emotional values associated with fire and the hearth; the final enjoyment may take the form of formalized banquets as well as the simpler joys of the family board, etc.." But nobody can be interested in denying this fact. The point is rather that of clarifying how that transformation is possible. This amounts to ask: Why is Dewey led to conclude that animals do not experience meanings? Is this conclusion consistent with his radical naturalism? As should be clear, what is at stake here is the very possibility of a non-reductive naturalism.

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