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A Plea for a Pragmatist Anthropology

Roberta Dreon

1. Why a New Philosophical Anthropology?

- 1 Is there really a need today for a new philosophical anthropology inspired by the Pragmatists' legacy? I mean a philosophical anthropology that involves, firstly, a strongly emphasized form of cultural-naturalism – in other words, a bio-cultural view of humanity, or a picture of what it means to be human that implies a “natural continuism with difference” (Bernstein 2020: 53). Secondly, an ecological conception of human nature as constituted through and through by human organisms' interactions with a natural and naturally social environment (Dreon 2022). Thirdly, an anthropological stance committed to a definitive renunciation of any form of transcendental claim and to an explicit acceptance of contingency and historicity as constitutive features of what we call “human nature” (Margolis 2009). Fourthly, a kind of philosophical inquiry that focuses on the intricate fabric of human qualitative experience, largely pre-personal and pre-reflective, already selectively oriented by vital needs, habits, and interests, and kneaded into gestural and enlanguaged practices (Dreon 2022) – that is, not primarily (or not only) concerned with problems of personhood, responsibility (Quante 2018), and the game of giving and asking for reasons (Brandom 1998). Finally, a philosophical stance that attaches great importance to the differences in our lives depending on the kinds of beliefs or habits of thought and action we are ready to embrace.¹
- 2 Some circumstances seem to argue against the expediency of such a claim, which may seem outdated when compared to some important issues. Consider just two major concerns.
- 3 A first serious objection to a naturalistic anthropology is the risks of natural determinism, whose consequences for moral and political behavior can be devastating. John Dupré's long-standing research on biological reductionism has explored the

various conundrums involved in both the theoretical stance and its dangerous use to justify (at least) problematic practices. For instance, he has focused on the connections between views of human nature as biologically determined and healthcare policies regarding the diagnosis and drug treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Dupré 2001: 3, 14).

- 4 Of course, this issue is very complicated and cannot be tackled in this article. My point, however, is to consider what might be an alternative. Assuming that biological determinism is a politically and ethically compromised position, must we embrace radical constructivism and renounce any form of naturalism? Can we honestly abstract from our being animals and living organisms and from the fact that cognition and action are primarily functions of life? For example, can we abstract from the fact that bodily conditions profoundly influence our actions, particularly when we are aging, ill, or pregnant, i.e. when we are more vulnerable, both physically and psychologically, and more dependent on the help, aggressiveness, or negligence of others? Or from the fact that human mammals at birth are unable to survive without the help of someone to take care of them? In other words, not only human embodiment, but also human interdependence is primarily connected to our organic conditions and cannot be disregarded when considering ethical and political issues (Sullivan 2013). The Pragmatists were particularly sensitive to these sorts of implications, and probably, insofar as they took a naturalistic stance from the outset, felt compelled to fight against forms of determinism – consider, in particular, William James’ strong criticism of Spencer’s environmental determinism (James 1878, and James 1879). In what follows (section 2), I will try to explain that the conception of human nature as historical and radically contingent, yet subject to irreversible processes, which we can draw from the Pragmatists, represents an antidote to natural determinism.
- 5 A second important claim concerns the charge of anthropocentrism that could be leveled against pragmatist anthropology. Dewey’s naturalism has been criticized and defined as “half-hearted naturalism” (Santayana 1925) and “anthropocentric naturalism” (Cohen 1940) insofar as it did not take physical cosmology as the center of its inquiry, but social anthropology and a doctrine of human experience. Consequently, it has been accused of neglecting questions about the cosmos beyond the human sphere. More specifically, Morris Cohen claimed that Dewey’s principle of continuity could not explain novelties in the “unbroken chain” from combinations of atoms to the human sense of beauty (*ibid.*: 201). One possible response to this criticism, I argue, is to adopt a circular rather than linear conception of continuity that explains novelties in terms of new, emergent ways of organizing pre-existent resources, as well as their feedback or loop effects on previous, pre-existent materials and processes. This kind of approach is helpful, I believe, in removing any residue of human exceptionalism from philosophical anthropology, while still acknowledging the need to explain differences among animals. I will deal with this issue in section 3, but again, this is not an exclusively theoretical problem: it is an increasingly urgent one, determined by the scale and consequences of human action on the planet. Given the now evident role of the human impact on the environment – most notably pollution and global warming – it might seem that the only ethically and aesthetically sustainable alternative is a more humble approach to the non-human environment as that which is beyond our control (Thompson & Piso 2019), and a disinterested attitude toward nature rather than a view of it as a means to practical ends (Brady 1998). In short, the Pragmatists’ instrumentalism, insofar as it is allegedly grounded in a form of anthropocentrism,

might appear to endorse practices related to the exploitation of natural resources. Again, this is not the place to clarify misunderstandings of instrumentalism in Classic Pragmatism and to engage in the discussion of means-ends relations within Dewey's thought (cf. Hickman 1990). Rather, my more limited point in this paper concerns the kind of anthropocentrism at issue. As emphasized by Ben Milius (Milius 2018), "anthropocentrism" in environmental philosophy is a polysemous word, ranging from perceptual anthropocentrism to normative anthropocentrism. On the one hand, it involves the recognition of the perceptually limited point of view from which philosophical and scientific inquiry begins, on the other hand, it implies an ideological claim about the alleged superiority of humans over other living and non-living beings. A philosophical anthropology inspired by the Pragmatists corresponds to the first meaning of the term, insofar as it involves the acknowledgment of humans' perspectivism and situatedness as the point of departure for any inquiry and the denial of a transcendental standpoint from which to view experience. More decisively, I would add, this explicit recognition constitutes the premise for the assumption of individual and social responsibility in its concreteness. On the contrary, the Pragmatists' emphasis on human beings as organisms in continuity with other living beings and their explicit plea for contingentism make the ideology of man as the ultimate end of evolution quite alien to them.

- 6 In what follows, I will present a pragmatist picture of human nature as historical and contingent, made through and through by its constitutive interactions with a natural and naturally social environment, and thus involving both a historicist and an ecological claim. Humans evolved out of already pre-existing organic resources and environmental energies, although they gave birth to new qualities and organizations. This view abandons the idea that human nature was complete and fully equipped before the advent of cultural development. It also abandons the traditional primacy of cognition over other modes of experience (section 2). In the third section, I will clarify cultural naturalism as the theoretical framework of a pragmatist anthropology, which in my view includes two pivotal claims. The first is the idea that continuity is not linear but circular: it implies a kind of feedback action or disruptive effect of what comes later on previous forms of organic-environmental interaction. The second claim concerns the anti-transcendental stance, emphasizing that the transformation of animal environments into a highly social, habitualized, enculturated, and enlanguaged environment is entirely contingent, though irreversible, and makes a crucial difference in the continuum of animal life (section 3).
- 7 Finally, I will try to show that a philosophical anthropology which draws on the Pragmatists' legacy can provide a significant contribution to focusing on the complex qualitative background that underlies normativity, responsibility, and personhood. This means paying attention to human experience in its broad, multifaceted, and sometimes vague forms, conceiving of experience itself as consisting of the interactions between organisms and the environment to which they belong, rather than as equivalent to cognition and the product of a cognitive subject. Radicalizing the Pragmatists, I propose to consider human sensibility as a function of life rather than of cognition, in continuity with organic sensibility. At the same time, I suggest approaching this qualitative background in the context of the peculiarly enculturated and enlanguaged human world, and consequently as something that is far from being pre- or non-linguistic, foreign to concepts, etc. Hence, I propose to view human experience as enlanguaged, insofar as all human beings begin to feel and perceive

things, events, and other individuals by being embedded in a world of broadly linguistic interactions and practices. Complementarily, humans primarily experiment with language as a mode of communication and behavior, and as an integral part of their experience, even before they are able to speak and analytically understand the words of their companions (Lorimer 1929). Finally, I suggest building on John Dewey's ecological/transactional conception of habit as a core conceptual tool for approaching fundamental topics such as personhood, responsibility, and normativity in a definitely post-transcendental vein (section 4).

2. Human Nature: Ecology, History, and Culture

- 8 From the Pragmatists we can derive a view of human life as continuous with other forms of organic life and as constituted by its interactions with its environment, much like other forms of life. One of John Dewey's groundbreaking ideas was to abandon the reference to human beings as subjects and to subject-object relations as the standard model in matters of epistemology, ontology, morality, and every other philosophical area. His explicit preference for "life," "organisms" and "organism-environment" interactions (Pearce 2013) makes a big difference in the many philosophical fields of inquiry he touched on and involved a broadly biological and ecological claim about human nature as revolving around the very idea of organic life as radically embedded in an environment, and dependent on environmental resources for its subsistence at all levels – from nourishment and protection to companionship and value sharing. From this point of view, cognition itself appears as a function of life and a mode of experience that emerged in certain living beings thanks to the development of distal perception, bodily movement, and language, rather than as the primary meaning and function of experience (Dewey 1981; Lorimer 1929).
- 9 Nevertheless, this ecological and continuistic view of human nature is not blind to the big and small differences characterizing human behaviors and environments, and it is compelled to interpret them without invoking any kind of human exceptionalism, and renouncing any appeal to extra-experiential principles or conditions (Margolis 2002). In short, one key point is to consider the human environment as entering into the shaping of human life itself in a peculiar way compared to other animals' environments. From this point of view, the human environment appears to be naturally social in a highly refined way, provided that every single human life depends on the lives of others from the most basic levels (both ontogenetically and phylogenetically). In fact, humans are peculiarly immature mammals at birth insofar as their neurological development is not complete before birth, but takes place within an already social, broadly habitualized, and enculturated environment to which they must attune their gestures and coordinate their actions in order to survive and possibly thrive (James 1890/1981, Ch. IV; Dewey 1988; Mead 2011). While human actions, practices, gestures (Maddalena 2015), or utterances (Margolis 2017), have transformed and continue to shape a natural environment into a cultural environment from within, this enculturated niche to which living beings belong interacts with and influences further human interactions, practices, etc. – although this mutual reshaping occurs at different scales and levels. It is this complex circuit of the constitution of human life through its environment and the transformation of the environment itself into a naturally social, enculturated, and enlanguaged environment (Dreon 2022) that can explain the

“continuity with difference” (Bernstein 2020) or the “relative discontinuity” (Sinha 2009, and Sinha 2015) of human life within a naturalistic continuum, without resorting to principles transcending experience.

- 10 Moreover, this kind of approach gets rid of the idea of human nature as fixed and predetermined before exposure to culture, according to a picture of the latter as a superstructure of nature to which it is only added later. As already suggested, the Pragmatists’ experience with infant psychology and neurophysiology allowed them to recognize that the development of significant behavior in very young humans precedes their physiological and neurological maturation. They envisaged that, from a phylogenetic point of view, cultural evolution is grafted onto a natural development that is still in progress, so that cultural development has a disruptive impact and loop effects on the physiology of organic life, as recently acknowledged by anthropologists, neuroscientists, and cognitive scientists (Geertz, Mithen, Tomasello). Moreover, through their anti-deterministic and anti-substantialist reading of Darwin (Dewey 2007), they worked out a conception of nature itself as open, radically contingent, and subject to change. Human nature appears to be historical (Margolis 2009), subject to reconfiguration through its embedment in a changing environment and its exposure to shared practices, techniques, artifacts, silent gestures, and verbal communication. To put it in a formula, being human is the product of a natural history: human nature is not interpreted as an allegedly innate, fixed, and preconstituted endowment that is only later exposed to cultural events, a social world, nurture, and empirical occurrences. Furthermore, human nature is not behind or below the course of events that happen to us: it is constituted by the rich complexity of organic and environmental circumstances – including material constraints, cultural conditions, and social factors – that are subject to relative fixation, stratification, change, and loop effects. Finally, the Pragmatists’ radical contingentist stance provides an idea of the characteristically human forms of life as fortuitously emerging from other organic forms through language, intelligent behaviors, and cultural practices and institutions – thus excluding any appeal to a teleological principle that would guide evolution from without. Moreover, evolution itself is not assumed to be a progression from inferior to superior levels of life, excluding any alleged human exceptionalism.

3. Cultural Naturalism as a Theoretical Framework and What it Means

- 11 As recently underlined by Mark Johnson and Jay Schulkin, pragmatist naturalistic philosophy involves a naturalistic perspective on humans as “complex, highly evolved biological and social animals, engaging their environment” (Johnson & Schulkin 2023: 3). More specifically, I suggest that the kind of philosophical anthropology that can be drawn from the Pragmatists’ insights into the human condition is conceptually framed by what Dewey defined as “cultural naturalism” in his mature work on logic (Dewey 1991), or, using Richard Bernstein’s expression, as “pragmatic naturalism” (Bernstein 2020).
- 12 In a nutshell, cultural naturalism is a nonreductive form of naturalism that holds culture to be continuous with nature, insofar as it is rooted in both the organic and environmental conditions of human life, and yet irreducible to the mere association of pre-existing resources. Importantly, it involves a refusal “to admit non-natural or

supernatural resources in the descriptive or explanatory discourse of any truth-bearing kind” (Margolis 2002). Dewey stated that “[t]here is no breach of continuity between operations of inquiry and biological operations and physical operations,” clarifying that “[c]ontinuity,’ on the other side, means that rational operations grow out of organic activities, without being identical with that from which they emerge” (Dewey 1991: 26). Given these premises, how can novelty be explained? How can human reflective intelligence, conscious behavior, and personhood be accounted for? Of course, this is a very complex question that clearly exceeds the scope of this specific paper. I can only suggest that, in a pragmatist sense, the answer lies in a mix of features. Firstly, cultural naturalism implies a form of emergentism, namely the idea that accidental variation produces new ways of organizing already existent resources and energies, new forms of organization that exhibit unexpected, emergent properties – similar, for instance, to the case of tastiness, namely the property of salt to make food tastier, that is the emergence of a property that is completely different from the properties of the components of salt, chlorine and sodium, which can be dangerous to human health (cf. Dreon 2022; Baggio & Parravicini 2019). Exaptation is another factor that helps explain the development of new, unexpected uses out of existing organic and environmental resources. The Pragmatists had already developed a similar idea through the contribution of Chauncey Wrights, although the concept was coined only later by Gould and Vrba (in Gould & Vrba 1982; cf. Parravicini & Pievani 2018). More importantly, cultural naturalism involves the loop-effect and retroaction of new forms of human-environment interaction on the environment itself, as well as on pre-existing organic-environment interactions (Dreon 2022). To the extent that human behavior is not simply the result of individual dispositions, intentions, and choices, but depends on the environmental features that constitute it – for instance, the way one moves depends on the length of one’s legs as well as on the surface of the ground – behavior will be different because it involves the interaction with an environment that has been modified and reshaped by previous actions and behaviors. Consequently, I would argue that continuity in a Deweyan sense should be understood not as a linear process, but as a circular one: peculiarly human organic circumstances are not the efficient causes of our social and cultural development, or vice-versa. Rather, organic factors and sociocultural features of the human environment should be understood as mutually conditioning and mutually reinforcing. More precisely, subsequent organizations of organic and/or environmental energies can transform previous forms of organic-environmental interactions and give rise to random and unexpected, but irreversible, results that make a difference compared to previous states. The point I want to emphasize is that cultural naturalism does not involve a linear, cumulative, and progressive form of continuity as it appears, for instance, in Husserl’s claim about the emergence of an objective and mathematized world out of the *Lebenswelt* (Husserl 1989), or in Merleau-Ponty’s idea of abstraction as derived from bodily *greifen* and *zeigen* (Merleau-Ponty 2000), or even in Johnson and Lakoff’s conception of linguistic metaphors as grounded in bodily perceptions (Johnson & Lakoff 1980) – namely according to a one-directional development from nature to culture or from body to language. Instead, I believe that cultural naturalism involves a form of circular continuity that implies mutual causality, feedback actions, loop effects, and the disruption of pre-existing organizations. According to the Pragmatists, this was the case with human symbolic intelligence, which emerged from previous forms of organic intelligence, transformed by the impact of language, nominalization, and its ability to

distance itself from present objects and situations (Lorimer 1929) and to enable socially coordinated activity (Dewey 1981, and Mead 1934/2015). This is also the case of human sensibility, which, while grounded in organic exposure to the environment and selective attitudes toward it, is dynamically reshaped by the development of language and communication within the human niche, as will be said in section 5.

- 13 An anti-transcendental stance is another important feature of the theoretical framework that undergirds a pragmatist anthropology, emphasizing that the transformation of animal environments into a highly social, habitualized, enculturated, and enlanguaged environment is entirely contingent, albeit irreversible, and makes a crucial difference in the continuum of animal life. “Pragmatic naturalism” (Bernstein 2020) resists the fascination of transcendental options and espouses radical contingentism: Dewey and the pragmatists urge us to reject the view of (relative) invariances, constancies, and commonalities as quasi-a-priori enabling conditions for empirical actions and events, as well as the view of empirical events as mere instantiations of general traits. In Dewey’s naturalism there is, in principle, no separate space of reasons: continuity means that there is no break, but rather mutual conditioning between water and riverbeds, to use one of Wittgenstein’s famous metaphors, although this happens at different time scales and at different levels of complexity.²

4. Human Experience in the Raw

- 14 The Classical Pragmatists, especially William James and John Dewey, were strongly committed to reclaiming a complex view of human experience, centered on the variety of interactions in life within an environment that contributes to dynamic change and transformation from within, rather than on an idea of the human mind as consisting primarily in cognition and decision-making. This is not to deny that rationality, autonomy, and responsibility (Quante 2018), as well as personal identity (Margolis 2017), are crucial factors in defining the characteristically human way of being. The point I wish to emphasize is that the pragmatist tradition provides us with some important insights and concepts that are particularly helpful for considering the qualitative background of experience, which is continuously reshaped by appropriating the results of more reflective practices. This “vague” (James 1890/1981), “mongrel” (Margolis 2017), or “esthetic” (Dewey 1981) reservoir represents the ground on which cognition and normativity are based. From this point of view, rationality appears to be a thicker phenomenon than asking and giving for reasons, the space of norms is not in principle considered to be sharply separated from habitual behaviors, customary modes of conduct, and institutionalized practices, and decision-making does not seem to be the result of a transparent evaluation and a pure act of volition. A philosophical anthropology drawn from the work of James, Dewey, Lorimer, and Mead, I argue, can enable us to focus on the intricate fabric of human qualitative experience, largely pre-personal and pre-reflective, already selectively oriented by vital needs, habits, and interests, and kneaded into gestural and enlanguaged practices (Dreon 2022).
- 15 A primary philosophical demand from the point of view of a pragmatist anthropology is a reframing of sensibility, by considering it primarily as a function of life rather than of cognition. In recent decades, affective neurosciences (Damasio 1994 and 1999, to mention just one prominent name) and post-cognitive affective trends in

contemporary philosophy (Colombetti 2014) have made enormous contributions to expanding the idea of the mind beyond the traditional view of it as primarily an epistemic device. Nevertheless, the result remains a composite picture that, at best, combines an embodied and enacted view of sensory perception (Noe 2006) with emotions and moods as a further layer that constantly accompany human beings and orient them in the world (Colombetti 2014). Rather, I contend that a coherent development of some pragmatist insights invites us to consider perception as primarily affective (Mead 2011, see also Merleau-Ponty 2002), characterized from the outset by an “esthetic quality” (Dewey 1981), which implies that the situation in which living beings find themselves is always felt as adverse, comforting, sweet or bitter, or even as boring. In other words, perception is not merely a recording of a state of things out there, but involves an affectively based proto-evaluation of the situation in which life is embedded. The distinction between sense-perception as a basic cognitive channel (be it disembodied or embodied and enacted) and affective valence as an allegedly additive, or so to say, suprasegmental feature is the result of ex-post discriminations and should not be taken as the ultimate structure of human experience. In a nutshell, affective valence is not a value that supervenes on the merely descriptive recording of a state of affairs, because organic life cannot be indifferent to the environmental conditions in which and through which it occurs and develops, but is always more or less favorably or dangerously affected by what happens around it.

- 16 Extending some insights of the Classical Pragmatists, I would argue that an approach to sensibility requires a basic shift from a conception of sensibility tailored to its possible foundational role in a representative view of cognition to sensibility as a structural dimension of animal life in general and human life in particular. Seen in this way, sensibility involves, on the one hand, a form of exposure, vulnerability, or passivity of the organism whose very life, survival, and possibility of flourishing depend on the environment entering into its constitution in a variety of ways – from nourishment, oxygen, and heat to protection and companionship. Complementarily, sensibility involves a form of orientation, selectivity and discrimination, that is a more active disposition rooted in a wide range of traits and habits.
- 17 However, this is not enough when we consider human sensibility more specifically, namely the sort of continuity with differences introduced in the previous sections. Indeed, human sensibility is embedded in a deeply social and cultural-linguistic niche from the very beginning: human infants begin to perceive their intimates and the world around them while entangled in a web of linguistic practices, exchanges, and interactions that are already there, pre-exist their perceptions, and demand that they be attuned in one way or another. This transformation of organic sensibility occurs because of the cultural-linguistic niche in which humans are fortuitously but irreversibly embedded, which produces feedback actions or loop effects on pre-verbal animal sensibility. In other words, although human sensibility is continuous with that of other mammals, it is reshaped by its characteristically enculturated and enlanguaged environment (Margolis 2009; Dreon 2022).
- 18 This last point is closely related to a second crucial feature of the kind of pragmatist anthropology I am defending: the need to recover a view of human language as something more complex than a mere “telegraph of thought” (Schopenhauer 2010), and to overcome the alleged divide between supposedly silent experience and language that has conditioned the debate between Classical Pragmatists and Neopragmatists (cf.

Hildebrand 2014), as well as other influential philosophical traditions – phenomenology *in primis* (Husserl 1973). In contrast, I argue that the Classical Pragmatists envisaged language as a mode of behavior that plays a crucial role in the shaping of the peculiarly human form of life. They abandoned the idea of language as merely the outer fabric of thought, understood as an essentially mental event. Moreover, Dewey, Mead, and a less-known figure, Franck Lorimer, developed an idea of human experience as continuous with other nonhuman forms of experience and, at the same time, as profoundly reorganized by the emergence of verbal communication. They saw verbal communication as emerging from pre-existing forms of gestural communication as well as from organic intelligence. However, the emergence of language caused a profound reorganization of previous forms of animal sensibility, cognition, and sociality, giving rise to peculiarly cultural-natural living beings such as humans. Furthermore, these thinkers maintained a view of language as having different functions and roles in human experience: they assumed that language is a very rich, multilayered, and multifunctional phenomenon that supports social bonds on mainly qualitative-affective grounds, makes things and events common, mutually coordinates social behavior on different scales, and operates both analytically and holistically. They also considered the aesthetic dimension of language to be fundamental rather than an irrelevant addition to its logical form: language is not only a powerful means of postponing current experience, of scaffolding reflection and inference, but it also enters human experience as immediate enjoyment or suffering in relation to circumstances that are either favorable or adverse to human life. Consequently, I suggest that the Pragmatists' work supports the claim that language and sensibility are not two separate and hierarchically ordered levels of cognition, but are closely intertwined in human experience, giving rise to a kind of circular continuity and mutual conditioning, as stated in the previous section.

- 19 Therefore, building on the Pragmatists, I propose to think of human experience as *enlanguaged*. This means that human experience is contingently but irreversibly embedded, from the moment of each person's birth, in contexts made up of linguistic practices, as well as more or less meaningful relations that contribute to continuously redefining what is happening. Complementarily, assuming a view of human experience as *enlanguaged* means that that human beings do not primarily encounter language in an isolated or pure form – whatever that might mean: the mere logical structure of language, a transparent device for making unambiguous references, a series of distinct and clear definitions, the product of an innate grammar, and so on. Conversely, we encounter language primarily as a part of our behavior and our environment: it is deeply interwoven with other communicative components of our behavior, which could roughly be characterized as multimodal and are continuous with more strictly linguistic aspects. In short, language is part of the thick fabric of our experience, as well as of the human world (Dreon 2022).
- 20 In addition, the Classical Pragmatists provide us with an outstanding conceptual tool for thinking about human action, namely habit. John Dewey and his colleagues worked out a positive conception of habits as active means of doing things, producing a collaboration of arms, legs, and bodies with environmental materials and resources. They are conceived not as hindrances to reflection and volition, as is the Kantian tradition, but as an indispensable part of life and behavior that enables us to be productive, intelligent, and free (see Carlisle 2014). They are considered pervasive in human behavior, ranging from habits of discrimination and selection in thought to

manual habits in practical contexts. The key point is that there is no place for human behavior that is free of habits. One can eliminate a habit of action or thought, but this does not give rise to a form of action or thought that is completely independent of habits. Neither will nor cognition are habit-free, but are structured by habits. Moreover, Dewey worked out a holistic conception of habit (Egbert & Barandiaran 2014; see also Barandiaran & Di Paolo 2014), namely a view according to which habits are not the result of the mere repetition of stimulus-response associations, but involve an organism in its entirety (body, mind, nervous system, perception and action) and imply a selective bias toward certain aspects of the environment to the detriment of others.

- 21 A conception of habits inspired by Dewey's thought is central to a pragmatist anthropology, I suggest, because it recovers an unsimplified conception of human action and avoids opposite forms of determinism, either environmental or individual (cf. Caruana & Testa 2020). By arguing that habits are functions of both the organism and the environment, Dewey emphasized their transactional (Quéré 2016) or ecological structure (Dreon 2022). Against methodological individualism, his basic assumption is that human behavior is not the endowment of a subject operating in a vacuum, but a function of the environmental context in which organic life is constituted, transforms, and dies. Transactions between an organism and its environment have a reciprocal effect, changing and shaping each other, albeit at different levels. In a nutshell, habits can be characterized as a more or less flexible channeling of both organic energies and environmental resources (Dreon 2022).
- 22 Moreover, building on Dewey, it is possible to focus on the primary social, or pre-personal character of habits: they are ways of doing things and ways in which things are done that already exist before each individual makes their own choices (Dreon 2022). Hence, they are mostly acquired through a kind of entrainment and attunement with an already habitualized social context, where habitual practices already exist and implicitly require individuals to measure and coordinate their behavior according to them. It is usually only later, when a particular habit of action, thought, or feeling enters into a crisis because it is no longer working, that it becomes explicit and can consciously be appropriated and re-instituted, changed, or refused. This approach to the acquisition of habits as occurring mostly at a pre-personal level and eventually being consciously accepted, revised, or rejected offers an important clue for rethinking responsibility and normativity within a cultural naturalistic framework. From this point of view, responsibility is no longer considered to be based on acts of apparently pure will following the moral maxim, nor on deliberations based on allegedly purely rational judgment and extra-empirical values. Rather, responsibility is associated with the reflective appropriation of pre-existing customs and institutionalized habits, involving a form of conscious behavior that arises from a crisis in a pre-existing "customary morality" that is already present when one assumes one's own responsibility (Dewey 1985: 162). Complementarily, normativity is seen as continuous with the experiential web of practices, habits, and rules that spread and replicate themselves, giving rise to institutions that in turn tend to crystallize into more or less rigid bodies of norms (Dewey 1988: 76). From this perspective, there is no ontological or logical gap between habits and customs, on one hand, and norms, on the other, provided that the relations between them are complex, mutually conditioning, and subject to change – both positive, through improvement, and negative, through stiffening and regression. A Deweyan perspective on habits also provides an interesting approach to individual identity as something emerging from the specific set of habits

that characterize one's personal narrative, involving the peculiar appropriation and individualized style of habitual actions and dispositions, as well as relative stability, though inevitably changing along with the different seasons of life.

5. Some (Provisional) Conclusions

- 23 In this paper, I have tried to show that Classical Pragmatism offers a valuable set of insights, conceptual tools, and arguments for developing a philosophical anthropology that could be openly naturalistic, without being reductive and deterministic, capable of renouncing any form of human exceptionalism while considering that continuity does not mean neglecting crucial differences, and assuming the human world in its complexity while renouncing to explain it from without. This is possible, I have argued, because from the Pragmatists we can develop an ecological idea of human nature, namely a view of human life as constituted through and through by its interactions with a natural and naturally social environment (Dewey 1989). The Pragmatists also offer important ways of thinking about human nature as contingent, subject to change, and historical (Dewey 1981; Margolis 2009), a hybrid system of mutually conditioning natural and cultural features (Margolis 2009). The very concept of cultural naturalism is at the heart of the philosophical project, insofar as it involves a form of circular continuity that explains novelty through the transformation of pre-existing resources into new organizations and their feedback effects on pre-existing conditions.
- 24 Among some of the major topics for a pragmatist anthropology, I have emphasized the need to reformulate the conception of human sensibility from the point of view of life rather than of cognition, taking into account the transformation of organic sensibility through its embedment in an enculturated and enlanguaged world. A second major topic to be explored is the idea of human experience as enlanguaged, that is a picture of human life as exposed from the very first moment to an environment fortuitously but irreversibly interwoven with linguistic practices, significant sounds, and gestures that are already present as infants learn to perceive their surrounding world. Complementarily, a pragmatist anthropology is compelled to consider human language itself in the raw, namely as an integral part of experience, and as a multifaceted phenomenon, involving affective or aesthetic, bodily, and behavioral dimensions and functions. I have even argued that the pragmatist concept of habit is central to a philosophical anthropology that finally sees humans as particular living beings acting in a shared world rather than as pure consciousness in a vacuum, and that paves the way for post-transcendental views of normativity and responsibility.
- 25 Of course, these topics are far from exhausting the range of significant topics for a philosophical anthropology inspired by the Pragmatists and focused more specifically on qualitative, pre-reflective experience. Other urgent lines of inquiry are represented by the role of technologies in human experience, from a point of view capable of considering that technologies have extended and continue to extend human agency by grounding it in human natural conditions, while at the same time affecting the natural conditions of human behavior and transforming the world in increasingly dramatic ways (Steiner 2010; Hildebrand 2023). Another line of thought concerns the diverse and often competing human interests that seem to be central to human issues (cf. Santarelli 2019). On the one hand, it is a question of whether interest always equals self-interest and, on the other hand, it is a question of whether only a disinterest attitude can be an

alternative to the human exploitation of natural resources (Dreon 2024) and aggressive action against the more vulnerable components of the social environment. It is time to investigate the role of interest in a conception of human experience as a function of organic life in an environment, its connections with a theory of organic sensibility, and, complementarily, the peculiar variety of interests that characterizes human speech and the human world.

26 But all of these are matters for future work.

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NOTES

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questions, and suggestions. *Ça va sans dire*, any eventual errors or omissions must be ascribed to the author.

2. This anti-transcendental claim is an important difference from other contemporary approaches, as Louis Quéré emphasizes with reference to Charles Taylor's proposal (Quéré 2024).

ABSTRACTS

In this paper, I defend the claim that a philosophical anthropology inspired by the Classical Pragmatists, while being explicitly naturalistic, can avoid biological reductionism and environmental determinism, as well as dogmatic forms of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, insofar as it offers a picture of human nature as historical and contingent, dynamically constituted through interactions with a natural, naturally social, and enculturated environment. Cultural naturalism, I suggest, provides the theoretical framework for a pragmatist anthropology that includes at least two pivotal claims. The first is the idea that continuity is not linear but circular: it implies a kind of feedback action of new organizations of resources and energies on pre-existing forms of organic-environmental interaction. A second claim regards an anti-transcendental stance, emphasizing that the transformation of animal environments into a highly social, habitualized, and enlanguaged environment is entirely contingent, albeit irreversible, and makes a capital difference within the continuity of animal life.

INDEX

Keywords: Pragmatist Anthropology, Cultural Naturalism, Human Sensibility, Habit, Enlanguaged Experience

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