

MORE THAN ACTION AND PERCEPTION

A PRAGMATIST VIEW ON SENSIBILITY

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Abstract

In this paper, I suggest deriving a conception of human sensibility from John Dewey: more specifically, from his strategy of shifting the field of reference from a representative view of cognition to organic life within an environment. From this point of view, human sensibility can be understood as selective exposure to the environment and an active feeling capacity to discriminate between favourable and noxious aspects by organisms whose primary experience of the surrounding environment is socio-cultural. This happens because of the organic conditions of emphasized dependence from a natural and naturally culturally shared environment characterizing the human form of life. This means that the conception of perception as skilled action involving movements and dynamism from its very beginning – a conception worked out within the enactivist field and independently envisaged by both John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – should be integrated. The mutual coordination does not occur between a still eminently sense-oriented perception and movement, but between an affectively oriented perception and movement. Consequently, a fully embodied and embedded conception of sensibility should be assumed as the affective capacity to discriminate living conditions as comfortable or menacing, as friendly, welcoming, annoying or troubling, as good places to live or bad situations to escape from. Roughly speaking, embodiment and affectivity should be assumed as the two intertwining sides of sensibility: in other words, sensibility should be seen as involving «primordial affectivity», which Giovanna Colombetti defines as a necessary and non-contingent feature permeating the mind. Finally, I argue that we should tackle the issue of the specificity of human sensibility, which is to say its being embedded in a deeply social and cultural-linguistic niche from birth. We should consider the feedback actions or loop effects on pre-verbal animal sensibility exercised by the cultural-linguistic niche in which humans are fortuitously but irreversibly embedded.

Keywords: Human Sensibility, Sensorimotor Knowledge, Primary Affectivity, The Human Cultural-Linguistic Niche, John Dewey.

Long before the recent progressive trends towards a philosophy of the mind as embodied, embedded, extended and enacted, John Dewey developed a conception of experience as situated ‘out there’ in the

continuous processes of interaction between human organisms and the natural as well as naturally social environment they depend on and belong to, and which they constantly contribute to reshaping from the inside¹. Dewey's broadly biological stance produced a disruptive effect on the traditionally modern conception of experience as something happening within the mind of the subject, giving rise to certain ontological and epistemological problems. If experience is something subjective, differing from external reality – as understood by the modern dualistic tradition since Descartes – how can the subject manage to reach the object, namely to know it and to fill the gap between the two opposite poles (Dewey 1980)?

Against the background of Dewey's non-reductive naturalism, the «inner» category is drastically reframed, becoming focused – as it indeed is – on the living organism's radical embeddedness within the environment – very far from the dualistic paradigm opposing a subject to an object and the allegedly external reality².

The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest. At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way (Dewey 1989, 19).

According to Dewey, the emphasis on dynamic processes constituting life as a rhythmical sequence of balance and disruption, of precariousness and recovered organic-environmental integration, is the source of the aesthetic within experience (Alexander 1987). However, «esthetic» qualities for Dewey (Dewey 1981, 82) are not only limited to so-called consummatory phases of experience, because they basically have more to do with living organisms' structural exposure to their environment (Dreon 2012). Situations are primarily felt as dangerous, welcoming, troubling, annoying, boring, sweet or bitter because organic-environmental relations are constitutive, i.e. they always make a little or a big difference with reference to the living beings at stake in a process of interaction. Other people, things and events are immediately perceived as having an affective, qualitative or aesthetic

meaning that is pervasive in human life because of its structural exposure to surrounding circumstances³. Affective sensibility is not something superadded to sense perception as the mere descriptive record of what is out there, but pervasively characterizes humans' interactions with their world from the inside.

Consequently, my suggestion is to derive a conception of human sensibility from Dewey and the Classical Pragmatists, namely from their strategy of shifting the field of reference from a representative view of cognition to organic life within a natural and naturally social environment. In the first section, I will sketch a view of human sensibility as selective exposure to the environment and the active feeling capacity to discriminate between favourable and noxious aspects by organisms whose primary experience of the surrounding environment is socio-cultural. This happens because of the organic conditions of emphasized dependence from a natural and naturally culturally shared environment characterizing the human form of life.

From this point of view, I think that an approach drawn from Dewey can provide a crucial contribution to the current debate on the enactivist field at the crossroad between perception as something scaffolded by action (Noë 2004, Gallagher 2017) and primary affectivity as something characterizing an enactive conception of the mind (Colombetti 2014). In the second part of this paper, I will contend that the conception of perception as skilled action involving movements and dynamism from its very beginning – a conception already independently envisaged by John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – should be integrated. The mutual coordination does not happen between a still eminently sense-oriented perception and movement but between an affectively oriented perception and movement. Consequently, a fully embodied and embedded conception of sensibility should be assumed as the affective capacity to discriminate living conditions as comfortable or menacing, as friendly, welcoming, annoying or troubling, as good places to live or bad situations to escape from. Roughly speaking, embodiment and affectivity should be assumed as the two intertwining sides of sensibility: in other words, sensibility should be seen as involving «primordial affectivity», which Giovanna Colombetti defines as a necessary and not contingent feature permeating the mind.

In the third section of the article, I will argue that we need to tackle the issue of the specificity of human sensibility, which is to say its being embedded in a deeply social and cultural-linguistic niche from

birth. It is pivotal to consider the feedback actions or loop effects on pre-verbal animal sensibility exercised by the cultural-linguistic niche humans are fortuitously but irreversibly embedded in.

I. REFRAMING SENSIBILITY

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey recommended a shift from an ontology of art tailored on the works of art exhibited in museums to the field of basic biological assumptions about experience and life. By following Dewey, I think that a somewhat similar change of approach should take place with reference to human sensibility: the focus should shift from a conception of sensibility tailored on its possible foundational role in a representative view of cognition to sensibility as a structural dimension of animal life in general and of human life, more specifically. This could be a good way to approach the issue, although Dewey shows no penchant for the word «sensibility», preferring as he does to speak of experience in general. In his 1925 he instead speaks of primary or immediate experience, to refer to the qualitative, affective or aesthetic dimension of human experience and behaviours.

Let's take a look at the «biological commonplaces» (Dewey 1989, 20) which Dewey invites the reader to focus on in order to understand what art is and what role it has – and could have – in our practices. He says that we should consider the essential conditions of life out of which artistic practices arise, i.e. that we should take into account the fact that life always unfolds in an environment, with which an organism is forced to interact in order to survive. «No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself» (Dewey 1989, 50). The environment – Dewey continues – both exposes each living being to dangers and gives it chances to find resources allowing it to live and flourish. «[T]he career and destiny of a living being», he says, «are bound up with interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way» (Dewey 1989, 19): in other words, environmental resources are constitutive contributions to the life of each organism. For these reasons, life consists in a succession of phases, rhythmically alternating moments in which the living organism falls into step with its environment and

phases in which this dynamic equilibrium is broken and the organism has to act in order to recover unison ((Vara Sanchez, 2020).

The above-mentioned biological commonplaces also constitute the main assumptions for a pragmatist understanding of sensibility. In a few words, the shift required is from an epistemological framework, where the main relationship is between cognition and sensibility, to a – broadly speaking – biological stance, where sensibility is seen from the perspective of life and of organisms' constitutive dependence on their environment. By approaching sensibility as something rooted in life and in its environmental conditions, it is possible to reframe it as basically involving organisms that are selectively exposed to the environment and capable of discriminating between favourable and noxious aspects of it, between dangers and opportunities to grow, move, act, and improve life. Analytically, two strictly embroiled aspects can be distinguished: on the one hand, sensibility involves a form of exposure, vulnerability or passivity of the organism whose very life, survival and possibility to flourish depend on the environment entering its own constitution in a variety of ways – from nourishment, oxygen, and heat to protection and companionship. The word «constitution» occurring in the previous statement should be interpreted in realistic terms: both food and parental care, for example, are real – albeit very different – factors contributing to the constitution of each organism, whose life would otherwise be fatally compromised and cease owing to the lack of environmental resources. On the other hand, sensibility includes a form of orientation, selectivity and discrimination, that is a more active disposition rooted in a wide range of features and habits: from the physiology of the organism to physical proximity and affective intimacy, from bodily movement to more or less powerful tools through which movement itself can be enhanced, from material and cultural needs and interests to habits of conduct and thought. Consequently, sensibility already involves a form of proto-evaluation of what is happening around the organism – an evaluation having a primarily affective-embodied characterization rather than a discursive one, based on explicit reasons and norms, and having the life of the organism as the issue at stake. Affective valence is not a value supervening 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 develops⁴. In other words, affective valence – i.e. the significance of the environmental impact on

the life of the organism – is always there, even if it can be stronger or weaker, depending on the context⁵. As such, sensibility is a constant and pervasive feature of human experience and cannot be limited to some special moments, when emotions are more intense and there is a kind of special leading feeling that can be recognized as marking a distinct event in one's experience.

However, as already stated, Dewey did not use the word «sensibility» to characterize the eminently aesthetic or affective phase of a human being's interaction with the world and preferred to use expressions characterizing human experience as primarily qualitative⁶.

Differently, I favour this linguistic choice for a number of reasons. The first is that I assume the traditional ambivalence of the word in many languages as a positive feature⁷. «Sensibility» has been traditionally used both to refer to sensory experience and to characterize an affective engagement with the world, capable of a discrimination based on feelings, desires, longings and refusals, as frequently pointed out by James (James 1981, 1058 and ff., James 1976, 137 and ff.). Thanks to this double field of references, 'sensibility' can convey the idea that our fully embodied experience of the environment is primarily affective, qualitative or aesthetic (cf. Johnson 2008) and that bodily perception is not something that is essentially conveyed by the senses alone, with the possible later addition of affective values. On the contrary, it is basically crossmodal and affectively or aesthetically configured from the very beginning, because life is always biased and selectively oriented: it cannot be indifferent to the conditions in which it occurs (Dewey 1981, 194 and ff.). In spite of being a source of problems, the ambiguity of the word «sensibility» represents, to my eyes, a corroboration of the assumption that embodiment and affectivity are primarily embroiled in human experience and can be only later discriminated for specific purposes. Affectivity, in other words, is the other side of human organisms' radical embeddedness in a natural and naturally social environment. To be affected by something or someone – as we recall the traditional emphasis of the verb *Affizieren* in classical German philosophy – does not primarily or only mean registering purely descriptive sense data that must be processed at a later stage, whether by the intellect or by a computing brain (or, more recently, through predictive coding). On the contrary, it means feeling or having something as important to one's own life, as dangerous, annoying, disturbing or joyful. From this perspective, radical embodiment means

considering the senses and the whole body in their basic connections with life and its structural dependence from an environment, rather than as a means to collect information for the purpose of representing an allegedly merely external reality. Like other animals, humans are sensible beings and exist in continuity with them. However, they are at the same time sensible in a different way, i.e. their sensibility differs both qualitatively and quantitatively because their form of life is structurally more exposed to the environment they belong to: humans are more immature and vulnerable at birth than other mammals, their modes of behaviour are largely indeterminate and plastic, and they are able to attune their lives to the most varied material conditions⁸.

Humans are also sensible beings in a different way from other animals from a qualitative point of view – at least at the moment, owing to the contingent course their form of life has taken up until now. The reason for this is that the natural environment which humans are constitutively exposed to is socially and culturally shared before their birth and is continuously reshaped by their doings and suffering in it. Both Dewey (in Dewey 1988) and Mead (Mead 2011, 73) frequently emphasise this point – what later came to be described as neoteny in evolutionary biology – probably based on their reading of Fiske and Chauncey Wright (Parravicini 2012).

Notwithstanding the different use of the word «cognition» and «experience», a fruitful connection can be drawn between the view of «sensibility» I am currently suggesting and the notion of «constitutive dynamic coupling» (Gallagher 2017, 6-12, Gallagher 2018, Kirchhoff 2015). Gallagher introduces a diachronic perspective within the notion of structural coupling (Clark 1998), claiming that the dependence of the entire organism (brain and body included) on its environment – and vice-versa – is both causal and constitutive. Organic-environmental relations are both causal and constitutive, which is to say that they are interdependent because all kinds of resources (neurological, organic, and environmental) interact on different diachronic levels to allow both the self-individuation of the human organism and the continuous reshaping of our natural and naturally cultural environment⁹. To put it in pragmatist terms, if we assume that neither organisms nor their environment are completely determined before and apart from their interactions, causality and constitution appear to be strictly intertwined. Interpreting Dewey, Thomas Alexander (Alexander 1987, 135) has clearly stated that the distinction between an organism and

its environment should be considered as taking place dynamically and mutually: on the one hand, the organism's life depends on resources and energies of the environment; on the other hand, the organism is an integral factor of an already existing yet still *in fieri* environment that is continuously reshaped to a greater or lesser extent by organic actions and behaviour (Skorburg 2013). Consequently, the equilibrium between the so-called operational closure of dynamic systems and precariousness (Di Paolo, Thompson 2014) would be altered from a pragmatist perspective. Traditionally, enactivists insist on the autonomy of living systems, considered as operationally closed nets of mutually conditioning and enabling processes. In this view, the human body is understood as «a number of overlapping autonomous systems, such as the nervous system and the immune system» (Di Paolo, Thompson 2014, 76). Even the precariousness of a system is strictly correlated to autonomy: it is conceived as the characteristic whereby a system will decay and stop in the absence of one of its enabling conditions (Di Paolo, Thompson 2014, 72). Differently, in a Deweyan vein, organic precariousness is understood as life's structural dependence on an environment: Dewey's form of cultural naturalism focuses on the web of conjoint interdependence and loop effects between both organic and environmental energies, even if the times and extent of this mutual dependence can vary dramatically. More specifically, the Pragmatists' emphasis on life's structural exposure to an uncertain environment reveals the roots of human sensibility. Consequently, uncertainty will be radically reinterpreted in affective, rather than mainly epistemological terms, as anchored in the natural condition of precariousness characterizing the life of each organism, which must always strive to maintain and flourish because there are no guarantees from the environment that it will endure forever. This is a second reason to favour the adoption of the word «sensibility», to stress that our engagement with the world happens against the background of this feeling of precariousness and exposure rooted in our natural dependence on extra-organic resources – social and cultural factors included.

The other side of the coin is that emphasizing the anchoring of sensibility in the natural and naturally cultural conditions of human life makes it possible to reassert a form of non-dogmatic realism as a peculiar feature of Classical Pragmatism (Hildebrand 2003, Pihlström 1998), which is to say a form of realism immune from the metaphysical claim that reality is out there, completely and definitely equipped be-

fore and regardless of any human intervention. Pragmatism does away with the traditional dichotomy between an independent subject and a merely external reality, completely defined, once and for all, before any human engagement with it. Differently, it supports the idea of living beings as integral parts of their environment, which they depend on to sustain their own life, while at the same time contributing to changing it to a greater or lesser degree. Assuming this mutual co-determination between organisms and environment should not prevent us from recognizing a strong asymmetry between individual or group life and the material conditions in which this takes place and which primarily affect living organisms as menacing, resistant or overwhelming. Far from being a mere subjective realm, sensibility manifests itself as a way to reaffirm the reality of our relations with the world and of the word itself on a level that is not primarily cognitive or epistemic, but is anchored in life material conditions as felt, suffered or enjoyed.

By remaining on the level of a fruitful engagement with the current debate, it must be recalled that enactivism strongly favours a broad conception of cognition as sense-making, by emphasizing an idea of experience as an active engagement with the world (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991). Basically rejecting a representationalist view of cognition as a kind of subjective mirroring of external reality, enactivists assume sense-making as a basic feature of organic life. Sense-making is an organism's «transformation of a world into a place of salience, meaning and value – into an environment (Umwelt) in the proper biological sense of the word» (Thompson, Stapleton 2009, 25); this interactive process is assumed as common to both bacteria and human minds. While sharing the idea of a structurally mutual dependence between living beings and their environment, the Pragmatists strongly affirm the need to circumscribe cognition within a broader conception of experience: inquiry is a kind of reflective interaction taking place when a situation is indeterminate, when a person actually does not know what to do, and there is an uncertainty regarding how to engage with new circumstances challenging habitual forms of behaviour. On my part, I suggest maintaining and improving the pragmatist functional and circular distinction between sensibility and cognition, which is to say between more qualitative phases of living interactions and reflective inquiring behaviour. This operative and contextual distinction presents the advantage of discriminating between different modes of interaction (Dreon 2019) that would be flattened by too pervasive

a use of cognition and sense-making. It applies to both human and non-human animals, as well as to every kind of human active capacity to adapt to an environment and rule it out (Di Paolo, Thompson 2014, 73). Moreover, with reference to Dewey's use of the expression «primary» or «immediate» experience, recourse to the word «sensibility» might be helpful, in my view, to avoid any temptation to consider this distinction in a foundational way and to explicitly assume a circularity or a dialectical interdependence between sensibility and cognition as a characteristic of the human environment.

The conception of sensibility I derive from the Classical Pragmatists basically converges with Giovanna Colombetti's idea of primary affectivity «permeating» the mind (Colombetti 2014, 1) – that is, sense-making, conceived as a way of behaving of living organisms in an environment, according to the meanings that the various aspects of that environment acquire for the organisms' lives (Colombetti 2014, 17, 18). As she puts it, primordial affectivity should not be conceived as an intermittent phenomenon, episodically added to an allegedly purely sensory perception of the world: «[...] It is a broader phenomenon that permeates the mind, necessarily and not merely contingently» (Colombetti 2014, 1). Affective neuroscientists generally consider emotions and moods as their essential objects of study, as they episodically affect «an otherwise neutral, nonaffective mind» (Colombetti 2014, 20). On the contrary, her enactive approach converges with Dewey's idea that sensibility is structural for living beings, who are always biased because their own lives are always at stake to a greater or lesser extent. Emotions and individual feelings can be assumed as more or less distinct events within experience, but sensibility is always there because being alive means being exposed to an environment in one way or another. Concern, interest and purpose, as Mead clearly saw (Mead 2011, 27 and ff.), are primarily affective aspects of our conduct, rooted in our dependence on a natural as well as naturally social environment. Interest in the basic and positive sense of finding oneself in the middle (from Latin «*inter esse*») of a situation, be it perilous or favourable, has naturalistic roots in life dependence on an environment (cf. Santarelli 2019).

2. SENSORIMOTOR KNOWLEDGE IS AFFECTIVELY ORIENTED

In the first chapter of his book *Action in Perception*, Alva Noë claims that perception is a kind of skilful activity, based on sensorimotor mastery: a sort of practical and mainly unconscious capacity to mutually coordinate selective sensations and movements in space. Together with Susan Hurley, Noë strongly criticizes the so-called «input-output picture» (Hurley 1998) of the relations between perception and action, that is the assumption that «perception is input from world to mind, action is output from mind to world, and thought is the mediating process» (Noë 2004, 3). On the contrary, Noë endorses the thesis that action, perception and thought are not divorced in ordinary human behaviour. Although brain activity plays a crucial role in perception, thinking is not a mediating process connecting a mirror-like perception with purely subsequent action, because people are already intelligently (i.e. skilfully, competently) acting, moving and dynamically turning their eyes, arms and legs to parts and aspects of the environment around them when perceiving. Furthermore, even though he assumes that mental activity at least partially consists in the production of internal representations – a rather controversial stance in the current enactivist debate (see Hutto 2012) – Noë rejects the kind of brain-centrism and brain-reductionism that is widespread in more traditional cognitive sciences. Skilful sensorimotor behaviour is something displayed by the whole animal that «is present in the world» (Noë 2004, 22), and perception – in Noë's view – is not the activity of an eye assumed to merely mirror what is there (Noë 2004, 20).

Shaun Gallagher (Gallagher 2017, 50) points out that Dewey's essay on *The Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology* (Dewey 1972) could be regarded as a forerunner of the embodied-enactivist view of perception: Dewey interpreted perception in the light of sensorimotor coordination, rather than understanding it in terms of sensory stimuli; he also developed a conception of brain activity as an integral part of the body, basically contributing to the regulation of different bodily processes and phases of behaviour.

In this section, I will briefly reconstruct the argument Dewey presents in his 1896 essay, and which has been rightly acknowledged by his interpreters (Tiles 1999; Garrison 2009) as marking a crucial moment in the development of his philosophy. I think that Gallagher

and others (Chemero 2009, 19-20, Santarelli 2016, Baggio 2017) are right in emphasising the convergence between Dewey and enactivism on this point. Nonetheless, in my opinion, an exclusive focus on the intertwining of perception, action, and thought could run the risk of dimming a more complex notion of sensibility that can be derived from Dewey's inquiries.

I am not saying this to downplay the importance of the 1896 essay: some decades before Merleau-Ponty's critique of the «longitudinal theory of nervous functioning» (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 13) and more or less a century before enactivists and theorists of radically embodied cognition, Dewey challenged the primacy of the reflex arc concept as a key tool for interpreting human behaviour and cognition.

Dewey's criticism has strong epistemological implications, because it rests on the idea that the reflex arc concept is not a scientific description of human perception and action; on the contrary, it is a philosophical way out that philosophers are forced to follow, when they illegitimately assume that human behaviour is composed of distinct and independent parts, namely of stimuli and responses as *disiecta membra* (Dewey 1972, 100), in need to be put together. On the one hand, there would be sensation, allegedly connecting an autonomous subject to the reality out there; on the other hand, there would be motor action, namely the physical response enacted by the body as a material counterpart of the mind and therefore capable of affecting the allegedly external world. If human behaviour consists in the composition of «a series of jerks», mental activity is required to play a mediating role – by means of mental representations and/or computation, according to more conservative trends in cognitive science and philosophy of mind. The point is that this kind of picture derives from a double ontological dualism grounding the concept of the reflex arc as well as the «input-output» picture of human experience, which is to say the dualism between the perceiving subject and reality, and the dualism between psychical and physical activity.

Dewey's response takes its cue from James' example of a child burning his fingers and withdrawing his arms from the fire (James 1981, 36-37). Where does action begin? Does it begin with the child's eyes being indistinctly bombarded by perceptual stimuli? The point is that the child, being involved in the situation at hand, already has a tendency to select certain stimuli and neglect others, and this kind of selective job is done by his eyes, his face and other bodily move-

ments that allow him to engage with certain aspects of his environment rather than others. In all of this, the child's action is not a blind physical movement but is constantly guided by the need to avoid a painful touch. Consequently, perception and action are already constantly intertwined and mutually adjusting each other in an «organic circuit», rather than according to a linear connection, because a complex, multidirectional interaction between an organism and its environment is occurring. Coordination comes before distinctions that should be regarded as different phases of a single behaviour, rather than as initial elements mutually connecting through the intervention of a mental activity, ontologically different from the physical reality from which the stimuli are supposed to come and on which physical movements are assumed to causally impinge. Almost forty years later, a similar idea can be found in Dewey's distinction between impulse and impulsion in *Art as Experience* (Dewey 1989, 64-65). Here he states that usually experience does not begin with an impulse – an impulse being merely the specialized part of a more complex mechanism we can analytically isolate from an overall experience by means of an act of reflection. Rather, according to Dewey, an experience begins with an impulsion that is a propensity of the organism as a whole to engage with certain aspects of its environment.

Now, the point I wish to make is this: how should this active propensity to engage with one's own environment be conceived? Can it be simply considered the dynamic inclination of a self-moving agent? In other words, does the thesis put forward by Merleau-Ponty in May 1960 – «*Wahrnehmen* and *Sich-Bewegen* are synonyms» (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 303-305)¹⁰ – as well as Alva Noë's similar position (Noë 2004, 22), exhaust the whole issue? My contention is that it does not (cf. Johnson 2007, 52).

In the couple of pages quoted above, Dewey clearly connects the impulsion or propensity to perceive and act in a certain way to the field of needs, desires, and the like, owing to the fact that we are living organisms «demanding completion through what the environment – and it alone – can supply» (Dewey 1972, 65)¹¹. Differently from the enactivists, Dewey here emphasizes a passivity within our propensity to perceive and act in the world, based on the «dynamic acknowledgement of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings» (Dewey 1972, 65). This dependence is so acute because – and this is a strong ontological contention – an organism's boundaries are

not clearly defined within the environment to which it belongs, even though in most cases the skin works well as a boundary. An organism is part of the environment, and environmental resources continuously become part of the organism; so, as already noted, the distinction between organic and environmental energies should be considered functional from this point of view. This rather provocative biological stance lies at the basis of Dewey's argument.

However, my main aim here is to answer the question formulated above, regarding an organism's impulsion to act. I think Dewey's point should be made a little more explicit: the mutual coordination does not occur between a still eminently sense-oriented perception and movement, but between an affectively oriented perception and movement. An individual will engage with certain aspects of the world and neglect others because he/she is guided by his/her existential needs and emotively laden interests (as suggested by Mead in his very short essay, entitled *Emotion and Interest*, Mead 2011, 27 and ff.). A person will move in a certain direction because he/she feels a situation as dangerous, attractive or comfortable, but also because in many cases (albeit probably less often than in our ancestors' days) he/she is overwhelmed, absorbed or beaten by what happens around him/her. In other words, my contention is that bodily perception is not a still merely sense-channelled, if intrinsically dynamic, perception but rather an affectively, aesthetically or qualitatively laden sensibility. This is not to say that action is guided by feeling, i.e. that it is irrational. On the contrary, qualitative or affective thought – to quote Dewey again – is strictly intertwined with our bodily movements, which contribute to selectively exposing us to certain aspects of the environment rather than others. To sum up, to acknowledge that perception and movement are intertwined in human behaviour is to go only part of the way. Instead, we have to develop a more complex notion of sensibility in order to deal with perception «in the wild». Roughly speaking, embodiment and affectivity should be assumed as the two intertwining sides of sensibility. As argued by Giovanna Colombetti, «Emotion is not a distinct step in a perception-action sequence or a distinct representation added at some point to the sequence; emotion is rather an inescapable pervasive dimension of brain activity on which sensory information impinges and from which action progresses» (Colombetti 2014, 64).

3. THE CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC LOOP

Constitutive dependence on an environment is a basic condition of life in general. For sure, it makes a difference for an animal's life whether it feels something as comfortable or repelling. Hence, it seems that humans share sensibility with at least most self-moving animals. However, human sensibility is not simply animal sensibility plus a (stronger) form of awareness. In the case of human beings, it must be considered that the human environment is not simply natural, but naturally social and naturally cultural, namely that it is also made up of shared practices that are laden with deep-seated meanings, habits, rules, etc. This means that human sensibility cannot be conceived as being exclusively connected to basic organic needs. On the contrary, our biological propensities to feel and select are always already modified and reconfigured by our cultural practices.

In assuming that meaning is rooted in our bodily, qualitative, affective or aesthetic experience, there is the serious risk of interpreting the relation between sensibility and language as foundational, one-way and hierarchically ordered. In my opinion, this kind of suggestion is still present in some phenomenologically oriented perspectives, for example in Merleau-Ponty, who did not completely give up on the old Husserlian project of grounding language and new forms of expression on perception (Dreon 2016). The idea that meaning basically has its roots in pre-linguistic bodily perception, and is only subsequently exposed to linguistic and normative practices, is still a prevalent paradigm that can be found in the work of scholars who are very attentive to the complexity of human perception, such as Hubert Dreyfus (Dreyfus 2014). As became clear in his debate with McDowell (McDowell 2007), Dreyfus strongly advocates in favour of the notion of embodied coping, which he regards as involving a form of skilled action that is essentially mindless, i.e. foreign to conceptuality, rationality and language. In his approach, he stresses the similarity between animals' behaviour and experts' actions (for example, the baseman throwing the ball during a baseball match), while supporting the idea that human conduct is additionally characterized by the possibility of performing acts of «free distanced orientation» that are not pervasive, but limited to specific situations (Dreyfus 2007). In a Deweyan vein, I do not endorse McDowell's idea of the pervasiveness of the mental, the conceptual and the rational in human experience as a quasi-a priori

condition of human experience. On the one hand, I would argue that the debate in question has tended to assume an over-simplified idea of human mental behaviour, conflating concepts, reasons and language¹². Differently, I think we should adopt a much more empirical view of language as consisting in a family of linguistic habits, skilled symbolic actions, and cultural practices which have always served various different functions, not reducible to exclusively epistemic purposes – establishing and maintaining bonds and social relations at different levels, doing things in common, defining one’s own identity within a group of people, and so on. In this light, I would even endorse a revision of a static idea of conceptuality and meanings, which I cannot develop here (see Dreon, forthcoming). On the other hand, I believe we should consider the completely fortuitous yet irreversible circumstance that human embodied coping occurs within an already cultural environmental niche, made up of shared meanings and linguistic practices, whose values and significance are steeped in our actions.

An analogous, although not identical, foundational attitude regarding the relationships between perception and language can be found even among supporters of enactivism, who strongly stress the difference between low-order and high-order cognitive practices (Hutto, Myin 2013). So one of the main issues in this field had become filling the alleged gap between first-order and second-order cognitive practices (Hutto, Myin 2017)¹³. Some interesting efforts have been made by scholars in radical embodied and enacted conceptions of the mind to avoid such an impasse (Gallagher 2017, Di Paolo, Cuffari, De Jaegher 2018). The central problem is the assumption of an epistemological discontinuity between bodily perception, on the one hand, and conceptual or linguistic cognition, which is to say modes of cognition based on representation, on the other hand.

Even Mark Johnson’s work on the aesthetic in experience seems to adopt a somewhat similar attitude when considering the anchoring of conceptual and linguistic forms of meaning-making in radically embodied, qualitative and aesthetic experience. His primary target is the «conceptual-propositional theory of meaning», based on the assumption that meaning is exclusively or primarily conceptual or propositional in nature (Johnson 2007, 8). Instead, he openly endorses an embodied view of meaning, looking for «the origins and structures of meaning in the organic activities of embodied creatures in interaction with their changing environments» (Johnson 2007, 11). However, it

is not clear whether he is fighting against a specific conception of language as mainly consisting in propositions and the conveying of concepts or whether he is referring to an allegedly mere bodily-aesthetic level of meaning, which would be precluded to language in general. This latter reading is supported by Johnson's claim that embodied meanings lie «beneath words and sentence»: for example, he considers early-childhood experience as providing «a meaningful contact with our world» that is «prior to language» (Johnson 2007, 17, 32)¹⁴.

For sure, James was drawn to the siren call of the idea of vague experience as something prior to language, even though there are different ways to interpret his approach to language (see Dreon 2020). On the other hand, Dewey was not always completely free of hesitations with regard to this matter (Dreon 2014). Nonetheless, he explicitly considered human sensibility and qualitative meaning-making as having been structurally re-organized by the advent of language and linguistic shared practices (Dewey 1981, 197 and ff.). This is evident in his choice to employ the word «mental» to distinguish human forms of interaction with the environment from the intelligent yet non-linguistic behaviours characterizing other animals. As Mead noted, it is important to bear in mind that in human forms of life physiologically based emotive responses to the environment are called for by «symbolic stimuli» or «aesthetic stimuli» (Mead, 1895).

In my opinion, some of the Classical Pragmatists' insights should be brought to a coherent conclusion by basically working on two sides, in order to avoid a foundational conception of language, while at the same time gaining a more rounded view on sensibility, as it unfolds in our ordinary lives. As already hinted at in response to Dreyfus, I endorse a more complex conception of language as primarily consisting in fully embodied and socially shared linguistic practices that have a variety of different ends in view and are largely regulated by an affectively or qualitatively oriented mutual sensibility. Propositions and expressions of allegedly predefined concepts do not exhaust the ordinary human experience of language, which is far more similar to a tangle of different practices largely operating according to a vague or «mongrel functionality» (Margolis 2017, 63 and ff.) – that is, one largely based on sensibility.

At the same time, I would also reject a linear foundation of linguistic and more generally higher forms of cognition on sensibility, by taking into serious account the linguistic structure of the human envi-

ronment, assumed as a completely contingent, albeit irreversible, feature. I have trouble with the idea that human experience results from the association of animal embodied coping with intermittent free distanced orientation. Rather, I believe that we should take into account the effects of the broadly linguistic structure of humans' environment on the re-shaping of their sensibility, in comparison to other moving and sensitive, yet non-speaking, forms of animal life. Consequently, the adoption of a generally continuistic view on sensibility should not prevent us from investigating the specificity of human sensibility in comparison to other animal sensibilities.

The weight of an already linguistically shared world of practices should also be taken into account when considering the configuration of sensibility in newborns, whose very first cries are nested in a complex web of social interactions, and linguistic and multimodal exchanges taking place mainly through mutual affective regulation (Stern 1985, Stern *et al.* 1985, Trevarthen 1993, Trevarthen 2002). Although evidently incapable of uttering words and syntactically well-formed propositions, young humans are embedded in an environment deeply saturated by linguistic practices from their very first days. Those practices – from so-called motherese to lullabies, nursery rhymes and storytelling – are often specifically directed at eliciting responses from the baby and catching his/her attention¹⁵. The baby's behaviours – shaking the arms, keeping the eyes wide open, squealing – are strongly embodied, even when they are vocal; but they are also affectively based and oriented responses to already cultural-linguistic stimulations on the part of their caregivers. From this point of view, the idea of a purely pre-verbal perception taking place and developing in a completely mute environment appears artificial and one-sided, as it does not take into account the empirical environmental conditions in which perception unfolds and configures itself – unless one adopts a conception of human behaviour as depending exclusively on internal resources (i.e. either neural programmes or voluntary acts) and not on organic-environmental constitutive interactions. In Di Paolo, Cuffari and De Jaegher's words, human beings are «linguistic bodies» (Di Paolo, Cuffari, De Jaegher, 2018), meaning that their bodily constitution is not forged apart from, or prior to, the fact that they live in a broadly linguistic environment and that, consequently, they are selectively disposed to feel not just a physical world but even culturally configured things, events and individuals as attractive, disgusting, or simply uninteresting. Hu-

mans' (more or less strong) affectively laden bodily impulses and reactions are embedded in a largely linguistic context of practices that are already unfolding before their most intimate perceptions of themselves take place. The point is to change our approach and to adopt the point of view of the shared social context in which an individual's first perceptions occur, rather than the still monological perspective of an isolated individual as the primary starting point of experience.

There is also a further reason to claim that human sensibility is not independent of cultural and linguistic ways of sharing an environment that (for better or for worse) is common, namely a coherent conception of cultural naturalism and emergence. From a pragmatist perspective, the notion of emergence does not involve only the assumption that new forms of organization are irreducible to the single features they are composed of, even though no external force has played a role in the process. Emergence also includes the idea that new forms of interaction between already existent natural elements retroact or have a loop effect on previous modes of behaving because the rise of a new way of organizing the relationships between living organisms and their environment becomes part of the environment itself and modifies it from within. Consequently, living beings have to face a different environment, with the result that the two reshape each other – of course to different extents and at different times, yet constantly and irreversibly. The introduction of a new form of organism-environment relation in a pre-given structure can play a disruptive, although fortuitous and completely contingent, role that does not leave the previous existent order unchanged. From this perspective, it becomes clear why both Dewey and Mead considered the advent of a linguistic form of communication and meaning-making crucial to the emergence of the mind, assumed as a novel kind of interaction taking place among human animals.

As a result, the issue becomes figuring out what feedbacks or loop effects might have impinged on a peculiarly human sensibility, given the cultural-linguistic niche humans happened to live in and contributed to forge across different timescales.¹⁶ By following or even radicalizing Mead, it could be argued that it was at least partly through the use of verbal communication that the sense of one's own self has been made possible – where self-reflection is considered a primarily affective-based form of awareness. While avoiding any hypostatization of interiority as a primary condition – which would give rise to the

well-known philosophical problems of the internal/external, private/public dichotomies – we should consider why humans are often capable of having a rich interior experience. In insisting on the disruptive role of language in reshaping animal sensibility, I am not contending that self-awareness should be considered in propositional terms. Not at all. On the contrary, it was the great chances of taking the role of the other offered by verbal, gesture-based conversations that made a decisive contribution to the emergence of our capacity to direct our sensibility towards ourselves (see Candiotta-Piredda 2019). The prosodic as well as grammatical features of human language have provided – and still provide – very powerful tools for discriminating the sense of one's own self as different from that of others within an interchange with intimates or foreigners. Furthermore, a family of broadly linguistic practices may have contributed to shaping human sensibility, making it capable of being self-oriented. Role playing, pretending and fictionalizing in the sense conceptualized by Wolfgang Iser (Iser 1990) could be considered a virtual extension of the incipient capacity to direct sensibility towards one's own self within a communicative context. Being scaffolded by complex linguistic resources and habits, all of those practices had and still play some part in the shaping of human beings' inner life and character. Another crucial contribution to the distinctively human capacity to direct sensibility towards one's own self is represented by the typically human practice of story-telling and narration by means of which a sense of one's own identity acquires depth and a relative stability through variations¹⁷.

A further consequence for a sensibility embedded in a broadly linguistic environment may have been the expansion of the highly nuanced varieties of qualitative meanings characterizing human interactions with their environment: situations can be awful or joyful but they can also be boring, embarrassing, intriguing, and so on. The Pragmatists derived from Alexander Bain the idea that a living being's perception of the world is primarily configured as pleasure or pain, i.e. that it is already laden with a significance that specific circumstances have on the organism's own life. Human sensibility seems to be structured not simply in terms of a binary opposition – as favourable to life or noxious – but through subtle varieties of nuances. Emotional or affective valence in humans is too complex to be dichotomized into acceptance and refusal, approach and withdrawal, or praise and blame. It is relational (Colombetti 2005), multidimensional (Lambie

and Marcel 2002), and dependent on «second-order descriptions» (Colombetti 2005, 118). Humans experience situations and contexts through a rich array of meanings that, while still anchored in life and its dependence from the surroundings, are deeply influenced by humans' embeddedness in a rich, strongly stratified and habitualized cultural environment. I think we should consider not only the fact that linguistic practices convey and express feelings, emotions and moods, but also the great extent to which utterances and narratives contribute to scaffolding sensibility through a complex web of mutual symbolic relationships, while also expanding the range of affective references and qualitative evaluations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have endeavoured to support a naturalistic conception of sensibility, namely an approach to sensibility as rooted in the conditions of life rather than as representing an eminently epistemological problem. This does not only mean that human perception consists in a form of active engagement with and within the environment and is scaffolded by sensorimotor habits, as rightly emphasized by enactivists. Focusing on organic interactions with an environment as something constitutive of the organism itself involves a serious assumption of the affective or aesthetic meanings, implicitly qualitative salience, and proto-evaluations characterizing organic-environmental relations. The other side of the coin is that a naturalistic approach to the topic in a Deweyan vein is not reductive because it takes into account the effects of human cultural and linguistic practices in changing the environment and non-verbal animals' sensibility into something peculiarly human – i.e. not better or worse, but *de facto* different. In other words, when adopting a relational view of sensibility as a function of living beings' exposure to their environment, the way the latter is dynamically shaped makes a difference for the new organization of previously existing resources.

This also means that some challenging insights can still be derived from Dewey's and the Classical Pragmatists' approach to experience and human anthropology: they did not merely anticipate some ideas emerging within the current debate, but should be regarded as

real interlocutors, providing fruitful ideas and arguments that deserve further development.

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ENDNOTES

¹ There is now an extensive literature on the convergences between Classical Pragmatism and the so-called 4E cognitive science. Among other contributions, see Johnson 2010, Menary 2015, Solymosi, Shook 2014, Madzia, Santarelli 2017, Gallagher 2017, Steiner 2017, Steiner 2019, Dreon 2019a, Dreon 2019b.

² On this change of paradigm, see Matteucci 2019, who succinctly defines the traditional dualistic model as an «experience of» and opposes it to a view of experience as constitutive interaction, characterized as «experience with».

³ Dewey often uses the term «esthetic» (Dewey 1981, 72, 74, 77) to characterize qualities and meanings of direct enjoyment and suffering (Dewey 1981, 76), rather than to refer to something else and prepare for further engagement. This is the difference, for Dewey, between knowing and having or feeling, that is between considering things and aspects of experience with reference to postponed purposes on the one hand, and things as having a direct impact on human existence, on the other hand. This use of the term can also be found in James, both in *The Principles* (James 1981) and in his *Essays on Radical Empiricism* (James 1976), and is probably derived from Alexander Bain.

⁴ For an alternative view, see Nussbaum 2001. I have discussed that position in Dreon 2012, 85 and ff.

⁵ I have found a convergent view in Colombetti 2007. For a discussion of the different uses and meanings of the word «valence» in affective sciences, see also Colombetti 2005.

⁶ Dewey reserved the words «feeling» and «sensitivity» – used to characterize the capacity to discriminate according to a living organism's interests and sense of what is good and valuable – for non-human animals whose body is capable of locomotion (Dewey 1981, 197).

⁷ On the intertwining of perception and affectivity characterizing the aesthetic component in human experience, see Matteucci 2019.

⁸ Cf. the work of Plessner and Gehlen, as well as that of Marjorie Grene, who derived philosophical consequences from arguments developed by von Uexküll and Portmann. Within evolutionary biology, the work of Stephen Jay Gould can be seen as providing further convergent contributions to this kind of approach.

⁹ Note that the introduction of a diachronic perspective marks a significant difference between Andy Clark's conception of the cognitive system as a «coupled system» (Clark 1998) and Gallagher's enactivistic notion of dynamic coupling.

¹⁰ See also Merleau-Ponty 1994, 285, note a.

¹¹ This point suggests a possible convergence with non-representational views of cognition derived from Gibson's ecological approach and emphasizing a broad conception of affordance (see Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014). In a Deweyan perspective, a richer «landscape of affordance» should explicitly include affective affordances.

¹² To be honest, McDowell's position seems to be more complex in some papers (McDowell 2013). The problem, for me, is that the debate has tended to polarize and oversimplify the two positions, with negative consequences that I would like to avoid.

¹³ Hutto and Myin assume a distinction between basic cognition, which is supposed to be contentless, and content-involving cognition, which requires public linguistic practices, which is to say shared cultural symbols and norms. In Hutto and Myin 2017, where they take this distinction for granted, their aim is to explain the relations between the two forms of cognition.

¹⁴ Nonetheless, in Johnson's book there also seems to be room for a different conception of the relationships between qualitative, embodied experience and language: for he quotes Eugene Gendlin, who «cautions us against the mistake of thinking that there are two distinct and autonomous sides of any experience – the felt sense (the implicit) and the formal expression (the explicit)» (Johnson 2007, 82). Moreover, I agree with Johnson when, speaking about neural processes, he states that «cognitive processing does not occur in a linear direction from core to shell structures. There are reentrant connections, so that what occurs at 'higher', or more differentiated, levels can influence what happens in limbic areas; these areas then affect shell regions, in a never-ending dance of changing experience» (Johnson 2007, 101).

¹⁵ Cf. the work of Dean Falk (Falk 2004, Falk 2009) and Ellen Dissanayake (Dissanayake 2000, Dissanayake 2001, Dissanayake 2011) for a specific focus on mother-infant interaction as a basis, respectively, for the development of language in humans and for «aesthetics incunabula».

¹⁶ On the concept of language as a bio-cultural niche see Sinha 2009 and Sinha 2015.

¹⁷ I would argue that this is how some artistic practices are rooted in human anthropology, as well as how they have contributed to forging the human condition. See Margolis 2009.

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