

**IS THERE ANY ROOM FOR IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE?
LOOKING FOR AN ANSWER IN DEWEY
(AND WITTGENSTEIN) VIA PEIRCE AND JAMES**

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ABSTRACT: The paper investigates the prospect of dealing with "immediate experience" from a pragmatist perspective. The issue at stake is the possibility of speaking in a deflationary yet tenable way about the direct character of our common experiences of the world, given that the human environment is profoundly characterized by linguistic, inferential and interpretative practices.

The author explores John Dewey's answers to the above-mentioned problem. These can be seen to reflect a sort of tension within classic pragmatism between the young Peirce's lesson about the semiotic and mediated structure of human cognition and James's mature claim for immediate experience.

Not least by means of a comparison with Wittgenstein's approach, the thesis arising from the paper is that Dewey was able to solve the apparent divergence by considering experience in close connection with life and through a complementary understanding of cognition as a specific form of experience, as well as by emphasizing the role of the qualitative or aesthetic aspect of primary experience. Moreover, Dewey's non-foundational and circular conception of the relationships between qualitative and reflective experience is identified as a decisive step.

Keywords: immediate experience; qualitative experience; classical pragmatism; semiotic turn; Wittgenstein

Is there any room for immediate experience in the human world, namely a world that is profoundly characterized by linguistic, inferential and interpretative practices, by complex forms of communication and signification, as well as by normative issues? Can we still speak in a deflationary yet tenable way about the direct character of our common experiences of the world after the crucial philosophical turns that took place in the previous century – the semiotic turn, the hermeneutic turn and the linguistic one?

It should clearly be stated that this question is not to be interpreted as a kind of epistemological problem referring to the enduring issue in modern and contemporary philosophy of whether and how it is possible to anchor our

knowledge of allegedly external reality in stable ground. The classical pragmatists as well as the later Wittgenstein – not to speak of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Merleau-Ponty's "Introduction" to his *Phenomenology of Perception* – clearly acknowledged that the world we belong to and interact with is already there before we begin any epistemological inquiry (see Colapietro's paper in the current issue of this journal). Nonetheless, I fear we run the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, if we do not consider the ways in which the world has a direct or immediate impact on us, on our lives, notwithstanding the linguistic, largely interpretative, inferential and mediated character of our practices.

I think that John Dewey provided a positive answer to this question. Hence, we should try to investigate how and to what extent there is room in his conception of experience for forms of immediate interaction between human organisms and their environment, given that he assumed that our environment is naturally social and culturally configured – in other words, that the human world is naturally characterized by intelligent, broadly linguistic¹ and normative practices.

In the context of the pragmatist tradition, Dewey fully accepted Peirce's lesson about the semiotic and mediated structure of human cognition. Nonetheless, he perceived the claim for immediate experience supported by James in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* as genuine or legitimate. In these papers, William James had freed himself from the picture of the individual conscience as something characterized by "absolute insularity" and privateness. Nonetheless, James had felt the need to give an account of the vague and overabundant complexity of life against the over-intellectualization of philosophical problems. Consequently, he had made a strong case for recognizing direct, non-inferential forms of human experience (Gavin 1992).

¹ By "broadly linguistic" I mean properly verbal practices as well as what Joseph Margolis calls "lingual" acts and behaviours, namely activities that are significant in connection to shared forms of life and culture, and which depend on the mastering of a common language. See Margolis 2017.

Dewey was caught between the two – the early Peirce on the one hand and the mature James on the other one – and, in my opinion, he tried to find a way out, even though he did not explicitly pose the problem as arising from the two fathers of pragmatism. His solution is partly grounded in his conception of human behavior as largely based on habits, understood in almost physiological and pre-personal terms, and not primarily as the result of the repetition of a voluntary or conscious action (Dewey 1983). However, I will not explore this route in the present paper, because I have dealt with it elsewhere (Dreon 2016). Differently, I will suggest that an answer to the present question can be found by considering Dewey's conception of experience as a primarily living process that is broader and more inclusive than knowledge – complementarily, cognition is interpreted as an internal phase and extension of primarily qualitative, aesthetic or affective experience. On the other hand, Dewey's solution – or dissolution – of the problem at stake is connected with an explicit acknowledgment of the fact that the relationships between reflective inquiries and eminently qualitative phases of experience are circular and non-hierarchical, because the results of previous inferences and inquiries have loop effects on our primarily qualitative everyday experience and reshape it.

This whole problem, as far as I understand it, is not at all foreign to the Wittgenstein of the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Although Wittgenstein's efforts here are mainly directed at denying or at least questioning the possibility of an *Erlebnis* – namely, an interior and immediately lived experience assumed as a kind of privileged source of certainty – his path seems to be more tortuous, insofar as he obliquely tries to consider the often direct character of our practices. I think that Wittgenstein gave an affirmative answer to the above-mentioned question, but his response only partially coincides with the solutions that Dewey offers us if we approach his texts in the way I am suggesting here.

Consequently, I will begin my inquiry by focusing on Peirce's criticism of introspection and of any assumed primacy of unmediated experience in his so-called anti-Cartesian essays. Then I will consider some similarities with Wittgenstein's criticism of *Erlebnis* as a privileged internal experience, allegedly immune from doubt. I will also sketch out an alternative path leading to different ways of seeing experience as unmediated by interpretations in the second part of his *Philosophical Investigations*. After this Wittgensteinian excursus, I will explore James's claim in favor of pure experience in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* – where he does not relinquish the notion of immediate experience, but definitely rejects any previous dualistic hesitations. The last section will focus on Dewey's answers to the whole issue, by following his main lines of thought, as briefly outlined above.

1. Peirce on the Pervasiveness of Mediation

As a point of departure, I will consider the very strong criticism formulated by the young Peirce of the privileged role traditionally attributed to first-hand experience, which is usually characterized as being immediate and intuitively certain, and hence as deserving an epistemological primacy over other types of indirect, mediated and discursive cognition. The main reference is, of course, to Peirce's anti-Cartesian essays, published in 1868, *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities* and *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man*. In these papers, we can find a negative answer to the question I posed at the beginning: very briefly, there is no room for immediate experience in a world like the human one, which precludes the possibility of thinking without signs. More properly, we should acknowledge that for Peirce both a specific thought, produced at a certain moment, and a specific feeling arising out of a particular context in a more or less idiosyncratic manner are unique and *sui generis* events that simply happen without any mediation.

However, in order for both of them to signify something for speakers of the same language or for a limited group of individuals involved in a situation (5.289), they must be based on the implicit or explicit institution of a mediating relationship, which is to say on a complete or incomplete inference, on a unifying hypothesis that can be more or less anchored in plausible reasons. There is neither any immediate self-awareness nor any special faculty of introspection of the internal world independent of our knowledge of the external world (5.244), to which we should attribute a privileged certainty in comparison with our mediated knowledge of the external world.

The polemical objective is twofold: first, Peirce tells us (against Descartes's assumption) that self-knowledge and introspection are not immediate, direct experiences, but are the result of complex inferential processes (1). More specifically, Peirce states that the feeling of the self in the young child is the result of a network of processes involving bodily, social and linguistic practices (5.226). For him, the feeling of one's own self is the result of the perception that one's own body is more centrally basic (in terms of the management of one's own space) than other people's bodies, as well as the product of a gradual learning of language by which the baby is exposed, step-by-step, to the testimony of others about a specific state of facts as convergent or divergent from its own. In this way, the young creature would be driven to use the first-person pronoun in order to posit a seat of ignorance or divergence.²

Secondly, Peirce extends his claim to the point of denying that immediate forms of cognition – and perhaps of experience – exist at all (2). Peirce states that even the perception of two-dimensional and three-

dimensional spaces, as well as sound and tactile perceptions, rest on comparisons, abstractions, selections, and reductions to more or less reasonable units as well as on predictions about features that are not actually present in perception. According to a semiotic approach, perception should be considered to be a mediated process, based on implicit inferences or interpretations (Paolucci 2016, 29).

Peirce is here disputing the associationist claim that mere perceptive data are the basic ingredients of cognitive processes. He is arguing therefore that these data cannot be considered privileged cognitive resources for laying the foundations of the cognitive building, as suggested by classical empiricism. Nevertheless, we should note that in these essays Peirce is still thinking of perception in eminently cognitive terms, as one of the components of a structurally inferential cognitive process.

More radically, he seems to adopt the same approach even with regard to emotions and habits, i.e. forms of affective and practical experience beyond reasoning in the strict sense. As a matter of fact, in this essay, Peirce argues that both emotions and habits involve inferential processes.

He tells us that an emotion is a simple predicate that replaces a series of different predicates by unifying them on the basis of an implicit (and often risky) hypothesis – a form of inference that is not grounded on rational explanations, as in the case of inferential judgments (5.292). Moreover, for Peirce emotions differ from intellectual judgments not because of their alleged immediacy, but because of their close connection with the idiosyncratic circumstances and the particular dispositions of a specific individual, as happens with the sense of beauty and morality (5.247). Differently, intellectual judgments would be more generally related to human nature, the human mind or the human community.

On the other hand, Peirce tells us that a habit is a form of practical inference which is constituted “when,

² As is well known, Mead supported the idea that self-identity emerges out of the capacity to take the role of the other in a conversation of gestures. However, I agree with Cook (in Cook 1993: 78 and ff.) that Mead did not conceive this process as basically involving any kind of interpretation or inference but rather as a kind of affectively based tuning (see also Dreon forthcoming).

having had the sensation of performing a certain act, *m*, on several occasions *a*, *b*, *c*, we come to do it upon every occurrence of the general event *l*, of which *a*, *b* and *c* are special cases" (5.297).³ Even the recognition of a friend would be based on some form of reasoning: we would not explicitly consider the premises of such an inference simply because it works and goes on without hindrances insofar as the hypothesis on which the inference is based is satisfied (5.223).

To sum up, here Peirce tells us that perceptions and sensations (and clearly judgments) rest on inferential processes; not only that, but even affective sensibility, as well as habits of actions, are grounded in forms of reasoning that can be more or less incomplete. If seen in the light of these specific texts, Peirce's position seems to be exposed to the risk of a reduction of human experience to cognition or to offer a basis for the thesis that cognition pervades every form of human experience – thirdness, to use Peirce's later phenomenological categories, seems to reabsorb both firstness and secondness.

Of course, this is a one-sided viewpoint on Peirce's philosophy, whose steps were much more multidirectional from the mid-1980s onward (Maddalena 2015, 33). More substantially, it could also be claimed that Peirce's development of his three phenomenological categories was a (more or less successful) attempt to defend the thesis that the origin of our knowledge lies in quality (Maddalena 2014: 107). Dewey probably recognized this issue in Peirce's thought by stressing the value of Peirce's theory of quality over his semiotics in an essay dating back to 1935 (Dewey, 1998; on this see Innis 2014).

³ It should be noted that whereas here Peirce provides a rather intellectual picture of habits, the picture he provides in other texts is somewhat different – the emphasis being not on a deliberate inference provoking the fixation of a habit, but on previous habits of action and belief as the basis for new habits. This different emphasis derived from the influence of Alexander Bain on classical pragmatists (see Feodorov 2017) and was systematically developed by John Dewey in Dewey 1983.

Nonetheless, these early essays lay out the issue at stake very clearly – an issue that both Dewey and Peirce himself had to take seriously into account and possibly try to reconcile with the reasons of immediate experience.

2. The Two Sides of Wittgenstein

A transition to Wittgenstein seems to be rather consequential at this point of the inquiry, because there is a profound convergence between the anti-Cartesian spirit of *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities* and Wittgenstein's later texts, as some scholars have noted (Hagberg 2016). One of the main polemical targets of the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations* is the idea that we first have an immediate and direct experience of the meaning of words, which we then use in different contexts (see Perissinotto 2002, Perissinotto 2016 and Morelli in this issue). It is clear that Peirce and Wittgenstein converge in their criticism of the picture of a secluded mind and self-consciousness as an inward depository for private contents, which deserves primacy in terms of certainty and undoubted knowledge (Hagberg 2016: 36). In the last sections of his *Philosophical Investigations* (and similarly to Peirce and Dewey), Wittgenstein endorses an overturning of the traditional interpretation of this process: first we learn to do something and use words in appropriate contexts of shared practices, and only later on can we focus on words and their meanings as part of an interior discourse. This means that this interior voice should not be considered the first means of apprehension of meanings; on the contrary, it results from the transposition of previous interpersonal exchanges between individuals who share the same practices, language and form of life. It is only at this (belated) point that we have a direct and immediate experience of meanings, as we draw them out from our allegedly private mental depository – an erroneous notion, deriving from the isolation of a particular kind of solitary

game from already existing social and linguistic practices.

It is exactly in relation to this issue that Wittgenstein makes a polemical reference to the *Principles*, more precisely to the chapter on the stream of thought, where William James characterizes consciousness as “absolute insularity” and says that the “most absolute fracture in nature” is the one dividing our own thoughts from those of others. By evoking James’s reference to the strange *Erlebnis* whereby a word is not yet present but seems to arise out of an inner experience (whether psychological or mental), Wittgenstein offers the famous response:

The words ‘It’s on the tip of my tongue’ are no more the expression of an experience than ‘Now I know to go on!’. We use them in *certain situations*, and they are surrounded by a behavior of a special kind, and also by some characteristic experiences. In particular, they are frequently followed by *finding* the word. (Ask yourself: “What would it be like if human beings *never* found the word that was on the tip of their tongue?”). (Wittgenstein 1958: 219).

Very briefly, there is no privileged psychological or mental access to meanings apart from the common contexts in which humans share their practices and linguistically interact with one another; there is no interior *Erlebnis* giving rise to or constituting the meaning of a word.⁴

Hence, should we understand Wittgenstein’s contribution to our opening question as a complete denial of any kind of immediate or direct experience? I suspect that this is only one part of the story: Wittgenstein was criticizing a certain use (or abuse) of experience in philosophical discussions while, on the other hand, he was also wondering if there could be other ways to consider everyday direct experience from a philosophical point of view without over-

⁴ Although Wittgenstein uses James here simply as a polemic target (as Goodman points out in Goodman 2007: 142), the positive importance of the pragmatist’s work for Wittgenstein’s philosophy has been clearly recognized by many scholars (Boncompagni 2016 and Sanfelix Vidarte 2017).

intellectualizing it. In my opinion, a first clue encouraging a more multifaceted reading of Wittgenstein on experience is given by his use of the word *Erlebnis* in this part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein’s criticism is directed toward the alleged primacy of *Erlebnis*, understood as the direct experience of meanings as mental or psychological contents – differently, the term *Erfahrung* appears only at the beginning of paragraph XI, in the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is well known that German philosophy has made extensive use of the two German words for experience, *Erlebnis*, and *Erfahrung*, by assigning them different meanings and different roles in various philosophical systems. Hans-Georg Gadamer proposed a famous analysis of the philosophical meanings of the term “*Erlebnis*” in the first part of his *Truth and Method* (part I, B, ii and iii) – the reconstruction of the history of the word played a significant role in his criticism of “aesthetic culture”, namely a cultural form, based on the grounding assumption that the experience of art and the beautiful represented something completely different and separate from other ways of perceiving and experiencing the ordinary world.⁵ Very briefly, Gadamer points out some features in the complex philosophical history of the concept of *Erlebnis*, which are essentially the polemical target of Wittgenstein’s criticism. Gadamer emphasizes that a distinguishing feature of the

⁵ Furthermore, Gadamer’s hermeneutical choice to distance himself from the phenomenological approach could be detected in this rejection of the concept of *Erlebnis* in favour of the idea of an *Erfahrung* of art as involving a real change in the subject having an experience. It has to do with a criticism of the alleged decisive primacy conferred by Husserl’s phenomenology on the noetic pole of the so-called intentional relation, to the detriment of the noematic pole. Roberta Lanfredini has highlighted a similar point at the beginning of William James’s essay *Does Consciousness Exist?*, where the author criticizes the strong asymmetry between the two poles of experience that emerged from Kant’s transcendental philosophy onward – and hence the position he himself had adopted in the *Principles of Psychology* (Lanfredini 2016).

philosophical concept of *Erlebnis* is the fact that it belongs to the inwardness of an individual conscience. This feature would guarantee a direct, unmediated access to its owner: the first person character of an *Erlebnis* would constitute the first unmediated and indisputable given, on which any other knowledge should be founded. Intimacy and adherence to one's own inner life as well as certainty and immunity from doubt are the two main characteristics defining the concept of *Erlebnis* and lending it a philosophical primacy that is criticized and regarded as illegitimate both by Wittgenstein and by Gadamer. On the other hand, in his further treatment of art Gadamer recalls that the German philosophical tradition developed also the more inclusive concept of *Erfahrung*, which extends beyond the limitedness of inwardness, inner life, the individual conscience and the mind. Differently from *Erlebnis*, the term *Erfahrung* – at least in its philosophical, mainly Hegelian, dimension – tends to include everything that happens, involving human actions and passions, as well as the historical and cultural relations between the so-called experiential poles (CFR. Gadamer 1990, part II, 4, 3, B).

This last point brings us back to Wittgenstein and to our thesis that he is inquiring whether there is still room to consider other modes of experience (*Erfahrung*) beyond introspection, mental or internal experience, and the like. Speaking about the experience (*Erfahrung*) of “noticing an aspect”, he famously says that his inquiry is focused on the “grammar” of the concept, which is to say its use in a language (and not on the alleged psychological causes of a concept, i.e. a specific *Erlebnis* which should be investigated by psychologists, not philosophers). What has been largely overlooked, by contrast, is the fact that Wittgenstein also makes an explicit reference to a plurality of *Erfahrungsbegriffe*: “We are interested in the concept and its place among the concepts of experience” (Wittgenstein 1958, 193).

A second passage deserving consideration for our purposes is the beginning of the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein famously states:

One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, startled. But Hopeful? And why not?

A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow? – And what can he not do here? – How do I do it? – How am I supposed to answer this?

Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life.

(Wittgenstein 1958, 174)

The passage seems to suggest that Wittgenstein was interested in understanding whether the fact that humans speak with one another – that our forms of life are strictly intertwined with exchanged words – has an influence on the ways they believe and hope, as well as fear certain things and feel pain or see something as a duck or a rabbit. In other words, I tend to read this passage as though Wittgenstein were posing the question of whether our being speaking creatures contributes to re-shaping the animal sensibility in which our roots are embedded. More specifically, it seems to me that Wittgenstein focused the problem whether our everyday seeing, feeling pain, shouting, believing or hoping should always be considered mediated experiences, always involving inferences and interpretations. Wittgenstein resists the idea that our ordinary seeing something as a specific thing is grounded on an inferential process. Differently, this can be the case when we shift from seeing something as a duck to seeing it as a rabbit: there could be a reason eliciting a change in my perceptual experience and a reasoning – the change is due to a non-artificial doubt (to use Peirce's lexicon) or to hesitation about what I can and should do when a situation becomes indeterminate (to recall Dewey's formulation of the issue).

This is also the case with exclamations and interjections, as well as with shouts and human cries. It is even the case with words themselves when they are perceived by the interlocutors as unmediated behaviors, similar to shouts.⁶

Most of our seeing something as something as well as the functioning of certain words and sentences as bodily gestures works immediately because we are intimately familiar with a context and a linguistic game, we adhere to it by means of an attitude or a 'belief' that is more primitive than an epistemological assumption. According to Moyal-Sharrock, this kind of immediacy is connected to our belonging to a form of life that is deeply rooted in our animality, consequently preceding any epistemological doubt and any inferential process (Moyal-Sharrock 2016).

Wittgenstein's famous observations on following a rule (§§ 197-202) are largely consistent with this view: he states that "there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation (*Deutung*)" (Wittgenstein 1958, 81). Wittgenstein refers to specific practices and to dispositions to act in a certain way, to habits of action and behavior that are not the result of the unconscious repetition of an originally intentional act. On the contrary, they are anchored in a shared form of living preceding any individual act as well as any singular word utterance (Dreon 2016).

Considering cases of this kind, Luigi Perissinotto argues that such linguistic games should be considered extensions of more primitive behaviors. The word 'primitive' in these cases has no reductive characterization, but simply refers to what is not the result of any reasoning. "From this point of view", he says, "'primitive' is not so much a synonym of 'elemental' or 'simple' as of 'immediate', where 'immediate' means: non mediated by reasoning,

⁶ Cf. also § IX (in Wittgenstein 1953), where Wittgenstein excludes that an expression such as "I am afraid" is the description of an interior state (an *Erlebnis*). However, he emphasizes that a word can be either very far from a shout or very close, since there are various degrees and nuances between the two extremes.

calculation, inductive and analogical processes, and so on and so forth" (Perissinotto 2002, 107, my translation).

It is in this sense, according to Wittgenstein's perspective, that we can speak of immediate experience, once we have freed ourselves from the myth of introspection and the direct intuition of one's own self.

3. James's claim for immediate experience

Let's return to the classical pragmatists and more precisely to the way William James poses the whole issue in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. I will focus my attention on some features of his text which Dewey found compelling and further developed in his own way. The influence of these essays on Dewey's *Experience and Nature* is very strong but it is always filtered through Deweyan lenses. The first element I wish to emphasize is that James, as a radical empiricist, does not abandon his preference to consider 'immediate experience' an important issue but a crucial shift is made with respect to the *Principles* (see Bella in this volume). As has already been observed, in the chapter on the stream of thought immediateness and immunity from doubts are attributed to interior experience in its allegedly "absolute insularity": "the personal self rather than the thought might be treated as the immediate datum in psychology" (James 1981: cap.IX, § 1).⁷ In *Does Consciousness Exit?*, as well as in *A World of Pure Experience*, it is no longer the strictly personal consciousness that is already given but the continuum of experience.⁸ Some remarks are important for a better

⁷ Nonetheless, James's *Principles* are marked by tensions and ambiguities also with regard to the issue of consciousness, as is interestingly acknowledged by Dewey in an essay dating back to 1940, whose eloquent title is *The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James* (Dewey 1988 b).

⁸ I owe to Kenneth Stickers an interesting detail about Wilhelm Jerusalem, the Austrian scholar who translated James's *Pragmatism* into German and worked on the project of founding epistemology and logic on social psychology. Jerusalem still suggested to use the German word "*Erlebnis*" (rather than "*Erfahrung*") for

understanding of James's shift from the stream of consciousness to the experiential continuum – without denying some problems in James's theory of neutral monism that cannot be the object of this inquiry. Negatively, experience is no longer understood as a kind of interior dimension; on the contrary, it is everything which occurs without the need for an underlying foundation – “In radical empiricism there is no bedding; it is as the pieces clung together by their edges, the transitions experienced between them forming their cement” (see the “Conclusion” of *A Word of Pure Experience*).⁹ “There is no general stuff of which experience at large is made” (*Does Consciousness Exist?*, section V): experience is made of everything – stuff, nature, features – we experience and consequently it is genuinely pluralistic. It is the dynamic world, including human life, which is not perceived as an exclusive property belonging to a personal consciousness; on the contrary, it simply is what it is: namely, superabundant, chaotic, vague, without sharp edges dividing one part from another (see Gavin 1992). I suggest we could understand the term ‘radical’ that is attributed to empiricism to mean the rich and vague plurality of processes that do not need any reference to principles transcending them. James wanted to account for this immediate experience we adhere to before posing any philosophical question and any real or merely artificial doubt (see Colapietro in this volume).

Of course, we could object that James's insistence on *pure* experience as “plain unqualified actuality, a simple *that*, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as someone's opinion about fact” (*A World of Pure Experience*, section V) is the late result of a sophisticated philosophical approach.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that James clearly does not refer to the dogmatic assumption of pure experience as a neutral given, assumed as the ground for cognition. On the contrary, James alludes to the continuum of dynamic processes – both organic and environmental – in which we are embedded before we can functionally establish whether something is either subjective or objective, whether it should be an attribute of things or thoughts, of physical reality or the mind. We practically adhere to this kind of continuum before specific cognitive relations take place between certain parts of experience and others. The immediacy of experience, in this broad and inclusive sense, is not at all a cognitive feature, because it is already there whenever it becomes necessary to distinguish a knower from the known, because a real doubt (not a paper one) arises from what Dewey will later describe as an indeterminate situation.

As a matter of fact, this reshaping of the role and place of knowledge within experience will represent one of the strengths of Dewey's approach to the issue – he will later make it much more explicit and develop all its consequences.

“experience” in James's later works. In my opinion, this choice was connected to the strong influence of James's *Principles* on his readers – the same influence that pushed Wittgenstein to consider James as the paradigm of a dogmatic conception of introspection. Kenneth Stickers says that Jerusalem's preference for “*Erlebnis*” was connected to his criticism of James with respect to the lack of the social dimension of experience in his thought (Stickers 2009).

⁹ Lanfredini (2017) interprets this change in James's thought in phenomenological terms, by arguing that with this new conception of experience James abandons any primacy previously attributed to the subjective (or noetic) pole of experience at the expenses of the objective (or noematic) pole.

¹⁰ Gavin (in Gavin 1992, 4) claims that James was deeply conscious of the impossibility of foregoing any theoretical disposition toward the object of philosophy, even when it consists in the allegedly “unarticulate” tissue of immediate experience: although theories and languages are structurally “directional”, they are “not dismissable”. His answer, according to Gavin, consisted in adopting a method of vigilance, while, at the same time, resisting the temptation to “clean up the vague” for epistemological reasons.

In my opinion, Dewey will also further develop another aspect foreshadowed in the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* in his 1925 volume, namely James's reference to so-called "affectual facts".

James transformed one of the cruxes of modern philosophy into an argument in favor of his anti-dualistic conception of experience – his idea of integral and practical experience as prior to and exceeding dualistic distinctions, such as mind and world, subject and object and so on. In a nutshell, the traditional philosophical problem is whether appreciations of values – both aesthetic and ethical ones – should be considered subjective or objective. For example, what is painful? Are some objects painful or should the property be attributed to the experiences we have of them? Is a certain figure fascinating or are we projecting a quality of our *Erlebnis* onto the object at stake? Are morally valuable characteristics *in res* or in the subject who is experiencing them? Is beauty an attribute of the object (a work of art or a natural landscape) or is it located in the eyes of those who appreciate beauty?

James takes advantage of the "chaotic", "hybrid", and "ambiguous" character of this class of experiences. According to James, the never-ending debate on the subjective or objective character of qualities shows that it is misleading and inconclusive to attempt to definitely regiment them by attributing them either to a *res cogitans* or to a *res extensa*, which is to say two modes of being (psychic and physical, mental and neural) which are supposed to be completely discontinuous. Alternatively, we can draw functional and contextual distinctions, for example, between a pain that is serious and in need to be nursed and a pain that is the result of hypochondria. Those distinctions are connected to the relations we assume as crucial from time to time at the expense of other relations we tend to overlook in the continuum of experience. In other words, the fact of characterizing something as either subjective or objective does not depend on the metaphysical stuff or nature out of which it is allegedly constituted. By means

of a deflationary argument, James states that these distinctions between the various phases of an experience respond to our temporary needs and to an ever-changing context.

Dewey will develop James's idea that these affective qualities of experience (he will also speak of them as "esthetic") exercise an effective role in our experiences, by conferring emphasis or enhancing them at the expenses of other features, as well as by making them more interesting – in more contemporary terms, we might say that these qualitative features in experience tend to draw salience lines and to control our orienting in the environment.

In any case, this kind of emphasis, salience and the like hardly seems to be the last result of an inferential process; consequently, a serious tension seems to arise between the Peirce of *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities Claimed for Man* and James's radical empiricism. Dewey was faced the difficult task of putting these two profound yet apparently opposite issues back together. On the one hand, he did so by recognizing the crucial role and the irreversible change produced in the very structures of human experience by the emergence of language and semiotic processes; on the other hand, by avoiding a kind of philosophical straining, namely the attribution of an inferential structure (if only a hypothetical and incomplete one) to each and every human interaction with the environment.

4. Dewey's ways out of a philosophical impasse

John Dewey shared Peirce's and (virtually) Wittgenstein's profound criticism of immediate experience understood as the direct perception of one's own mental contents (Dewey 2004: 8-9, 13). He was very far from assuming a conception of inwardness as a privileged kind of experience that is supposed to be given directly and primarily to the subject, who could have an unmediated access to it and consequently adhere to it as a locus of certainty immune to any doubt.

Dewey's understanding of experience was very remote from the *Erlebnis* model – not only for theoretical reasons but also because of the socio-political consequences of the misuse of this concept in relation to everyday life, as is evident in *Individualism Old and New*.¹¹

On the contrary, Dewey had a very inclusive idea of experience, as something unfolding in the natural and human world and involving the complex of dynamic and historic processes that have to do with human actions in the real world. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey famously stated that

[...] experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience that is experienced, but nature – stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain ways with another natural object – the human organism – they are *how* things are experienced as well. (Dewey 1981: 12-13).

Dewey insistently highlights that human actions and sufferings are as real as natural events because they are natural events dynamically contributing to changing and shaping the environment to which they belong. As a consequence, this picture of experience has a strong sense of contingency to it, an awareness of a structural lack of clear and complete epistemic transparency, as well as an explicit assumption of the hypothetical, risky and provisional character of our truth claims – not because they are supposed to be merely subjective but because both the organic and environmental conditions for interaction are always shifting (see Calcaterra, 2011).

Taking a step back, it is useful to focus on the connection between organic life and the environment, which constitutes the core of Dewey's idea of

experience. From his point of view, Darwin's evolutionary biology offers some beneficial feedback on philosophical distortions because it definitely abandons the traditional modern assumption that human subjects are independent entities dealing with an already given and complete reality that exists *per se*. This assumption dissolves when considering some "biological commonplaces" (Dewey 1989: 20): all living beings, including humans, depend on an environment to survive, flourish and die; life goes on in and by means of an "environmental medium, not in a vacuum" (Dewey 1980: 7). Furthermore, living beings belong to an environment on which they depend and with which they continuously interact. Consequently, they constantly contribute to changing their environment from within to a more or less wide extent.

At the end of *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*, Dewey sums up the possible effects of Darwin's evolutionary biology for developing a sounder philosophical conception of experience. First of all, "If biological development be accepted, the subject of experience is at least an animal, continuous with other organic forms in a process of more complex organization" (Dewey 1980: 26), because different forms of life stand out through the greater or lesser degree of complexity of their interactions with an environment. Moreover (and foreshadowing the more recent idea of neural reductionism), "experience is not identical with brain action; it is the entire organic agent-patient in all its interaction with the environment, natural and social. The brain is primarily an organ of a certain kind of behavior, not of knowing the world" (*ibidem*). Finally, "experience means primarily not knowledge, but ways of doing and suffering" (*ibidem*).

To sum up, experience is constituted by the dynamic interactions between human organisms and their natural as well as naturally social environment.

¹¹ On this issue see Calcaterra 2013, introducing the Italian translation of Dewey's 1929 volume. On the "Pathology of Inwardness" see also Lothstein 1977. See Dreon 2015 on Dewey's criticism of the political and economic consequences of an exclusive cultivation of one's own inner life at the expense of real emancipation.

This kind of approach to experience makes it possible to speak plausibly and non-dogmatically of immediate experience, by denying that there exist any forms of direct, non-inferential knowledge.

By reading Dewey's texts as though they were mainly aimed at solving the whole issue and by simplifying the complexity of his lines of thought, I suggest that his answer could be connected to three main arguments. (1) Dewey endorses a conception of experience as something including vital interactions that are not primarily or eminently cognitive relations, by at the same time downsizing the role of knowledge in experience. (2) Furthermore, he decisively emphasizes the aesthetic, qualitative or affective meanings of things, persons and situations in primary experience. (3) Finally, he adopts a non-foundational, circular conception of the relationship between reflective and eminently qualitative phases of experience, so that the results of previous reflective inquiries are absorbed by primarily qualitative experience and react on it, enriching its depth and complexity.¹²

Let's now consider these lines of thought more analytically.

4.1. In *Experience and Nature*, there is room for immediate experience – Dewey seems to favor the formula “primary” experience over “immediate” experience, even though he does not stick to a fixed expression. In the first chapter of the 1925 volume, he claims that all forms of unreflective primary experience are unquestionable. If we read this statement through a Peircian lens, Dewey is supporting the idea that we cannot really suspend our belief in “gross, macroscopic, crude subject-matters in primary experience” (Dewey

1988: 15); if we did, this would be a clear case of a “paper doubt”, namely an artificial and derived doubt (see Colapietro in this volume). In Dewey's language, it would be a philosophical fallacy, consisting in the assumption of the refined outcomes of a reflective inquiry as though they were the primary elemental features of experience.

For Dewey, everything happening in the world – things and circumstances that hinder us or simply happen to us and have an impact on our lives – is not primary in the sense of representing the first neutral data on which knowledge is based. Rather, these elements are primary in the sense that they are already there, something which has already happened to us and has already conditioned our actions and behaviors before a specific cognitive problem arises and elicits a process of inquiry. In a formula, it is life that is primarily at stake in experience, rather than knowledge. By returning to Peirce and his phenomenological categories, we could translate Dewey's distinction between primary, “consummatory” experience and more reflective phases of experience in terms of relations: primarily dyadic relations, which bear the impact – be it favorable or unfavorable – of something on our lives, are the more inclusive background in which triadic or symbolic references can be developed as further chances, whenever necessary. When something does not work in our largely habitual interactions with the environment, the opportunity for inference is opened up – but knowledge is a secondary or intermediate phase in the temporal development of experience, as Dewey emphasizes in his 1916 introduction to his *Essays in Experimental Logic*:

But it is indispensable to note that [...] the intellectual element is set in a context which is noncognitive and which holds within it in suspense a vast complex of other qualities and things that in the experience itself are objects of esteem or aversion, of decision, of use, of suffering, of endeavour and revolt, not knowledge (Dewey 2004).

¹² For a different point of view on the opportuneness of speaking about immediate experience, see Ryder (forthcoming). The core of Ryder's argument is grounded in the development of Justus Buchler's distinction between query and inquiry rather than in Dewey's distinction between primary experience and reflective experience.

This does not mean that knowledge enters into experience as an alien or transcendent feature. On the contrary, if all experience is of nature as well as in nature,

[e]xperience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also had breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference (Dewey 1981:13).

Inference is, for Dewey, “the use of what happens, to anticipate what will—or at least may—happen” and it “makes the difference between directed and undirected participation” (Dewey 1980: 16). It is the capacity to see something happening now as the sign of some possible consequences in the future, it is a more or less risky forecast – an abduction – of whether propitious or painful events might take place. It is an extremely powerful tool in human experience, decisively extending – “stretching” – its chances beyond those limits that are out of reach for non-human forms of life. Consequently, inference is an intrinsic feature in human experience,¹³ yet it does not exhaust its qualitative complexity. Thought and reason are reflective modalities in experience which are elicited primarily by practical difficulties regarding human actions when we face the problem of what to do in new and unexpected circumstances. Reason in action is the process of returning to an indeterminate situation, by trying to analytically discriminate the vague, qualitatively thick features of primary experience – where we mostly move habitually, without any need for analysis. Inquiries are grounded in attempts to draw distinctions in the rich and largely continuous fabric of primary experience, by means of procedures that are functional to producing a

¹³ See *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*, where Dewey says that experience “is full of inference” (Dewey 1980: 6) in the sense that, if we abandon the atomistic point of view of classical empiricism, we cannot but acknowledge that connections and continuities are pervasive in our experiences. In this reasoning we can perceive Dewey’s capacity to put together Peirce’s and James’s different approaches by undoing their (sometimes) apparent contrasts.

hypothesis, i.e. to making inferences – that are more or less complete and more or less risky, according to Peirce’s lesson – about further consequences.¹⁴ To sum up, this stretching of experience to meet needs stemming from experience itself is still an internal chance, although an impressive one.

4.2. Dewey’s emphasis on the qualitative or aesthetic aspects of primary, unreflective experience represents a second important element for developing a non-dogmatic conception of immediacy. Qualitative, aesthetic or affective features are not to be considered in eminently cognitive terms, as properties channeled through mere sensory perception, which would constitute the purely descriptive ground of subsequent cognitive processes (be they inferential or interpretative). On the contrary, Dewey wanted philosophy to acknowledge that in ordinary, everyday life, each time something happens to us, things, other persons and events are immediately felt as hostile or favorable, welcoming or detrimental, sweet or bitter, bearing hope or anxiety, as well as boring and indifferent. They are “immediately felt” not for any metaphysical reason, but simply because there is no native separation between an alleged merely sensory level of data and a subsequent affective quality which would be subjectively superimposed upon them. These two alleged levels can be abstracted and distinguished only later on for specific reasons and purposes when something goes wrong and a process of inquiry must be developed. Dewey uses the words *felt* or *had*, by contrast to *known* – and this is the reason why he speaks of aesthetic qualities or meanings by referring to a kind of affectively oriented sensibility, rather than to sense perception as a basic feature of an eminently cognitive

¹⁴ In *The Philosophy of Gestures*, Maddalena emphasizes that analysis should be regarded as an intermediate phase between two synthetic moments in experience and, consequently, that discrimination should be considered an internal chance within a basic continuum (Maddalena 2015).

framework.¹⁵ Nonetheless, hostility and sympathy, bitterness and joy, hope and anxiety should not be considered “self-enclosed states of feeling, but [as] active attitudes of welcome and wariness” (Dewey 1980: 10). They are not merely subjective qualities: on the contrary, they are real qualities characterizing real connections¹⁶ and interactions taking place between organisms and the environment. Moreover, qualitative experience is not primarily cognitive because it is connected to the biological and anthropological dimension of life, which is structurally exposed to an environment on which life depends at different levels of complexity and which, consequently, always has an impact and a basic (biological or existential, not cognitive) meaning for life itself. In these cases, references are direct, connecting life and its environment; they are not inferential because they basically assume the impact of an *Umwelt* on life – which deals primarily with existential connections and not with logical relations and triadic references, considering something that is not actually present as a sign for a possible consequence. From this perspective, Dewey could be seen to be re-using and re-interpreting Peirce’s phenomenological categories of Firstness and Secondness (see Dewey 1998) against the more one-sided young Peirce, who may be regarded as considering

¹⁵ This use of the word “esthetic” is basically consistent with James’s and Peirce’s approaches (see Shusterman 2011, Maddalena 2014 and Innis 2014). Nonetheless, I think that Dewey developed and made more coherent a claim that was already to be found in the works of classical pragmatists.

Marcuse draws an exemplary distinction of these two ways of understanding sensibility in the chapter on the aesthetic dimension in his book *Eros and Civilization*, by contrasting an epistemologically oriented conception of sensibility with an affective and embodied sensitivity, basically animated by desires and refusals – or longings and concerns, to speak in more Jamesian and Deweyan terms.

¹⁶ In Dewey 1980, the philosopher suggests that we distinguish between connections, which are existential, and relations, which can be understood as merely logical relationships. He probably introduced this distinction because he sought to avoid certain misunderstandings that could arise in reading James on “relations”.

inferential processes pervasive in every form of experience.

I suggest that Dewey expanded and radicalized the role of James’s so-called “affective facts” in experience (see also Shusterman 2011). First of all, things happen to us as pleasant or painful, hateful, tragic or joyful, they are nice or ugly, and we welcome or reject them: qualitative or aesthetic characterization is pervasive in human experience. At the same time, qualities are not merely descriptive properties, because they are laden with a sort of proto-evaluation that is not based on any inference but on the direct impact of a certain situation on one’s own life. In *Art as Experience* (Dewey 1989, Chap. XI), Dewey explains that aesthetic qualities (and, later on, artistic qualities) should not be interpreted as either subjective or objective properties, depending on the context and its specific purpose. Partially redirecting James’s interpretation of “affective facts”, Dewey says that aesthetic qualities concern the specific relations taking place between the various components or phases of an experience, which are just as real as the things and entities involved in an interaction, because they have consequences and affect the dynamic configuration of the environment. But Dewey is also very careful to avoid any hypostatization: qualities are not entities but modes of relation, they concern the ways in which interactions take place between human organisms and their natural as well as social and cultural environment.

4.3. Nonetheless, the most important point in Dewey’s approach, in my opinion, is that his distinction between primary and reflective experience is not foundational – and probably it is for this reason that he avoids James’s use of the ambivalent adjective “pure” to characterize primarily qualitative experience. The distinction between qualitative experience and reflective inquiries cannot be a founding element because human beings are animals who, from the very beginning, find themselves caught in the middle of communicative and linguistic interactions as well as inferential processes, which belong to a

community more than they do to any individual speaker and knower. All of this interferes with and has consequences for qualitative experience, which incorporates the results of previous inquiries and is modified by them, whether it is enriched or impoverished. There is a kind of circular process which moves from qualitatively thick experience to analysis, hypothesis, and inference each time a difficulty arises about what can or should be done in a specific context. On the other hand, the outputs of reflective experiences cannot but return to the primary experience out of which the need for them emerged and through which their strength will be tested. Consequently, primary experience is continuously re-set and re-shaped, in some way or other: I correct my disposition to act if a particular mode of action works better than another in a new context of action. Primary experience checks the efficacy of the outputs of previous inquiries and appropriates them in largely unconscious ways when something unexpected and disrupting happens that requires a reassessment.

From this point of view, the results of knowledge and inferences are everywhere in human experience, even in primarily qualitative and non-cognitive experiences of what ordinarily happens. However – as is clear from Dewey's *Rejoinder* to some objections presented in the volume edited by Schlipp (Dewey 1939) – the American philosopher states that we should distinguish between knowledge understood as process *in actu* and the outputs of previous inquiries, which are absorbed and (collectively) established in primarily qualitative experience, and assumed as an integral part of the experiential fabric. Qualitative experience can be more or less vague, yet it is nonetheless appropriate when things unfold normally and there is no hindrance.

At present in our culture, even the man on the street immediately sees the thick brush strokes of a Van Gogh's painting as wheat in the hot summer fields of the Mediterranean, rather than as nervous splotches, without the need for any inferential process. Differently,

a *Deutung* becomes crucial for the art expert who is expected to distinguish whether a painting is an authentic Van Gogh or a mere daub. Similarly, an uneducated elderly woman will say that she is *suffering* from gastritis, while her physician must *investigate* the causes of this and find possible remedies, if the old lady asks him for help when she can no longer endure her condition.

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