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### A Critical Approach

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## 1. Introduction

“These remarks are preparatory to presenting a conception of philosophy; namely, that philosophy is inherently criticism, having its distinct position among various modes of criticism in its generality; a criticism of criticism, as it were.”  
(LW.1: 298)

- 1 When studying Dewey's work, I caught myself thinking that Dewey's method and metaphysics are essentially interdependent: that if one aims to clarify his naturalistic method, this automatically leads to clarification of his naturalistic metaphysics, and if one attempts to clarify Dewey's metaphysics, this sheds some light on his methodology.
- 2 In this paper, my goal is to clarify Dewey's naturalistic *method*, and if I am right, this should help us see his metaphysics better. Here, my approach is critical: I am aiming not just to describe Dewey's method, but to specify the problems within it, and after doing that, to fix them.
- 3 Since Dewey's *Experience and Nature* is considered to be his *magnum opus* where his naturalistic method (that he termed as “denotative method”) as well as his naturalistic metaphysics are explicitly stated, this work is my main guide. I also attempt to show that Dewey's metaphysics as well as his methodology are not as explicitly and clearly formulated as it can seem *prima facie*.
- 4 The main method that I employ in this paper is that of genealogical “deconstruction”<sup>1</sup> followed by pragmatic “reconstruction.”<sup>2</sup> This method was employed in *Experience and Nature* by Dewey himself. For example, when talking about the mind-body problem, Dewey suggests that its “solution” [...] “is to be found in a revision of the preliminary assumptions about existence which generate the problem” (LW.1: 202). Therefore,

Dewey's meta-approach can be summarized by the following maxim: *Not to start with conclusions/solutions, and thus, not to take them for granted, but to start with the revision of the premises/assumptions on which the very problem is based.* In his *Experience and Nature*, Dewey applies this approach not only to the mind-body problem but to the whole history of philosophy: first he genealogically “deconstructs” the premises on which the problem is based, and then he pragmatically “reconstructs” the matter (usually via dissolving the original problem). Thus, I will apply the same meta-approach to Dewey's own naturalistic methodology (his denotative method) which will also have some consequences as regards his metaphysics.

5 The structure of the paper consists of two parts, thus reflecting the meta-approach applied in it. In Part 1, I genealogically “deconstruct” Dewey's denotative method, while in Part 2, I pragmatically “reconstruct” it. What I am going to do in this paper is the following:

(1) I claim that Dewey's “immediate empiricism” (that is the philosophical ground of Dewey's naturalistic method) and his pragmatism (instrumentalism) are essentially incompatible. Dewey's denotative method is not only strictly metaphysically laden but is heavily socially/politically laden as well. By the latter, I mean Dewey's main hidden assumption of the “common man” that grounds “common sense” as its main bearer. I argue that the latter prevents Dewey's method to be genuinely scientifically and instrumentally applicable. From this, it follows that one has to modify Dewey's naturalistic method in the first place.

(2) Dewey's “primary experience” must not be identified with the “non-cognitive.” I claim that such identification leads to contradictions like “non-cognitive cognitive”/“immediate mediacy”/“immediate meaning.” In order to avoid these contradictions, one has to acknowledge that all of our qualitative experience is *cognitive* (but not to be reduced to “intellectual”) in the sense that we always start with *interpretations*. Therefore, our primary experience is always mediated with *interpretive meaning*. Immediate empiricism in its original postulation is false: qualities are indeed objective (as emergent properties of objective situations) but are always mediated through *interpretive effort* that is grounded in the organism's *sensorimotor coordination*. This leads to the reconstruction of Dewey's “immediate empiricism” into the “hermeneutic empiricism.”

(3) I claim that Dewey's identification of primary experience with “common sense” leads to the interpretation of immediate empiricism's postulate as some kind of “intuitionism” (as based on the “common sense intuition”) which is at odds with Dewey's pragmatism (instrumentalism) and pragmatism overall. Thus, instead of identification of primary experience with common sense, I claim that it would be better to identify it purely with the *problematic situation*.

(4) One of the ways to modify Dewey's method further would be through the substitution of his notion of “common sense” with what I would call “sound reason.” The latter I see as more pragmatically and scientifically oriented than common sense, and if to bracket Dewey's main hidden political assumption of the “common man” that grounds “common sense,” *sound reason* is something that Dewey should actually have appealed to instead.

## Part 1. Genealogical Deconstruction

### 2. Dewey's Denotative Method. A Thread Through Labyrinth?

- 6 What are the origins of method/metaphysics “interdependence” that I was mentioning in the Introduction? To find this out, I invite the reader to look at the *origins* of Dewey's denotative method itself. One of the major Dewey scholars, Thomas Alexander (2004) associates Dewey's denotative-empirical method with the “thread through labyrinth.” Dewey himself viewed his denotative method/pattern of inquiry as a “unified method” with that of natural sciences. But if the method in itself is perceived as a “labyrinth,” how can it be *applied* successfully in both philosophy and especially in sciences in the first place?

#### 2.1. A Case of Confusion

- 7 Alexander aims to distinguish between the “denotative method” (as genuinely *philosophic* method) and the “pattern of inquiry” (a label introduced by Dewey (1938) in his monumental *Logic: Theory of Inquiry*) that is the core of Dewey's “instrumentalism” or “theory of knowing.”
- 8 Thus, Alexander writes:
- Instrumentalism is Dewey's theory of inquiry, i.e., his theory of knowing. The “denotative method” on the other hand is *philosophical method*, i.e., a way of preventing philosophy from succumbing to “intellectualism”; it is a way of putting “knowing” in context and making “experience” serviceable for the real philosophical project: wisdom. (Alexander 2004: 248)
- 9 And as a way out, Alexander finds “aesthetics a particularly significant, though neglected, aspect of Deweyan philosophy” (*ibid.*) that leads him to “believe” that Dewey's *Art as Experience* is “more of a key in understanding Dewey's philosophy than has been generally recognized” (*ibid.*: 249).
- 10 So, according to Alexander, it is the instrumentalist method (or “pattern of inquiry”) that is purely scientific (as the “theory of knowing”), but the denotative method is more than that. As essentially “philosophic,” denotative procedure is the way not just to knowledge but to “wisdom.” I tend to disagree with such a bifurcation between Dewey's denotative method and his instrumentalism. To me, they appear as essentially the same methods but expressed in different words. Dewey viewed both of them as scientific not in terms of the subject-matter but *in kind*. First, let's look at how Dewey himself views the matter, and then we can speculate as to what could be the cause for Alexander to bifurcate Dewey's method into two.
- 11 Let's start with Dewey's 1938 version:
- The attainment of unified method means that the fundamental unity of the structure of inquiry in common sense and science be recognized, their difference being one in the *problems* with which they are directly concerned, *not* in their *respective logics*. It is not urged that attainment of a unified logic, a theory of inquiry, will resolve the split in our beliefs and procedures. But it is affirmed that it will not be resolved without it. (LW.12: 84; my emphasis)

- 12 Already in 1905, when talking about his “postulate of immediate empiricism,”<sup>3</sup> Dewey expresses the same thought as he would express in his *Logic: Theory of Inquiry* (1938): “But the real significance of the principle is that of a *method of philosophical analysis* – a method *identical in kind* (but differing in *problem* and hence in operation) with that of a *scientist*.” (MW.3: 165; my emphasis).
- 13 Finally, already in the Preface to the second edition of his *Experience and Nature* (1929), Dewey writes the following:
- All art is instrumental* in its use of techniques and tools. It is shown that normal artistic experience involves bringing to a better balance than is found elsewhere in either nature or experience the consummatory and instrumental phases of events. Art thus represents the culminating event of nature as well as the climax of experience. In this connection the usual sharp separation made between art and science is criticized; it is argued that *science as method* is *more basic* than *science as subject-matter*, and that *scientific inquiry is an art*, at once instrumental in control and final as a pure enjoyment of mind. (LW1: 8-9; my emphasis)
- 14 Let’s unpack this quote. Dewey does not identify “instrumental” and “instrumentalism” with just “theory of knowing” and especially with “intellectualism.” Moreover, he states that “science as method” is “more basic” than “science as subject-matter.” And “scientific inquiry is an art.” But art in itself is “instrumental.” If we were to follow Alexander’s understanding of “instrumental” as just “theory of knowing,” then we would have to conclude that art is also a theory and practice of just “knowing” which is, of course, something that Alexander would avoid saying at any price.
- 15 But, Dewey’s notion of “instrumental” is not to be reduced to just “knowing.” Because if we do, we again would have to conclude that art (as instrumental) is purely “knowing” and as such, is an “intellectualist” enterprise. What is “intellectualism” then? According to Dewey, it is “the theory that all experiencing is a mode of knowing, and that all subject-matter, all nature, is, in principle, to be reduced and transformed till it is defined in terms identical with the characteristics presented by refined objects of science as such” (LW.1: 28). Thus, Dewey claims that “intellectualism” appears when we tend to reduce nature to the “refined objects” of “science as such.” Here, he says nothing about the scientific *method* of “science as such.” Because, as we saw earlier, the scientific *method* is “more basic than science as subject-matter.” Therefore, when Dewey refers to the “refined objects of science as such,” he seems to refer to the scientific “subject-matter” and *not* to the scientific method *per se*.
- 16 From this it follows that Alexander seems to make some kind of a category mistake. Since he basically identifies Dewey’s “instrumentalism” with Dewey’s theory of inquiry/knowing, this leads to the (mis-)identification of Dewey’s instrumentalism with “intellectualism,” and limits inquiry as such to the latter. And since Alexander wants to escape the identification of Dewey’s philosophy with instrumentalism-as-intellectualism, and, therefore, aims “to contextualize ‘instrumentalism’ within a broader and deeper philosophical methodology” (Alexander 2004: 248), he simply misses Dewey’s own point that “all art is instrumental” (but not as intellectualist). And since science-as-*method* is *art*, it is also *instrumental*. And in natural sciences it is science-as-method-as-instrumental that helps eliminate the gap between experience and nature, as “the only method”/“the only way” to be “intelligently used as a *means* of disclosing the realities of nature,” [my emphasis] and “penetrating its secrets” by getting directly at nature’s heart (LW.1: 4-5, 11).

- 17 According to Dewey, “the inquirer must use the *empirical method* if his findings are to be treated as scientific” (*ibid.*: 11; my emphasis). And later on, Dewey boldly claims: “This empirical method I shall call the *denotative method*.” (*Ibid.*: 16).<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2. Dewey's Denotative Method. An Overview

- 18 Now let's overview the very pattern of the denotative method itself. Dewey (following James) states that our experience is “double-barreled” (LW.1: 18). It is basically a cluster of two different but interconnected *functions*, the “primary experience” and the “secondary experience.” The first denotes our experience in its “unanalyzed totality,” a qualitatively “gross” experience, a “macroscopic” one (*ibid.*: 15, 18). S. Morris Eames identifies Dewey's primary experience with Peirce's “firstness” that he understands as a “sheer feeling” (Eames 2003: 34). Primary experience is *immediate*. The latter leads to an interpretation of it as *non-cognitive* (*ibid.*: 17; Alexander 2004: 251), which is backed up by Dewey himself: “It is literally impossible to exclude that context of non-cognitive but experienced subject-matter which gives what is *known* its import” (LW.1: 29); “cognitive experience must originate within that of a non-cognitive sort” (*ibid.*: 30).
- 19 Our “secondary experience,” on the other hand, refers to our *reflective* activity, to *meaning*. It is experience as reflectively “refined,” and meaningfully perceived. Therefore, this kind of experience is *mediate* and *cognitive*. Thus, the trick is (and this is precisely why the method is called “denotative”) that while we always start with denoting objects of primary experience, and then reach the objects of secondary experience (those of philosophy and science), we still have to “go back” to denote the objects of primary experience again in order to test our “intellectual” results achieved in the secondary one. Thus, Dewey thinks that it is exactly what natural sciences do but philosophy does not. And that is exactly what makes sciences successful and of primary importance, while philosophy is usually redundant and of secondary importance. This method is the essence of the natural-scientific approach as such, and if philosophy employs this method, it will become genuinely naturalistic and scientific.
- 20 Despite a seeming scientific-empirical origin of the denotative method, is there any *philosophical* origin of this method?

## 2.3. A Problem with Dewey's Immediate Empiricism and the Notion of Primary Experience

- 21 There is no doubt that the first and foremost *philosophical* inspiration for Dewey's method was William James' *radical empiricism*.<sup>5</sup> Based on that, Dewey developed his own famous position that he called “immediate empiricism” or, to be more precise, the “postulate of immediate empiricism” (MW.3: 158-67).
- 22 According to Dewey, “Immediate empiricism postulates that things – anything, everything, in the ordinary and non-technical use of the term ‘thing’ – are what they are experienced as” (*ibid.*: 158). What does it mean? The very postulation itself is already problematic because it leads to different interpretations that seem to be opposite to each other. How to interpret the “as” part correctly? On the one hand, “experienced as” can refer to *meaning*, as it is interpreted in the phenomenological tradition (consciousness is consciousness *of* something *as* something) (Crowell 2013: 65). On the other hand, the “experienced as” part is usually interpreted as the *non-cognitive*

realm of experience. Thus, we already are presented with a problem, “things” that are “experienced as” can both be understood as non-cognitive, and therefore, “immediate,” and cognitive, i.e., mediated through meaning.

- 23 Dewey himself seems to give us reasons to understand his postulate in these two contradictory ways. On the one hand, he calls his empiricism “immediate,” and so suggests that this is the right interpretation of what he actually means. Thus, it is not hard to see that when Dewey is talking about “primary experience”/“gross experience”/“things as *had*” in his *Experience and Nature*, he refers to nothing but “concrete qualitative thing or *that*” from his 1905 paper (MW.3: 163). This leaves us with the impression that our “primary experience” is primarily *non-cognitive* (because Dewey also refers to “that” as “earlier non-cognitionally experienced thing” (*ibid.*: 166)).
- 24 On the other hand, Dewey identifies his “primary experience” with “common sense” by which he means “our day-to-day experience.” But it will be hard to deny that our ordinary experience is mediated with meaning and as such, it is *not* immediate. Even when we look at some very basic stuff like water, commonsensically we *interpret* it as a “liquid we can drink, cook with, take shower with, etc.” The latter pertains again to *interpretive meaning* which leads to thinking that all of the commonly shared “sense” is nothing but such meanings. Therefore, our “common sense” is always mediated with an interpretive meaning, and hence, is not “immediate.” It requires *interpretation* to be done in the first place. Thus, one cannot hold two understandings of primary experience (i.e., immediate/non-cognitive and mediate/cognitive) at once because it leads to the problem of “immediate mediate”/“non-cognitive cognitive”/“immediate meaning” that appears as a contradiction.
- 25 Let’s try to look at the expression “experienced as” in another way. Since our experience, according to Dewey, is basically a cluster of “primary” and “secondary” experiences, “things experienced as” refer to two *functions* of experience as a whole: primary experience is non-cognitive (for now, let’s bracket the common sense dimension), secondary experience is cognitive (meaning), but since experience as such is one thing (i.e., it is not essentially consisting of two separate domains), as “double-barreled,” it leads to interpreting experience as a whole as “immediate mediate”/“non-cognitive cognitive”/“immediate meaning” as well. An expression which again appears as contradictory in itself.
- 26 One way to argue for the “immediate meaning” as true would be via claiming that meanings are essential constituents of reality, and therefore, some of them are “mediate” and some are “immediate.” This leads to the idea that some kind of “meaning idealism” is true. But Dewey is not easy with any kind of idealism. Thus, is there any way to avoid these striking contradictions and even the possibility of ending up with just another kind of idealism? Dewey himself was totally fine with such a combination. He did use the expression “immediate meaning” himself (e.g., LW.1: 198, 200). But why? What are the conditions of possibility for that? We have to dig into Dewey’s method deeper.

## 2.4. A Further Problem with Dewey’s Notion of Primary Experience

- 27 As mentioned, we need always to go back to the things that are *had*, and to avoid substitution of the latter with our philosophic and scientific “knowings.” But what



exactly does Dewey mean by “things as *had*?” Dewey’s “primary experience”/“things as *had*” refers to nothing but *qualities*. Thus, we should further clarify what Dewey means by the latter.

- 28 One can definitely say that for Dewey, qualities are not “qualia” in the analytic philosophy of mind sense. Deweyan qualities are essential constituents of a *situation* that an organism is in. Therefore, qualities are not purely subjective/phenomenal properties of an organism. Instead, they are objective immediate data *in* and *of* the specific situation. Since situations (as contextual wholes) are objective, qualities as their emergent properties are objective as well. Anyone who enters the contextual whole of a situation would be able to feel its specific, unique, and immediate qualities.
- 29 For example, when I and my dog hear a noise in the house at 2 AM in the morning, we both seem rapidly to interpret it as some “bad sign.” Therefore, this situation to both me and my dog appears as problematic, and even fearful because there’s a rapid assumption that there could be an intruder who wants to rob the house and so on. Therefore, the problematicity and the fearfulness of this situation are not anthropomorphic, and are indeed shareable even with non-human species.
- 30 When one feels anger, fear, or sadness, these emotions are not purely subjective states, they are direct givens of a specific situation one is in. It is not that the person is just angry, or fearful or sad, it is the person’s being in a specific situation(s) (that are “angry,” “fearful” or “sad”) that determine these qualities to be felt by that person. Situations themselves are not some static or fixed entities or states of affairs. They are products of interaction between an organism with its environment. (But in themselves, these “products” are not just “states,” but more like *processes*.) Therefore, the *activity* of the organism is an important element for the appearance of situations and their specific qualities. And this seems to cause a problem. If it is only situations that are fearful, sad, etc., and not purely subjective states of a person/organism, then how to explain an organism’s “phenomenal” states that are *not* intersubjectively shareable overall? Does Dewey mean that it is to be a *norm* that it is due to our being in specific situations that we feel certain emotions, and when someone appeals to purely subjective states (i.e., not intersubjectively shareable), then it is to be *abnormal*? But practically speaking, many people either misunderstand the situations they are in or “impose” their own feelings and emotions onto seemingly objective situations. But if qualities are “immediate” then how is it possible to misperceive them in the first place? This leads to the hypothesis that qualities are actually *not* immediate and are heavily dependent on organisms’ *interpretations* of the specific qualitative event(s).
- 31 For example, when a student enters a party, she sees people laughing. The immediate quality is that of the cheerfulness of a situation. A bit later she discovers that the common laugh is caused by a senior publicly embarrassing a freshman. Now the same “cheerfulness” of a situation has changed into the feeling of sadness. But she is the only one in the group who feels sad because others are perceiving the quality of cheerfulness and not sadness.
- 32 How to explain this example? There is no doubt that the case is not just conceivable but empirical. It is usually well-portrayed in the movies and can be experienced potentially by anyone. But if we accept Dewey’s view that the qualities of situations are immediate, then the situation described above simply would not make sense. If qualities are immediate, the majority of that group should have felt the same sadness as she felt. But they did not. Or, she must have felt the same cheerfulness that that group had felt. But



she did not. This seems to imply that qualities are not immediate but are always mediated via our *interpretations*.

- 33 It is interesting that Dewey himself suggests that our perceptions of qualities are *not* immediate but are rather interpreted on the basis of various cultural/social/political factors:

Only analysis shows that the ways in which we believe and expect have a tremendous effect upon *what* we believe and expect. We have discovered at last that these ways are set, almost abjectly so, by social factors, by tradition and the influence of education. Thus we discover that we believe many things not because the things are so, but because we have become habituated through the weight of authority, by imitation, prestige, instruction, the unconscious effect of language, etc. We learn, in short, that qualities which we attribute to objects ought to be imputed to our own ways of experiencing them, and that these in turn are due to the force of intercourse and custom. [...] The power of custom and tradition in scientific as well as in moral beliefs never suffered a serious check until analysis revealed the effect of personal ways of believing upon things believed, and the extent to which these ways are unwittingly fixed by social custom and tradition. (LW.1: 23)

- 34 Can it be the case that Dewey's own views were "unwittingly fixed by social custom and tradition" as well?

### 3. Dewey's "Common Man"

- 35 Besides the assumption that situations and their qualities are immediate and objective, is there any other assumption that grounds Dewey's intention to identify primary experience with common sense? It seems that the assumption in question that Dewey "unwittingly fixes" is that of the "common man." Indeed, how can "common sense" be a widespread phenomenon if there were no further assumptions about its bearer, i.e., the "common man?" *Who* and *what* is that? One can deduce that the latter is a "practical man," an "artisan," to whom Dewey refers in many of his works, including *Experience and Nature*. Since common sense is a "day-to-day experience" then a common man is a person who lives his/her day-to-day ordinary life. A common man is a practical person that mainly solves practical problems. It is the notion of common man that seems to be both Dewey's starting point and the end point of his denotative method. It appears that Dewey's main assumption is that common men share common problems and offer common solutions.
- 36 Dewey's common man is a highly intelligent person that successfully deals with his environment without an appeal to the sophisticated "refined" philosophy or science. It is the common man that should be an exemplar for philosophy and not vice versa. Since Dewey is mostly against the division between theory and practice, he is also against the division of people into the "leisure class" and practical people. He often repeats that philosophers are still a "leisure class" by historical inertia. When common people were people of arts and other practical activities, philosophers needed leisure to comprehend "essences" as something static and fixed. Philosophers as well as priests were in a "quest for certainty" (to use Dewey's later expression). It is only practical people who really recognized our existence as "precarious and stable" and were able to use arts instrumentally to stabilize our always precarious and unstable world. Therefore, Dewey's famous "reconstruction in philosophy" is not only an attempt to

employ the empirically-scientific method, but also an attempt to reconstruct the very status of philosophers and philosophy as such. Instead of being somewhere in the sky, it needs to become more grounded and deal with earthly and “practical” problems.

- 37 From this, it follows that for Dewey the meaning of “practical”/“instrumental” is also politically laden. Simply because scientists deal with many problems within their respective spheres but it will be very much naïve to identify them with just the problems of the “common man.” One can be still a “practical” person without being a “commonsense” person overall.

### 3.1. Is There any “Common Man?”

- 38 Where could Dewey’s assumption of a “common man” come from? Looking at the origins of Dewey’s idea of democracy can help clarify the matter. Michael J. Rockler (1997) while quoting from Gutek (1991) suggests that Dewey’s view of democracy is coming from his childhood upbringing:

The Deweys were members of the Congregational church. Life in small-town Vermont had an important impact on Dewey who, throughout his life, cherished a vision of the face to face, town meeting type of community that existed in New England. This vision of the small-town community may have influenced his emphasis on the role of the community in shaping social intelligence and participation. (Rockler 1997: 5; Gutek: 1991: 333)

- 39 Thus, it seems that it was Dewey’s “small-town community” that also shaped his view about “common sense” and “common man.” And indeed, Dewey’s view on democracy is inherently connected to the idea of “Common Man”:

Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. (LW.14: 226)

- 40 How does Dewey define “common man” overall? In his “Beliefs and Existences” (MW.3: 83-101) Dewey says the following: “the world of the common man, – that is, of man as an individual and not as a professional being or class specimen.” (*Ibid.*: 83). Thus, there is not only a genuine gap between a philosopher and a common man but “the professional man, the philosopher, has been largely occupied in a systematic effort to discredit the standpoint of the common man, that is, to disable belief as an ultimately valid principle.” For Dewey, “modern philosophy,” after it “absorbed the Stoic dogma,” became nothing but “epistemology.” The latter is just about “[p]assionless imperturbability, absolute detachment, complete subjection to a ready-made and finished reality – physical it may be, mental it may be, logical it may be – is its professed ideal” (*ibid.*: 84-5). Nevertheless, even though philosophers alienated themselves and became a different “leisure” class, still there is “the possibility of a common understanding, in thought, in language, in outlook, of the philosopher and the common man” (*ibid.*: 99).

- 41 However, one might wonder: “Is there any such thing as a ‘common man’ in the first place?” “Isn’t it just another kind of ‘realism’ in the classical sense?” In the Medieval Ages, philosophers used to debate about the existence of “universals.” Roughly, the question was: “Is a ‘horse’ just an abstraction or does it *really* exist?” Nominalists held that there is no such thing as a “common horse,” it is just a name for individual animals that have some differences. The “commonness” in question is just an abstraction.

Realists, on the other hand, stated that a universal “horse” does exist, and there is indeed a real object, a real “common horse,” to which it corresponds.

- 42 By analogy, Dewey’s view of “common sense” and of “common man” as its bearer appears to me a kind of (common sense) *realism*. Dewey does not hold that “common man” is just a useful (“instrumental”) abstraction. Rather, he generally thinks that “common man” is objectively real and now it is the main goal of philosophy to descend from heaven to earth, and thus, to “go back” to the reality of common man (common sense), which means that of “primary experience.”<sup>6</sup>
- 43 Therefore, besides the strictly metaphysical assumptions (like the existence of objective immediate qualities), there is also a strong social/political assumption on which Dewey’s method rests and on which it seems to be “unwittingly fixed.” And it is that of “common sense realism.”<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2. Pragmatic Approach to Dewey’s Immediate Empiricism and Primary Experience

- 44 Is Dewey’s immediate empiricism (as “concrete qualitative thing or *that*”) compatible with his pragmatism and with pragmatism overall? Dewey’s description of “primary experience” is ambiguous. On the one hand, he identifies it with the “unanalyzed totality” (non-cognitive) while on the other hand, he identifies it strictly with “common sense” (cognitive). In his “Re-Introduction” to *Experience and Nature* (LW.1: 331-61), Dewey is even talking about “common sense knowing,” which only reinforces my previous assumption that common sense is indeed cognitive. Thus, we have two ways to interpret “primary experience.” On the one hand, it is “immediate”; on the other hand, it is also a form of “knowing” and therefore always mediated with meaning. These two strains of interpretation can lead into one “immediate knowledge/meaning.” What is this “immediate knowledge” then? It seems that it is nothing but what is known in the modern philosophy as “intuition.” But how is this compatible with pragmatism?
- 45 The fact is that pragmatism is essentially against *any* kind of intuition. Pragmatism as a philosophical tradition started with the criticism of Descartes and precisely of his *intuitive method*. Charles Peirce, in his “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” (Peirce 1955 [1868]: 228-50) famously undermined the Cartesian method while stating that “We have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions” (*ibid.*: 230). Therefore, every cognition is always mediated by another cognition. There is no such thing as “immediate knowledge/cognition.” Thus, the pragmatic method (as exemplified through the “pragmatic maxim”) is about testing every meaning in its practical consequences.
- Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Peirce 1955 [1878]: 31)
- 46 The procedure starts with meaning (let’s call it *initial* meaning) and after looking at facts or via making experiments ends with the *outcome* meaning (as the *consequences* of the inquiry or experiment). The latter becomes the “real” meaning of the theory or hypothesis that was tested. Thus, in the pragmatic attitude, we start with meaning (cognition) and we end with meaning (cognition) as well. In immediate empiricism, on the other hand, we start with the “common sense” or “common sense knowing” that is

“immediate.” That seems to contradict what Peirce was trying to say, i.e., there is no immediate knowledge as such. It also contradicts Dewey’s ubiquitous denial of any kind of intuition respectively. It seems then, that Dewey’s “immediate empiricism” fails his own and the overall pragmatic test as just another kind of intuitionism.

- 47 There’s another problem with Dewey’s denotative procedure. After our being in the reflective mode (“secondary experience”), we are supposed somehow to “go back” in order to “denote” that “unanalyzed totality” of “common sense” that is immediate, and from which we initially started. But how? As we saw earlier, Dewey has admitted that the way we perceive objects’ qualities can be heavily socially/politically/culturally influenced. So then how is it actually possible to “go back” without practicing what in Husserlian phenomenology is called “epoché” or “bracketing?” For (the later) Husserl it is only via the phenomenological *epoché* that is it possible to “go back” to the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*) (i.e., our prescientific and ordinary way of perceiving the surrounding world (*Umwelt*)) (Husserl 1970).<sup>8</sup> But Dewey has no bracketing technique whatsoever. Even more, Dewey is very much skeptical of the whole phenomenological tradition as still “Cartesian” (Dewey 2013: 90). His naturalism does not allow him to appeal to the phenomenologically “given” or to “intuition.”<sup>9</sup> For Dewey, these things are simply “super-natural” and Cartesian. But as the “immediate empiricist,” Dewey seems to do what officially he is opposed to, because, as based on my analysis above, immediate empiricism appears as just another kind of intuition (let’s call it “commonsensical intuition”) that is directly at odds with the pragmatic method overall. It seems there is another methodological inconsistency in Dewey’s method.
- 48 Husserl assumed the existence of the “transcendental ego” that “holds sway” of our lived-body and that is the essential ground for our genuine (transcendental) rationality, but which is hidden behind the veil of the “natural attitude” (basically “common sense”), as well as the “naturalistic attitude” (basically, physicalism); it is only via the phenomenological epoché and reductions that it is possible to recover that transcendental realm of our existence. Dewey, on the other hand, just assumed the existence of the “common man” that holds sway in every one of us. And it is only such a “common man realism” that seems to be the real condition of the possibility for our “going back” to the “unanalyzed totality” of the primary experience with common sense as its essential ground, and of Dewey’s immediate empiricism as true overall.
- 49 Therefore, if one repudiates the idea of “common man,” one has to repudiate the idea of “common sense” (the way Dewey put it) as well. Which also leads to the repudiation of the notion of the “primary experience” in the *original* sense, and of the doctrine of immediate empiricism as well. Does this lead to the destruction of the denotative method as a whole?

## Part 2. Pragmatic Reconstruction

### 4. Dewey’s Denotative Method 2.0. Towards Hermeneutic Empiricism

- 50 After the genealogical “deconstruction”/“analytic dismemberment” of Dewey’s denotative method, one can wonder what is left and whether it is possible

pragmatically to “reconstruct” it overall. I think it is possible. One should undertake the following steps:

1. To get rid of the identification of primary experience with the non-cognitive, and to recognize that our “primary” experience is always an *interpretation* and as such it is always mediated with interpretive meaning, and therefore, it is *cognitive*. Qualities are indeed objective (as emergent properties of objective situations) but are always mediated with an interpretive meaning. This leads to the reconstruction of Dewey’s “immediate empiricism” into the “hermeneutic empiricism” instead.
2. To repudiate Dewey’s identification of primary experience with “common sense,” and to identify it with just *problematic situation* which is not necessarily commonsensical.
3. To substitute “common sense” with “sound reason.”

#### 4.1. Things Are What They Are Interpreted As

51 Let’s start with (1). According to Dewey, our experience is essentially *problematic*. An organism would simply die if nothing were going on. An organism always needs some problems in order to survive. A problem starts when “*something* happens” (LW.1: 13). But how is it “immediate” if to recognize this “something,” an organism should *interpret* the event as something problematic? An individuation of this something-as-happening from the contextual whole of the situation needs an *interpretive effort* of the organism in the first place. Without such an effort, this “something” will not even be noticed as “something” to pay attention to. An organism *interprets* events as troublesome, pleasant, sad, scary, etc. Therefore, “something happens” is always mediated through interpretive meaning. It is always *cognitive*. Although it does not entail the latter’s being necessarily “intellectual.” Thus, we can distinguish between two senses of “cognitive”: *weak* and *strong*. By the “weak” sense of the cognitive I mean an *interpretive effort* of the organism as described above, whereas the “strong” sense of the cognitive refers to our *intellectual* activity. Dewey seems strictly to identify “cognitive” with “intellectual.” Thus, he writes: “[...] the only way to maintain the doctrine of natural continuity is to recognize the secondary and derived character of aspects of experience of the intellectual or cognitive.” (LW.1: 30). From this, it follows that, since Dewey wants to avoid “intellectualism,” he tends to reduce the “cognitive” only to its “strong” sense while leaving the “weak” sense of it out of the picture. Such reduction leads to the identification of objective qualities and the meaning of primary experience as “immediate.” Since I introduce the “weak” sense of the cognitive as the *interpretive effort*, I must clarify the origins of the latter.

52 By “interpretive effort” I mean essentially an *act* that is grounded in what Dewey in his 1896 seminal article “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (EW.5: 96-109) referred to as the “sensorimotor coordination.” The latter is in itself also an *act* that consists of two interdependent *functions* “stimulus” (sensation) and “response” (movement/motion). As opposed to the classical tradition of looking at stimulus and response as separate “existences” that constitute the “reflex arc,” Dewey proposes to look at them “teleologically.” They are functional parts of the same functional whole. This whole presents itself not as an arc, but as a *circuit*. The way Dewey describes this process suggests that his 1896 paper is not only the document of his functional psychology but also one of the earliest statements of his *instrumentalism*:

The stimulus is that phase of the forming co-ordination which represents the *conditions* which have to be met in bringing it to a *successful* issue; the response is

that phase of one and the same forming co-ordination which gives the key to meeting these conditions, which serves as *instrument* in effecting the successful co-ordination. They are therefore strictly correlative and contemporaneous. (*Ibid.*: 109; my emphasis)

- 53 Dewey emphasizes the point that both “stimulus” and “response” are to be “discovered” or to be “made out” (*ibid.*: 106, 109). But *how* are they “discovered?” Dewey makes it clear that stimulus and response are not existences, but *interpretations* of the functional kind. What makes them functional is that they do not come out of the blue but are means to some end. What makes them interpretations is that to see the sensory stimulus *as* stimulus, and a response *as* response is to *interpret* them as such from the whole of the sensorimotor circuit/act:

[...] it is only the assumed common reference to an inclusive end which marks each member off as stimulus and response, that apart from such reference we have only antecedent and consequent; in other words, the distinction is one of interpretation. (*Ibid.*: 105)

- 54 Even before the “stimulus” and “response” are recognized, the sensorimotor act comes first:

In any case, what precedes the “stimulus” is a whole act, a sensori-motor co-ordination. What is more to the point, the “stimulus” emerges out of this co-ordination; it is born from it as its matrix. It represents as it were an escape from it. (*Ibid.*: 100)

- 55 After the stimulus was interpreted by an organism *as* stimulus, the response (or movement/motion) “is only for the sake of determining the stimulus, of fixing what kind of a stimulus it is, of interpreting it” (*ibid.*: 102). Because, “the motion is not a certain kind of existence; it is a sort of sensory experience interpreted, just as a candle flame, or burn from candle flame. All are on a par” (*ibid.*: 103). On and on, Dewey is emphasizing that both stimulus and response are the functional “terms of interpretation”:

[...] it is impossible to apply the phrase “sensori-motor” to the occurrence of as a simple phrase of description; it has validity only as a term of interpretation, only, that is, as defining various functions exercised. (*Ibid.*)

- 56 In a very instrumentalist fashion, Dewey states: “Just as the discovery of the sensation marks the establishing of the problem, so the constitution of the response marks the solution of this problem.” (*Ibid.*: 105-6). Based on that, we can deduce that what Dewey called “stimulus”/“sensation”/“problem,” and “response”/“movement”/“motion”/“instrument” in the “Reflex Arc” article, signifies what he termed as “primary experience” and “secondary experience” later in *Experience and Nature*. Both stimulus/primary experience and response/secondary experience are *functional interpretations* of the situation that an organism is in. Both are grounded in and distinguished from the sensorimotor circuit/coordination as its functional phases. Therefore, both clusters are always mediated through *interpretive meaning* that is never “immediate.” This also shows that Dewey’s “immediate empiricism” of 1905 and as applied in 1925/1929, is at serious odds with his functional psychology and instrumentalism as presented in 1896.

- 57 The evidence presented in Dewey’s “Reflex Arc” article suggests to reconstruct the “immediate” part of his “immediate empiricism” into the “hermeneutic” one instead. The outcome is “hermeneutic empiricism.” Dewey’s immediate empiricism’s *motto* is “things are what they are experienced as.” While the hermeneutic empiricist’s *motto*



would be “things are what they are interpreted as.” Or, “things are experienced what they are interpreted as.”

## 4.2. Primary Experience as the Problematic Situation

58 (2). Dewey's preoccupation with an understanding of primary experience as “common sense” leads him to thinking that genuine science is essentially commonsensical<sup>10</sup> and always goes back to common sense to “verify” and “check” with its statements. Again, this assumption seems to be based on his implicit idea that there is such a creature as a “common man” in all of us (compare to Husserl's assumption about the “transcendental ego”). So in order to check our philosophical and scientific assumptions with the “common man,” philosophers should descend from their philosophical heaven. But as showed earlier, this assumption leads to some kind of (Medieval) realism with which Dewey's instrumentalism should be at odds. If we bracket the “common man” idea, then it would seem that one's “common sense” depends on a person's *practical identity*. It is hard to believe that quantum physicists' “common sense” (as *intersubjectively shared meanings*) would correspond to the “common sense” of some religious sect, or to that of peasants/farmers. Thus, to avoid confusion, primary experience should rather be identified with the *problematic situation* as such. And the latter's complexity would be different depending on people's different practical identities. What remains is the *situation-as-problematic*.

59 Therefore, the “reconstructed” version of the denotative method would be the following. We start with the *situation-as-problematic*. In order to distinguish that specific situation as problematic, one has to make some *interpretive effort*. The latter can be already seen as an initial hypothesis/interpretation of the event. Then we start making further hypothesis(es)/interpretation(s) in order to stabilize our “precarious” situation into a more stable one. That is where our fully-fledged “secondary experience” comes in. And then we go back to our problem in order to solve it. If we are successful, our situation has been stabilized and the worry has gone; if not, then we need to look for other hypotheses/interpretations (“secondary experience(s)”) in order to stabilize it. In a sense, “secondary experience” (as our interpretive effort) goes hand-in-hand with our “primary experience” (our problematic situation).<sup>11</sup> But again, and to remind the reader, that when it comes to the latter, we got rid of the purely non-cognitive level in it (because it is always mediated via interpretive meaning, and therefore is “weakly cognitive”), and we also eliminated its universal identification with common sense.

## 4.3. Reconstruction of the “Common Sense” Into “Sound Reason”

60 (3). After we genealogically “deconstructed” Dewey's notion of “common sense,” is there any way pragmatically to reconstruct it? I think there is, and here is my proposal. Instead of the concept of “common sense,” I am offering the notion of *sound reason*. I want to show that this concept is compatible with both Dewey's pragmatism and his overall natural-scientific orientation.

61 Let's start with the semantics. What makes it a “reason” and what makes it “sound?” Dewey's philosophy is not against rationality as such but is rather at odds with the classical *rationalism* like that of Descartes and Spinoza because it is presupposing the “antecedent reality” as “fixed” before the inquiry even starts. In fact, he pragmatically



reconstructs the notion of rationality, and offers what I elsewhere called an “instrumentalist rationality.”<sup>12</sup> It is essentially the means-consequences relation with the core idea that an organism uses ideas as “instruments” (“means”) in order to resolve the problematic situation (“end”) it is in. Ideas are not “real” in this sense. They are *instrumental*, and are to be controlled by facts (and not vice versa). What is genuinely real is the situation which is problematic. That is my justification of the “reason” part.

- 62 What makes the reason “sound?” When an organism successfully applies ideas that it uses as “tools” to the problematic situation, and when the latter is resolved that makes those ideas “sound.” They “make sense” not because they are inherently “beautiful” in themselves, but because they “work.” They transform a previously precarious situation into a more stable one. How is the “sound reason” different from “common sense?” The above-mentioned explanation should have provided the evidence that the sound reason is essentially *pragmatic*. It starts with the *consequences* and treats ideas as *hypotheses*, and not as “fixed” and infallible data. Therefore, sound reason is fundamentally *critical*.
- 63 Common sense instead is mostly *uncritical*. What makes it uncritical? Well, it takes many things for granted. For example, let’s look at the commonsensical belief in the mind-body relation. Andrew S. Gordon and Jerry R. Hobbs (2011) focused on “commonsense (naive) psychology” with its emphasis on “the commonsense theory that non-scientists use to make everyday inferences, particularly with respect to the interpretation of natural language about the mind and the body.” In the end, the result they got was a theory that most resembled Descartes’ mind-body dualism as presented in his *Meditations* (Gordon & Hobbs 2011: 1-2, 6). This implies that common sense is still Cartesian. The latter methodology as well as metaphysics is Dewey’s arch enemy.<sup>13</sup> Another example comes from Dewey’s 1896 “Reflex Arc” article discussed above. Dewey claims that the “older dualism of body and soul finds a distinct echo in the current dualism of stimulus and response” (EW.5: 96). Such a dualism is totally *commonsensical*: “The ordinary interpretation would say that the sensation of light is a stimulus to the grasping as a response, the burn resulting is a stimulus to withdrawing the hand as response and so on,” and though it is the “rough practical way” to see things, “when we ask for the psychological adequacy the case is quite different” (*ibid.*: 97). Overall, such an “ordinary conception of the reflex arc theory, instead of being a case of plain science, is a survival of the metaphysical dualism, first formulated by Plato,” and as such, is “a mixed materialistic-spiritualistic assumption” (*ibid.*: 104).
- 64 On the other hand, since sound reason is more scientifically inclined, it thinks that Darwinian evolution is true because it is based on scientific evidence. Since Dewey’s own “emergent’ theory of mind” is Darwin inspired, sound reason would be more eager to accept Dewey’s own emergentist perspective on the mind-body relation, than the commonsensical religiously inspired Cartesian one. The same applies to the “reflex arc” discussion.
- 65 Finally, one could ask: “Who is the bearer of the ‘sound reason?’” Answer: the bearer of the sound reason can be anyone. Sound reasoner is not a mythical “common man.” It does not depend on the practical identity either. Sound reason is a *function* and the *method of intelligence*. Anyone who can think critically, who cherishes evidence, who is able to see a problematic situation as problematic, and starts to undertake actions in order to stabilize it, can be called a “sound reasoner.”

- 66 With such a modification, I think, this pragmatically reconstructed denotative method can be considered a good candidate for being genuinely empirical and scientific.
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## NOTES

1. Here, I use the word "deconstruction" in the wide sense as "the analytic examination of something (such as a theory) often in order to reveal its inadequacy" ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deconstruction](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deconstruction)). Thus, when I say "deconstruct," I mean it in a more general way like "to subject to rigorous analysis, as to reveal weakness or error" ([www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/deconstruct](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/deconstruct)). Therefore, I am using it more as antonym and antecedent to pragmatic "reconstruction." Once the problem (theoretical "construction") is identified, we seek to find its *origins*, i.e., what makes it as a problem. After doing that, we pragmatically "reconstruct" the issue, in order to fix the problem itself.

2. Such a view of the philosophical methodology can be found in Dewey himself. Thus, in chapter 2 of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey is talking about the "analytic dismemberment and synthetic reconstruction of experience" as the task of philosophy that he borrows from anthropology (LW. 1: 42).

3. To be discussed in section 2.3.

4. Paradoxically, the reason for Alexander's bifurcation of Dewey's method can be found in Dewey himself. Thus, Alexander cites Dewey's letter dating back to 1940: "I have come to think of my own position as cultural or humanistic Naturalism. Naturalism, properly interpreted, seems

to me a more adequate term than Humanism. Of course I have always limited my use of 'instrumentalism' to my theory of thinking and knowledge; the word 'pragmatism' I have used very little, and then with reserves." (Alexander 2014: 69).

So how to interpret this letter? Here, Dewey openly contradicts what he was saying in his *Experience and Nature*. My take on it is the following. (1). Since, *Experience and Nature* is a published work, and thus, was intended to be read by anyone, I take the view expressed there as having more authority than his private correspondence.

(2). Since Dewey's statement there is semi-biographical, I wouldn't treat his claim "I have always limited my use of 'instrumentalism' to my theory of thinking and knowledge" to be too seriously a reliable source as opposed to his officially published work because given the immense work he produced throughout his life, and given his own testimony that he is not very good with the description of his own philosophical development (See "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" [LW.5]), I still prefer to stay with my above-mentioned interpretation of Dewey's method as the "unified" one, and therefore, not to reduce Dewey's instrumentalism to just his "theory of knowing."

5. Although Dewey viewed his "immediate empiricism" as just another name for the pragmatism, and the scientific method, James, on the other hand, saw his "radical empiricism" as neither a scientific enterprise, nor his pragmatism, but rather as his *worldview*: "I give the name of 'radical empiricism' to my *Weltanschauung*." (James 1977 [1904]: 195).

6. One can also specify the *philosophical* origins of the "common man" idea in Dewey that is coming from his interpretation of Emerson. In his "Emerson - The Philosopher of Democracy" (MW.3: 185-92) Dewey is praising Emerson for his attempt to return philosophy to the "common experience of the everyday man" and it is by the "immediate life" of the latter that Emerson "tries every philosopher [...] even prophets like Plato and Proclus whom Emerson holds most dear, to the test of trial by service rendered the present and immediate experience" (*ibid.*: 188-9). That all of Emersonian "symbols of various uses" are "administered to the common soul" (*ibid.*: 189).

And again, Dewey sees Emerson as a philosopher of the *common man*: "Against creed and system, convention and institution, Emerson stands for restoring to the common man which in the name of religion, of philosophy, of art and of morality, has been embezzled from the common store and appropriated to sectarian and class use." (*ibid.*: 190). From this it follows that, "Emerson is not only a philosopher, but that he is the Philosopher of Democracy" (*ibid.*).

7. I tend to agree with Peter Godfrey-Smith (2002) that Dewey's "common sense realism" should not be articulated via the "mind-independence" thesis because it undermines Dewey's view on mind as a *social* function (although Godfrey-Smith thinks that Dewey is not a common sense realist overall). And I think that this only supports my idea that Dewey's "common sense realism" has a firmer foundation in Dewey's social/political commitment (i.e., that of "common man") than in just a strictly metaphysical one (like that of a "mind-independent reality").

8. In Leonov 2020, I am suggesting that what Dewey called "common sense" in his *Logic*, Husserl referred to as the "life-world" in his *Crisis*.

9. "Non-empirical method starts with a reflective product as if it were primary, as if it were originally 'given'." (LW.1: 19).

10. In fact, Dewey thinks that the tendency of the modern sciences to substitute "qualitative events" for the "older notion of fixed substances" is in agreement with the "attitude of naïve experience" (LW.1: 5).

11. Dewey himself viewed primary experience as a problematic situation: "A philosophy which accepts the denotative or empirical method accepts at full value the fact that reflective thinking transforms confusion, ambiguity and discrepancy into illumination, definiteness and consistency. But it also points to the contextual situation in which thinking occurs. It notes that the starting

point is the actually *problematic*, and that the problematic phase resides in some actual and specifiable situation.” (LW.1: 61).

12. See Leonov 2020.

13. Thus, Dewey is wrong when he claims that common sense/“naïve experience” sees mind and matter as “significant characters of events, presented in different contexts, rather than underlying and ultimate substances” (LW.1: 5). It seems to be rather exactly the opposite.

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## ABSTRACTS

In this paper, I critically approach the essence of Dewey’s philosophy: his *method*. In particular, it is what Dewey termed as *denotative method* is at the center of my attention. I approach Dewey’s denotative method via what I call the “genealogical deconstruction” that is followed by the “pragmatic reconstruction.” This meta-approach is not alien to Dewey’s philosophy, and in fact was employed by Dewey himself in *Experience and Nature*. The paper consists of two parts. In Part 1, I genealogically deconstruct the philosophical foundation of the denotative method: the doctrine of *immediate empiricism*. The latter was originally stated in Dewey’s 1905 seminal “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” article, and fully developed twenty years later in his *Experience and Nature*. I claim that Dewey’s immediate empiricism is essentially incompatible with his pragmatism (instrumentalism) and with pragmatism overall. In Part 2, I pragmatically reconstruct Dewey’s denotative method from the perspective of what I term as the “hermeneutic empiricism” which is grounded in Dewey’s 1896 “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” article. As opposed to the immediate empiricism’s main thesis “things are what they are experienced as,” the motto of the *hermeneutic empiricism* would be “things are what they are interpreted as”/“things are experienced what they are interpreted as.” The above-mentioned pragmatic reconstruction also leads to the transformation of the notion of “common sense” which is vital to Dewey’s method, into the notion of *sound reason*.

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