

Sense and Construction

The Development of Dewey's Theory of Meaning (1884-1903)

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ABBREVIATIONS

Citations of John Dewey's published works are to the thirty-seven volume critical edition published by Southern Illinois Press under the editorship of Jo Ann Boydston. Citations give text abbreviation, followed by volume number, year of publication and page number.

Series abbreviations for the *Collected Works*:

- | | | |
|----|------------------|-------------|
| EW | The Early Works | (1882-1898) |
| MW | The Middle Works | (1899-1924) |
| LW | The Later Works | (1925-1953) |

References to John Dewey's correspondence are to the electronic editions, *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-1952*, Vol. 1-4, edited by L. A. Hickman. Citations give the text abbreviation (CJD), followed by the number of the volume, the date of the letter and the names of the sender and the recipient.

Citations of John Dewey's lectures are to the electronic editions, *The Class Lectures of John Dewey: Volume 1: Political Philosophy, Logic, Ethics*, edited by D. F. Koch and The Center for Dewey Studies and published by the InteleX

Corporation. Citations give the text abbreviation, followed by the year in which the lecture was delivered and page number.

Abbreviations for selected texts:

- ItP *Introduction to Philosophy*, 1892, Syllabus of Course 5, University of Michigan, with Lectures Notes by John Black Johnston, pp. 26-75.
- LoE *Logic of Ethics*, 1895, University of Chicago, pp. 428-496.
- PE *Psychological Ethics*, Winter 1898, University of Chicago, pp. 1081-1332.
- ToL *Theory of Logic*, Autumn 1899, Winter 1900, and Spring 1900, University of Chicago, Class Lecture Notes by H. Heath Bawden, pp. 530-903.

Citations of John Dewey's 1897 lecture on Hegel are to *John Dewey's Philosophy of Spirit, with the 1897 Lecture on Hegel*, edited by J. Good and J. Shook, published by Fordham University Press, New York 2010, pp. 93-174. Citations give the text abbreviation (JDLH), followed by the year and page number.

Commentary on Logic of Hegel, Lecture Notes, University of Chicago, undated (probably 1897), unpublished manuscript, Joseph Ratner Papers, Center for Dewey Studies, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, 75 pages. Citations give the text abbreviation (CLH), followed by the year and page number.

Introduction

In a well-known passage of *Experience and Nature* Dewey criticized the tendency of philosophers to overemphasize the importance of the problem of truth. Having in mind the epistemological turn that American philosophy was undertaking, he stated that “[p]oetics meanings, moral meanings, a large part of the goods of life are matters of richness and freedom of meanings, rather than truth” (LW1: 307). By remarking the fact that our experience is an experience of enjoyment and trouble Dewey aimed at reminding his colleagues that the task of philosophy could not be reduced to an analysis of the conditions according to which it is possible to say that knowledge in general represents reality in general, provided that such an analysis is possible – and this is a point that Dewey was not disposed to concede to his interlocutors. Even though *Experience and Nature* has usually attracted the interest of critics for the discussion of the denotative method of philosophy contained in the troubled introductory chapter entitled *Philosophy and Philosophic Method*, it is first and foremost an attempt to outline a theory of meaning that could do justice to the richness and complexity of human experience.

Traditionally, the issue of meaning has been recognized to be at the center of the debate (both historical and theoretical) on pragmatism. As is well known, the history of pragmatist movement has been traditionally depicted as a contrast between two different ways of conceiving the pragmatic maxim: on the one hand, Peirce’s conception of it as an account of meaning; on the other hand, James’s more radical view of pragmatic maxim as the ground of a pragmatist theory of truth. Consequently, one would naturally expect that Dewey’s account of meaning has been object of much discussion, with the aim of discovering its

similarities and differences from Peirce's and James's formulations. Surprisingly enough, Dewey's theory of meaning has not received adequate attention¹.

It is very likely that the great attention paid to the pragmatist theory of meaning has been one of the main reasons for the lack of interest in this important feature of Dewey's philosophy. Dewey's mature theory of meaning revolves around the thesis that meaning is a natural event that originates in a communication situation involving two organism aiming at achieving a shared end. Now, even though Dewey's naturalization of mind is undoubtedly a significant contribution to a richer understanding of the nature of human experience, the theoretical ground of this extremely articulated position is the thesis that meaning is the relationship between antecedents and consequences. Human experience arises when an organism "learns to treat [a group of events] as signs of an ulterior event so that his response is to their meaning" (LW1: 140). Meaning, Dewey argued, is treating something as means to consequences. It is an universal rule that states that if some action is performed, some consequences will occur: "every meaning is generic of universal" since "a meaning is a method of action, a way of using things as means to a shared consummation, and method is general, though the things to which it is applied are particular" (LW1: 147). It is not difficult to see that this position is in deep continuity with Peirce's definition of the significance of an abstract or intellectual conception in terms of the "practical consequences" that "might conceivably result from the truth of that

¹ A few studies have been dedicated to the analysis of this aspect of Dewey's thought. In the majority of cases they have been concerned with the formulations expounded in the great works of his maturity. Particularly remarkable from this point of view is Kestenbaum's *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning* in which the author analyzes Dewey's concept of habit by confronting it with the phenomenology of Merleau Ponty (Kestenbaum 1977; for a critical discussion of Kestenbaum's approach see Rosenthal 1978; see also Kestenbaum 2002: chapter 7 and Rosenthal 1986). Very interesting is Garrison's seminal article *Dewey on Metaphysics, Meaning Making, and Maps*, in which the relationship between metaphysics and meaning is discussed and highlighted (Garrison 2005). More recently, Johnson has called attention to the possible applications of Dewey's theory of mind, meaning and experience to cognitive sciences (Johnson 2010). More interested in the historical reconstruction of Dewey's intellectual development is Alexander's *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature* (Alexander 1987). Explicitly devoted to the study of the process through which Dewey elaborated his understanding of experience and meaning is Shook's *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality* (Shook 2000). The recent book of Morse, entitled *Faith in Life: John Dewey's Early Philosophy*, is the first study wholly devoted to the analysis of Dewey's early theory of meaning. Even though I do not find Morse's concept of *modernism* – "the cultural condition or malaise in which we believe there is an unbridgeable separation between human meaning on the one side and brute, indifferent nature on the other" (Morse 2011: 5) – very appealing I obviously agree with his emphasis on the problem of meaning as crucial for understanding Dewey's philosophy.

conception" (Peirce 1878/1986: 266). As a consequence of the strong similarities between Dewey's and Peirce's theories of meaning, many interpreters have been therefore led to conclude that Dewey's reflections on that topic were substantially unoriginal in the sense of being nothing but a refinement and extension of Peirce's fundamental insight. Consequently, they have taken Dewey's theory of meaning for granted, and have used it to highlight other more controversial aspects of his thought – notably, his view of experience or his peculiar form of naturalism.

The general framework of the present dissertation is determined by the rejection of the fundamental premise of the argument, that is, the thesis that Dewey belongs to the pragmatist tradition. Indeed, even though it is usually maintained that it was the reading of James's *The Principles of Psychology* that prompted Dewey to abandon his early idealism in favor of a naturalistic and functionalist account of meaning and experience – which, in turn, paved the way for the formulation of his mature version of pragmatism –, in reality Dewey started his confrontation with pragmatism only after his move to Columbia University in 1904 (Shook 1995; for a general overview of the debate between idealists and realists in which Dewey became involved see also Hildebrand 2002: chapter 2 and 3). But at that time Dewey had already developed a consistent theory of meaning and experience. Consequently, it is not possible to explain Dewey's views on these matters by tracing them back to a supposed influence exerted on him by Peirce and James. This is a too simplistic way of dealing with the problem of Dewey's philosophical development not because such an influence was not real, but because it was not the motive that led him to embrace the position which characterizes his mature philosophy. Pragmatism represented only a factor that partially redirected the course of Dewey's thought by providing him new tools and ideas to tackle the traditional problems of philosophy. Consequently, an explanation along those lines does not explain why at a certain moment of his life Dewey became convinced of the partial validity of the pragmatist approach, as well as why he took so much time to become aware of the importance of Peirce's philosophy for his logical and educational thinking (Prawat 2000: 808-809).

The aim of the present dissertation is to clarify the genesis and structure of what is usually called – but I will partially distance myself from the standard use – Dewey's early theory of meaning, that is, the theory of meaning that Dewey elaborated in the first part of his life, before his decision to leave Chicago and

move to New York. So, even though Dewey's mature works lie completely outside the scope of our consideration, nonetheless by highlighting the process through which he developed his account of meaning and experience – an account that was similar enough to the one formulated by Peirce to convince his interlocutors to treat him as a pragmatist, the similarity between the two accounts being due to their common origin in post-Kantian and post-Hegelian philosophy – it is believed that a contribution to the understanding of his whole thought can be provided. The approach is historical and contextual. In order to clarify the novelty and originality of his philosophical position, special attention has been paid to the terminological variations that he introduced in the language used by his contemporary philosophers. The idea at the basis of this methodological choice is that any great conceptual change reverberates itself in the terminology employed by the author to express his views.

The thesis of the present work is that Dewey's naturalistic and functionalistic theory of meaning stems from a critical appropriation of some major themes of British idealism. On my reading, Dewey started his philosophical career as an idealist of a neo-Hegelian type. His first articles are philosophical exercises that imitate the style of the neo-Hegelians – in particular, Seth, Haldane, and Edward Caird – but do not possess any trait of novelty and originality. Starting from 1886, Dewey became more and more convinced that neo-Hegelianism was not a viable theoretical option: because of its panlogicism, a neo-Hegelian account of meaning does not take into consideration the activities of mind that make meaning possible. Therefore, Dewey developed a different standpoint – which he called 'psychological' – that enabled him to provide a satisfactory description of the constructive activity of the mind. However, Dewey never questioned what he considered the most precious insight of British idealism: the Kantian-inspired idea that the meaning of a thing is constituted by the relations that present sensations entertain with possible future sensations. According to Kant's theory of concepts, a concept is a rule that states how an object of a certain kind should be constructed. As his fellow idealists, Dewey followed Kant on this point, and tried to formulate a theory of meaning grounded on that conception of objectivity. Contrary to them, however, he tried to achieve his goal by working within the framework of scientific psychology. Dewey's *Psychology*, which appeared in 1887, is the result of his ambitious attempt to merge together British idealism and scientific psychology.

Immediately after the publication of that book, however, Dewey started realizing the theoretical untenability of his early account of meaning. As a consequence of the process of naturalization that psychology underwent in the last decade of 19th century, Dewey understood that he could not explain the structure of meaning by having recourse to an activity of the mind that is not describable in empirical and naturalistic terms. This would have entailed a bankruptcy of his project of developing a scientific philosophy, that is, a philosophy that could be in harmony with the most advanced scientific knowledge of the time. He tried therefore to find a way out of this difficulty by revising some of the basic ideas that were at the basis of his early theory of meaning. Dewey's idealistic account of meaningful experience revolved around two assumptions: on the one hand, the view that meaning is constructed by a synthetic act of the mind; on the other hand, the conviction that the aim of thought is to bring to light and make explicit the meaning only implicitly constructed in perception. The first tenet was directly or indirectly committed to some sort of metaphysical and 'spiritualist' psychology: the belief in a mind that acts 'beyond the curtain of consciousness', so to say, made it possible to explain why in perception human beings experience meaningful objects without being compelled to undertake a conscious act of thinking, but it seriously risked to relapse into a form of supernaturalism. Dewey wanted to preserve a constructivist account of meaning, but he was not disposed to accept the conclusions that follow from the adoption of a non-empirical theory of mind. So, he decided to drop his early views in favor of a weaker form of constructivism: according to this new paradigm, the agent that constructs meaning is not a mind but an organism. The objects of primary experience are experienced as meaningful in an immediate and unreflective way because their consequences are anticipated by the habits that the organism has acquired in his previous interactions with the environment. Being universal, habit is structurally identical to a rule of reason; being a natural property of an organism, its genesis is empirically ascertainable. In so doing, Dewey succeeded in translating constructivism in biological terms, thus showing that its validity as a model of explanation of meaning was not dependent upon the idealistic framework in which it had been originally formulated. As a consequence of this shift from idealism to naturalism – but this is a 'theoretical' consequence since the two movements took place at the very same time – he was eventually led to radically rethink the role of thought in experience. Dewey came to realize that thinking

could no more be conceived of as the process through which the imperfectly constructed meanings encountered in perception are brought to light and refined. The expressivist conception of thought was not intrinsically contradictory, but it could not explain the creative power that it is usually associated with the idea of thinking when thinking is traced back to the concrete activity of reflection performed by an organism in determinate circumstances.

The naturalization of immediate experience and the functionalization of thought are the two lines along which Dewey tried to reshape the theory of meaning which had been outlined by British idealists and which he had embraced in the first years of his philosophical career. The three chapters of the dissertation deal with the three different moments of Dewey's intellectual development. In the first chapter Dewey's early philosophy is taken into account. With this expression I refer to that period that goes from his first articles to the publication of the *Psychology* (1882-1887), that is Dewey's period of philosophical apprenticeship. The second and the third chapter analyze, respectively, Dewey's biological theory of meaning and his naturalistic account of thinking. The three chapters have a different structure. In the first chapter great attention is devoted to reconstructing the philosophical and psychological debates in which Dewey participated, in the conviction that the relevance of his thought is to be found in the way in which he tried to accommodate the various suggestions made by his interlocutors. Dewey's philosophy is therefore initially put in the background, and its elements of novelty are treated as points of convergence of different lines of thought. In the second chapter the focus of attention is narrowed to Dewey's original appropriation of the project of naturalization of the mind. By highlighting the particular way in which Dewey read James's *The Principles of Psychology*, it is believed that light may be shed on his highly personal understanding of what naturalism should be. Nonetheless, the greatest part of the chapter is dedicated to an analysis of Dewey's writings. The third chapter is almost exclusively centered on Dewey's effort to develop a consistent theory of logic: almost no attention is paid to discuss the differences with the other logicians of his time. The decision not to pay attention to the logical debate to which Dewey directly or indirectly referred in his writings is due to a twofold reason. On the one hand, Dewey himself decided not to take part in it: with the remarkable exception of the *Studies in Logical Theory* Dewey's reflections on logical issues can be found in the unpublished lectures that he delivered at the University of Chicago. On the other hand, the radical novelty of his approach

does not make it necessary to take into consideration the theoretical context within which it was located. Even though Dewey was obviously well informed about the different positions in the debate, he dramatically departed from them. It has therefore seemed sufficient to concentrate on the use that Dewey made of the various options available as sources to formulate his own views about the nature of thinking.

The difference in structure between the first and the other two chapters reflects therefore a substantial difference in the structure of Dewey's philosophy. The last decade of the 19th century represented the most creative period of his life: it is the moment in which Dewey realized that he could not rely on ready made solutions, but had to create his own method and approach. This change of attitude went hand in hand with a powerful change of terminology, which, in turn, adumbrated a deep change in the conceptual apparatus used to express the constructivist theory of meaning. Dewey gradually replaced neo-Hegelianism with a more complex and articulated set of concepts. James's biological theory of mind and Hegel's idealistic account of reality as the power of a thing to realize itself in concrete courses of action became the two foci of his inquiry into the nature of meaning. So, the sharp distinction between what has been called here Dewey's early philosophy (1882-1887) and the second and more creative phase of his philosophical career (1888-1903) is less arbitrary than it may appear at first glance: it reflects a real difference in the thing itself.

In any case, it would be meaningless to try to provide arguments and reasons to defend the theoretical and heuristic validity of all these interpretative concepts – the new conception of Dewey's early philosophy, the thesis that constructivism represents the thread that runs through Dewey's thought, the distinction between Hegel and Hegelianism, and so on. It would be meaningless because the measure of their validity is the consistency and accuracy of the historical reconstruction that results from their adoption as rules of inquiry. So, it is not necessary to dwell further upon them here. The final result will tell us more about their validity than any a priori consideration: "from their fruits ye shall know them". What I want to do in the remaining part of this introduction is rather to argue for the plausibility of two methodological choices that I have made and which go against the grain of the conventional approaches to the study of Dewey's 'early' philosophy.

The first one concerns the decision not to use Dewey's autobiographical essay *From Absolutism to Experimentalism* as a reliable source of historical

information. It is undoubtedly true that Dewey's sketchy description of his years of philosophical apprenticeship as a long drifting away from Hegelianism has been an important factor in determining the abandonment of the traditional image revolving around the conviction that Dewey's philosophy experienced a sudden, sharp, and quite inexplicable reversal somewhere between 1893 and 1896. This is a point that Shook has pointed out with great clarity (Shook 2000: 12). However, since I think that the traditional image does not hold us captive any more, it is possible to proceed further, and criticize a tool that has been very useful, but may now turn into a stumbling block for future research. Obviously, this does not compel us to maintain that the autobiographical reconstruction that Dewey outlined in that essay is utterly false. What I am suggesting is, rather, that Deweyan scholars should be more sensitive to the context in which Dewey wrote that article, and pay more attention to the goal that he was trying to reach. Originally published in a volume entitled *Contemporary American Philosophy* (1930), *From Absolutism to Experimentalism* is a militant article, in which Dewey wanted less to offer a faithful account of his personal philosophical development than to put forward an interpretation of the American tradition, and of his own place within it. Dewey's autobiographical sketch is vague, in the sense of being general enough to be minimally faithful to the real historical circumstances, and, at the very same time, plastic enough to be functional to the creation of a narrative able to contrast, on a rhetorical level, the widespread diffusion of epistemology in North America during the 1920's. *From Absolutism to Experimentalism* is an important historical document, but it gives some useful information about the wishes and aspirations of the mature Dewey.

The second choice is terminological. I wholly agree with Morse's project of understanding Dewey's early and 'intermediate' philosophy (1882-1903) "as a whole, taken on its own terms as a sustained philosophical endeavor" (Morse 2011: 1). It is for this very reason that I have suggested that Dewey's theory of meaning should not be labeled as pragmatist. Consequently, I have tried to avoid as much as possible to use any term of expression that was not used by Dewey himself in the writings under consideration. So, for instance, the concept of construction is used in the sense in which Dewey – and many others of his contemporaries – intended it: constructivism is the thesis that meaning requires some sort of constructive activity of the mind (see Parrini 2006: 2374 for the standard definition of constructivism). It does not refer, therefore, to contemporary constructivism, even though it is not excluded that some

similarities can be found between the two approaches (for a discussion of this point see the essays contained in Hickman, Neubert, and Reich 2009; see also Garrison 1997, Vanderstraeten 2002, and Hickman 1990).

It is difficult to deny that this terminological choice has some undesired consequences. It not only prevents us from seeing the actuality of Dewey's thought; it also deprives us of the possibility of more easily understanding his arguments regarding the nature of meaning. Indeed, it is very likely that our understanding of Dewey's effort to develop a consistent account of meaning would be enhanced if the concepts he used to achieve this goal were translated in more contemporary terms. It would be undoubtedly easier to recognize what was at stake in his confrontation with James if his non-reductionist version of naturalism were treated as an anticipation of John McDowell's 'liberal naturalism' (McDowell 1994). But it is believed that, even though extremely appealing from a theoretical point of view, such a translation tends to hide what is most important from a historical perspective. This is the fact that Dewey's philosophy is an ambitious attempt to reckon with Kant, Hegel, and Bradley, not with McDowell, Putnam, and Wittgenstein. In this sense, the terminology that Dewey used in the first part of his philosophical career – that is, before he became involved in the great debate over the nature of experience – reminds us of his belonging to the great tradition of post-Kantian idealism, in the light of which his thought has to be interpreted. To provide such an interpretation is the ultimate goal of the present work.

Chapter 1

Post-Kantianism and Psychology: Dewey's Early Theory of Meaning

1. *The Problem of Dewey's Early Philosophy*

1.1. The Traditional Interpretative Canon

Dewey scholarship has witnessed an impressive proliferation of studies in the last three decades. Many of the new contributions have dramatically altered the image of Dewey's philosophy elaborated under the influence of outstanding critics of his philosophical views as – to name only the most important ones – Russell, Santayana, Croce, and Reichenbach¹. The increase of interest in a more

¹ Russell's criticism to Dewey's theory of logic are formulated in the review of the *Essays of Experimental Theory* and in the contribution to the Schilpp volume in honor of Dewey, entitled *Dewey's New Logic* (Russell 1919; Russell 1939; but see Dewey's response to the latter in LW 14: 28ff.). For a masterful analysis of the Dewey-Russell debate, see Burke 1994; but see also Hager's review of that book and Burke's reply (respectively, Hager 1998 and Burke 1998). Reichenbach's objections against Dewey's theory of science and reality can be found in the opening pages of his *Dewey's Theory of Science* (Reichenbach 1939; see LW 14: 19-28; see also Godfrey-Smith 2010 for a discussion of this point). Santayana expressed his reservations about Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics in the famous review of the first edition of *Experience and Nature*, entitled *Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics*, originally appeared on the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1925 and then reprinted in first volume of the Library of Living Philosophers (Santayana 1925/1939). Dewey's response to

detailed account of that highly idiosyncratic approach to philosophical issues which goes under the label of instrumentalism has been due, in the main, to distinctively theoretical reasons. Indeed, the effort to reach a better comprehension of the fundamental traits of Dewey's thought has been motivated by the desire to test the validity of his philosophical conclusions in the light of the most recent debates. The unsaid assumption that lies at the basis of the ongoing attempt of actualizing Dewey's views is therefore the confidence that pragmatism in general, and Dewey's instrumentalist naturalism in particular, may provide fruitful insights for tackling in a new way some central problems in the fields of contemporary ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, etc.

Contextually, a more accurate comprehension of Dewey's philosophical development has emerged from this complex work of reassessment. A precious process of revision of the various errors contained in the first historical studies on Dewey's thought has run parallel to the quest for a sound theoretical account of his philosophy. Consciously or unconsciously, all Deweyan interpreters have been involved in the collective enterprise to provide a criticism of previous unilateral descriptions of Dewey's intellectual growth – what may be called the standard image of his drift away from his early idealism toward a mature form of functionalist naturalism. By simply elaborating new and original images of Dewey's philosophy, they have *ipso facto* subjected this standard picture to test. This work of clarification has undoubtedly contributed to pave the way for a substantial refinement of our understanding of Dewey's intellectual biography. In so doing, new light has been shed on the motives that led Dewey to take part in certain debates and to side with certain traditions of thought against certain others. This process of revision has therefore yielded a significant improvement in our capacity to evaluate the soundness and consistency of Dewey's theoretical proposal. Finally, by showing the essential interwovenness of historical reconstruction and theoretical interpretation, it has also drawn attention to some 'material' conditions that have to be met by any inquiry aiming at providing a

Santayana is found in *Half-Hearted Naturalism* and in *Experience, Knowledge and Value: A Rejoinder* (see, respectively, LW3: 73-81 and LW14: 15ff.). On the debate between Santayana and Dewey, see Dilworth 2003, Shook 2003, and DeTar 1996. Croce criticized Dewey's naturalistic aesthetic in his review of *Art as Experience*, originally appeared on *La Critica* in 1940, and then translated in English with the title *On the Aesthetics of Dewey* in 1948 (Croce 1940/1948). Dewey's harsh reply to Croce's review is in *A Comment of Foregoing Criticisms* (LW15: 97-100). Croce responded in *Intorno all'estetica e alla teoria del conoscere del Dewey* (1950), translated in English two years later with the title *Dewey's Aesthetics and Theory of Knowledge* (Croce 1950/52). Much has been written on the Dewey-Croce exchange: see in particular Douglas 1970, Alexander 1987 (introduction and chapter 1), and Colonnello and Spadafora 2002.

historical reconstruction of a philosophical system that present a degree of complexity similar to that of Dewey's.

The last remark can be clarified with a simple example. One of the most remarkable achievements in recent Dewey scholarship is the successful definition of a small number of books and articles held as representative of Dewey's whole philosophical position. The most outstanding example of this sort are the two volumes of the *Essential Dewey*, edited by Alexander and Hickman, and published in 1998 by the Indiana University Press. The book should be read as an attempt to fulfill the goal of establishing a consistent canon of Dewey's texts. It stands out as a sign that a shared agreement on a reliable interpretative canon has been, if not eventually reached, at least consciously pursued by scholars. The fact that Dewey's early works are totally absent from this collection – with the obvious exception of *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (1896), no article or excerpt of book written before 1900 is reprinted in the two volumes – is particularly interesting when read from this angle. It is a clear evidence that at the time of its publication, Dewey's first philosophical production had not yet received an adequate consideration². Dewey's early idealism was not perceived as theoretically relevant for contemporary interpreters. It was believed that historical research on the origins of Dewey's thought were not relevant for understanding his later formulations, and, *a fortiori*, for understanding the theoretical validity of his mature naturalistic instrumentalism.

Nevertheless, the lack of theoretical interest in Dewey's early philosophy has not prevented the constitution of what may be called a 'regional' canon valid for the study of his early thought, as well as a relatively independent field of research. Thanks to the cooperative work of many scholars, we now have a list of texts that can be assumed as accurately and faithfully representing the main themes and directions of Dewey's idealistic phase. The interpretation that naturally stems from this selection of texts has been formulated and codified in the works of Dykhuizen, Flower and Murphey, Coughlan – to name only the most important examples –, and further refined by many other Deweyan scholars that have written in more recent times (Dykhuizen 1973; Coughlan 1975; Flower and Murphy 1977). A clear and concise exposition of its distinctive traits has been

² The tendency of considering Dewey's early philosophy as relatively unimportant in the light of his later position has not completely disappeared, even though it has lost much of its original force. But for an intelligent defense of this approach to Dewey's philosophical production, see Frega 2006: 16ff..

provided by Shook in the opening pages of his watershed study on Dewey's philosophical apprenticeship entitled *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality*³.

Before moving to discussing in detail the traditional interpretation of Dewey's early idealistic philosophy, a preliminary remark can be useful. Leaving aside for a moment any consideration about the criteria of selection of material, great attention should be paid to the motives that have prompted many interpreters to define – no matter whether implicitly or explicitly – a canon of texts as the basis for their interpretation of Dewey's thought. Broadly speaking, the establishment of an interpretative canon is an evidence that the discipline has achieved a normative status. It means that it has become possible to tell what is live and what is dead in the subject-matter of the discipline. In the field of philosophical historiography, the quest for a normative dimension finds its most adequate expression in the definition of general guidelines providing the backbone of what is usually considered the standard picture of the philosophical views formulated by the thinker in question. Once a canon is established, the historical reconstruction that naturally follows from it plays a twofold role. On the one hand, it has a descriptive value, the goal of such a picture being that of providing a faithful representation of the main features of the position held by the author and – if seen from an evolutionary perspective – of the main coordinates of his intellectual development. On the other hand, it acts as a selective criterion in reference to which one is entitled to indicate which amongst the works of an author are important and which theses and arguments should be viewed as functional to the growth of his later philosophy. The interwovenness of normative and descriptive elements is what gives a canon its distinctive central position in historical analysis.

For this reason, when an attempt of analyzing Dewey's early philosophy is undertaken, it is necessary to confront with settled standards of interpretation and selection of material. According to the traditional canon of interpretation, a correct exposition of Dewey's early philosophy should start with a brief analysis

³ In this book, Shook devotes a long paragraph to discussing what he calls 'the problem of Dewey's early philosophy' (Shook 2000: 18-20; but see also Welchman 1989). It is very interesting to note that while interpreters have been unable to reach a consensus about the meaning and proper direction of Dewey's revision of his psychological idealism, there has been a substantial agreement on the correct interpretation of his early philosophical production (1882-1887). The difference in the degree of consensus indirectly corroborates the decision of treating the two periods as two relatively distinct phases of Dewey's intellectual growth.

of his first theoretically relevant article – that is, *Kant and the Philosophic Method* (1884) – where the results of his doctoral dissertation (now unfortunately lost) are presented. Then, one should discuss the *Psychology* (1887) and the couple of articles appeared on *Mind* the year before – *The Psychological Standpoint* and *Psychology as Philosophic Method* –, in which it is possible to read Dewey's criticism against the widespread, yet harmful tendency of severing psychology from philosophy. Finally, an analysis of his early philosophical production cannot be considered complete unless one touches on the article *The Ethics of Democracy* (1888) which provides evidence of Dewey's early interest in moral and social issues. These are the architraves of the standard picture of Dewey's early philosophy (see, for instance, Westbrook 2010). They have not been questioned even by those interpreters - like Shook and Good – who have recently tried to revise the traditional image of Dewey's thought by insisting, respectively, on the British and German sources of his thought and on the influence exerted on him by American Hegelianism. All the other Deweyan works can be arranged around this fundamental nucleus, their theoretical relevance being dependent on the perspective point adopted by the interpreter.

Broadly speaking, from this perspective one is led to emphasize the fact a) that the young Dewey was an upholder of idealism; and b) that his main interests concerned the formulation of a satisfactory version of idealistic philosophy that could live up to the most recent discoveries of what he called 'the new psychology', that is, the physiological inquiry into psychical facts inaugurated by Wundt. More precisely, it emerges that Dewey formulated a voluntaristic idealism grounded on the assumption that will has a sort of metaphysical primacy upon feeling and knowledge. He defined reality as the process through which the self becomes real: reality is the activity through which the universal factor of knowledge and the individual moment of feeling are brought in harmony in a conscious experience. This process is both practical and theoretical: the activity of knowing amounts to the reproduction in an individual consciousness of the objective content of universal consciousness. On the contrary, moral activity consists in the struggle for realizing in the external objective world the ideals that an agent creates in his mind. Contrary to Kant, in Dewey's thought there is no gulf between theoretical and practical reason, understanding and will. Activity is the encompassing whole.

On this reading, the insistence on the primacy of activity – which, incidentally said, it is what enabled the young Dewey to escape the dangers of

intellectualism – eventually led him to put great emphasis on ethical and social aspects of associated life. Dewey’s shift of attention to ethical issues is rightly considered a major event in his philosophical and intellectual development. Not only because it satisfied the religious anxiety and the sense of “inward laceration” which he had inherited from his Calvinistic upbringing (LW5: 153). But especially because the understanding that human beings are the real moral agents freed Dewey from all the difficulties stemming from the assumption of a meta-empirical and a-historical subject of activity. Moreover, it paved the way for the instrumentalist and naturalist turn that characterizes Dewey’s later philosophy, which is grounded on the idea that the whole activity of thought provides effective tools for redirecting and readjusting a problematic situation. Far from being a self-consistent form of absolute idealism, Dewey’s psychological and voluntaristic idealism contains the seeds that yield its overcoming.

1.2. *Why a Partial Revision of the Traditional Canon is Needed?* *A Preliminary Overview*

The brief reconstruction presented above is intended as a sketchy summary of the most important results reached in the ongoing debate on the significance of Dewey’s early philosophy – both in itself and in the light of his later philosophical production. Consequently, it avowedly sacrifices many of the aspects of the standard account of Dewey’s idealistic thought, as it has emerged from the collective works of Deweyan scholars. The simplification has been done consciously and in behalf of a concise exposition of the pivotal tenets of the standard picture. In any case, it is believed that that work of selection and abstraction does not entail a lack of its explanatory power. Rather the contrary, it will be argued in the following pages that it is precisely when this level of abstraction is abandoned that doubts can be casted upon the validity of the standard interpretation.

Taken at this level of generality, indeed, the standard picture is extremely satisfactory. There is no reason to deny that it represents a good description of what can be found in the books and articles that Dewey wrote in the first half-decade of his career. So, for instance, it would be utterly meaningless to question

the thesis that Dewey's heterodox version of idealism is strongly influenced by his interests in psychology, just as it would be meaningless to deny that from the very beginning Dewey's thought is ethically and socially oriented. Consequently, a *wholesale* rebuttal of the standard picture of Dewey's philosophical development would turn out to be a too radical move that probably nobody is willing to make. It is important therefore to better qualify the reason of my dissatisfaction with it. In my view, the problematic aspect of the standard representation concerns much less its *general* validity than its degree of accuracy. Indeed, even though a historical reconstruction along those lines is substantially correct, it seems that something relevant goes lost when Dewey's early philosophical production is interpreted in the light of general categories such as the opposition of philosophy and psychology, the critical relation between Kantianism and absolute idealism, or the substitution of Dewey's religious interests with a concrete ethical approach to human life. It is my conviction that when these categories are exploited as ultimate reading-keys, the real, concrete problems that the young Dewey intended to face are dealt with from a too large and too rough point of view.

Dewey's was not primarily concerned with finding his place in the contemporary debate. In reality, Dewey came to side with idealists against positivists, and to reject the idealistic distinction between philosophy and psychology, only because he realized that such an approach was functional to the formulation of a satisfactory account of meaningful experience. This was the aim that he set himself. I suggest, therefore, that Dewey's early philosophy should be read in the light of his efforts to find a consistent solution of this particular problem. The young Dewey was fascinated by the fact that experience reveals itself to be laden through and through with meanings – or, to use his own words, that knowledge and experience are “concerned with a world of related objects”, “with a universe of thing and events arranged in space and time” (EW2: 75). Extremely sensitive to the most recent results of psychological investigations, Dewey's early philosophical production was devoted to explaining why human beings have an experience of a meaningful world rather than of the bundle of disconnected sensations that psychologists accept as their starting point of their investigations. With ‘meaning’ Dewey referred to the fact that things are experienced as significant objects or, in less tautological terms, that a thing is recognized to be a determinate object as a consequence of the identification of its distinctive characters. More technically speaking, by raising the issue of meaning

Dewey called attention to the processes of synthesis and connection of material that make possible the construction of an object. Connection is mediation: to put two elements in connection means to mediate the (meaning of the) thing present with (the meaning of) the thing absent. Thus, an element can be said to be mediated if and only if “it is present as the result of a process of reasoning” (EW1: 182). In Dewey’s idealistic, post-Kantian conceptual framework, objectivity and meaning represented therefore two faces of the same phenomenon, that is, the process of mediation and inference that construct objective reality. By endorsing and progressively refining the widely accepted thesis that meaning results from mind connecting material, Dewey tried to establish a sound basis on which to formulate his constructivist proposal, which he put at the basis of his whole philosophical conception.

For these reasons, it is believed that Dewey’s early philosophy should be conceived as revolving around the issue of providing a sound account of meaning⁴. The reasons why Dewey considered the fact of meaning particularly remarkable are both historical and biographical. On the one hand, according to

⁴ This point is particularly problematic, and may raise some doubts about the legitimacy of this interpretative key. Indeed, it is impossible to condense in few words the theoretical richness that is intrinsically connected with Dewey’s notion of meaning, partly because it represents a sort of primitive concept that cannot be defined in terms of simpler notions but only in the light of the whole system to which it belongs, partly because it is not always easy to ascertain the philosophical significance that he attributed to the term. Dewey was not alone in using the term ‘meaning’ in a lax way. Indeed, at the time he published his first articles, meaning was not conceived of as a technical concept of philosophy. So, for instance, Green employs the word “meaning” in a non-technical sense in his *Prolegomena to Ethics*. The same holds true for Caird. They sometimes employ the term ‘meaning’ to indicate the fact of mediation, but it does not seem possible to detect a regularity in their use of the word (see, for instance, Green 1883: 14; Caird 1877: 282). As will be pointed out in 3.1.1. of the present chapter, it was Bradley who defined and established the philosophical significance of the term ‘meaning’. Consequently, it is only after reading *Principles of Logic* that Dewey could formulate the problem of philosophy as that of explaining the possibility of having a meaningful experience. This is not in contradiction with what has been stated above because there is an obvious continuity between the two approaches. In the first period of his philosophical career Dewey was actually committed to provide an account of meaning, but he did not have the terminology and the grammar to express his views. However, it is true that one should be careful in using the same term to refer to both the works written under the exclusive influence of Caird and Anglo-American idealists and the works written after reading and assimilating Bradley’s *Principles of Logic*. Indeed, if this distinction is not preserved, there is a serious risk of introducing a dangerous terminological ambiguity. Such an ambiguity is dangerous because it prevents from seeing the philosophical relevance of this terminological acquisition, which enabled Dewey to tackle in a systematic way the problems raised by British idealists. For this reason, in the next sections the term ‘objectivity’ or the expression ‘objectivity and meaning’ will be used to refer to what, starting from his *Psychology* (1887), Dewey named simply ‘meaning’ – that is, the fact of mediation that connects two elements in an encompassing whole.

what he declared in his intellectual autobiography *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*, the recognition of a widespread presence of meaning in human experience afforded a way out from the sense of inward laceration stemming from the religious assumption of an essential separation between self and world (LW5: 153). On the other hand, the issues concerning the nature of meaning and the relation between self and world were two of the points at stake in the Anglo-American debate between idealists and associationist psychologists, in which Dewey took part from the very beginning of his philosophical career.

Much has been written about Dewey's existential struggle with his Calvinistic upbringing⁵. Less interest has been devoted to the reconstruction of his intellectual background. Nonetheless, it seems plausible to argue that it is at the debate between idealists and psychologists that one who aims at placing Dewey's early thought in its proper context has to look. The next sections will be therefore devoted to discussing the nature of that debate. In particular, great attention will be focused upon the contrasts and controversies that arose around the account of mind as the proper basis of meaning and objectivity. Both idealists and associationist psychologists shared the conviction that meaning can be satisfactorily explained in terms of the connections drawn by a mind: for both traditions, the meaning of a thing is to be conceived as the set of relations that it entertains with other elements. They parted their ways on the correct explanation of the ultimate source of relations. The philosophical significance of their disagreement will be discussed at length, with an eye to determine their relation

⁵ It has been often remarked that Dewey's early philosophy should be read as a distinctively religious attempt to rationally defend Christian truths against all the criticisms raised against them as a consequence of the process of secularization that America was undergoing at the end of 19th century. An outstanding example of this kind of reading is Rockefeller's *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (Rockefeller 1991). More recently, Shook has dealt with the same issue in a long article entitled *Dewey's Naturalized Philosophy of Spirit and Religion* (Shook 2010). Even if it would be exaggerated to consider Dewey as a religious thinker, the religious dimension of Dewey's thought should not be underestimated since it represented one of the motor force of his intellectual development (see Kuklick 1985). From this point of view, it is at least worth remembering that both H. A. P. Torrey and G. S. Morris – Dewey's teachers, respectively, at the University of Vermont and at the Johns Hopkins University – endorsed a vision of philosophy as continuous with religion. In his obituary on Morris, Dewey emphasized precisely this point as the distinctive feature of his teacher's philosophy: "[I]n the fundamental principle of Christianity, he found manifested the truth which he was convinced of as the fundamental truth in philosophy – the unity of God and man so that the spirit which is in man, rather which is man, is the spirit of God" (EW3: 8). On the intellectual relationship between Dewey and Torrey see Westbrook 1991: 7ff. For an analysis of Morris's life and work, see Wenley 1917. Morris formulated his views about religion in *Philosophy and Christianity*, a series of lectures delivered in New York in 1883 (Morris 1883).

to the common theoretical ground provided by Kantian philosophy. Finally, in the last part of the section an attempt will be made to define a new, revised canon of Deweyan texts that integrates the results of these analyses into a consistent whole. It will be therefore outlined a different image of Deweyan philosophy, whose explanatory advantages consist in its capacity to shed light on Dewey's extremely complex relationships with his intellectual milieu, and to better clarify the originality of his philosophical proposal.

1.3. *The Theoretical Horizon of Dewey's Philosophical Reflection: A Historical Reconstruction*

1.3.1. A Clash of Options: The Debate between Idealists and Psychologists

Starting from the second half of 19th century, influential psychologists as Spencer, Lewes, and T. Huxley put out a radical challenge to the advocates of traditional philosophy (Dixon 2003: 180ff.). Strongly influenced by the theory of evolution (not necessarily in its Darwinian form), they maintained that far from needing to resort to the unscientific assumption of a metaphysical soul or a transcendental subject in order to explain the fact of meaning and objectivity, the latter has to be accounted for in psychological terms. They believed that as a consequence of the most recent physiological discoveries a new image of mind had become available, which asked for a new discipline (scientific psychology) and a new approach (evolutionary associationism) that could supplant philosophy as the science of psychical phenomena. Experiments conducted by Pflüger on decapitated frog had showed purposive behavior, traditionally assumed as the defining character of an organism, to be reducible to reflex actions. The most outstanding result of these experiments was the discovery that a decapitated frog can perform acts functional to the achievement of a purpose (Huxley 1874/1893: 222; Lewes 1879a: 324; Spencer 1855: 494ff.). If a drop of acid is put on the lower surface of a thigh of a decapitated frog, it will rub off the acid using the upper surface of the foot of the same leg. However, if the foot is cut off,

after some fruitless effort the decapitated frog will use the foot of the other leg to rub off the drop of acid. This fact was taken by *some* of the proponents of a study of the mind based on physiological research as a decisive evidence that the traditional distinction between mind and matter could be no more maintained⁶. Since complex purposive movements can be satisfactorily explained by being brought under the label of reflex action, it was considered possible to account for them without presupposing a mind independent from the body. This theoretical move opened the door to a scientific account of mind, which in turn paved the way for the formulation of an ambitious project of naturalizing experience that characterized a large part of British philosophy at the end of 19th century. Undoubtedly, this philosophical project was not particularly original. Nonetheless, it was perceived as a sound and promising research program because it was in conformity with the scientific *Zeitgeist* of the time. Its theoretical validity was strongly supported by the fact of being defensible on the basis of the theory of evolution: a naturalistic account of mind fitted in with the ambition to trait human life in all its richness as a series of natural events.

In open contrast to the reductionist approach advanced by positivists, British idealists objected a) that relations are the result of the activity of mind; b) that mind is not a natural thing, but a meta-empirical synthetic function that provides the conditions of possibility of meaningful experience; c) that the operations through which the synthetic activity is performed cannot be described in terms of conceptual framework of natural sciences; d) that human experience, insofar as is meaningful, is 'spiritual', in the technical sense of being radically different from events taking place in external nature. Consequently, British idealists were led to conclude that a sharp line of demarcation should be drawn between psychology and philosophy. This distinction was grounded upon the assumption of a much

⁶ It is important to stress that the correct interpretation of these experimental data was a matter of intense discussion amongst different schools of thought. Indeed, the reductionist reading defended by many psychologists and physiologists was not perceived as the only possible explanation of this sort of facts. Indeed, many psychologists believed that they could be easily accommodated within an idealistic framework. So for instance, Wundt elaborated a scientific version of idealism and voluntarism (Høffding 1922: 281; Diamond 2001: 61-62; see also Shook 2000: 71ff.). In America, a similar position was held by Ladd, a follower of Lotze, who did not accept the reduction of mental process to neurological activity (Ladd 1887; for a discussion of Ladd's debate with James on the possibility of psychology as a natural science see Chapter 2, 1.2.).

more fundamental distinction between mind as the proper dimension of meaning and brain as the locus of causal interactions⁷.

Thus, when Dewey started formulating his philosophical proposal, the question concerning the nature of meaning and objectivity was not simply one of the problems at the center of Anglo-American philosophical and psychological debate. Much more radically, it was the single theoretical issue whose solution

⁷ The last statement might appear controversial. Indeed, it has usually been maintained that British idealists in general refused to recognize explanatory power to the new psychophysiological science. Green's criticism of the theoretical assumptions at the basis of what he called popular or empirical psychology – both in its traditional version expounded by classical empiricists and in its modern forms defended by associationist psychologists – has been taken as clear evidence that the British followers of Kant and Hegel refused psychology *in toto* (see, for instance, Klein 2009: 417). Their rejection of psychology has therefore been conceived of as coextensive with their rebuttal of naturalization as a consistent research program. In reality, this reading does not seem to be completely correct. A more nuanced description of their view is probably more appropriate to do justice to the complexity of the argument they put forward. On the basis of textual evidence, it seems possible to maintain that many British idealists were not interested in arguing against the possibility of psychology and physiology as *natural sciences*. Rather, they were concerned with defending the less radical view that since psychology is a natural science, it cannot provide a general theory of rationality (Haldane 1883: 53). Psychologists assume the distinction between mind and world as a fact (Spencer 1855: 394; James 1878: 2). Then, they move from this assumption to the search for an explanation of psychical phenomena in terms of natural events happening either on the surface of the body (psychophysics) or internally (physiology). Therefore, psychology presupposes the existence of a meaningful world as its very condition of possibility. Its task is to look for relations among facts that already possess meaning in order to establish the laws that governs the life of the *individual* mind. Accordingly, psychical science is similar and complementary to physical science in the fact that it deals only with a limited part the whole reality. Insofar as it remained a special science with a well-defined subject matter and a clear method, psychology is a wholly legitimate intellectual enterprise even for the most radical idealists. "The fact that there is a real external world of which through feeling we have a determinate experience, and that in this experience all our knowledge of nature is implicit", Green wrote, "is one of which no philosophy disputes" (Green 1885a: 376). It is only when it came to be regarded as a possible substitute for philosophy that scientific psychology could not be accepted by idealists. This argument is clearly stated by E. Caird in his influential *Metaphysics*, written as an entry for the ninth edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica (1883) – an article that Dewey knew very well –, and accepted without reservation by many other idealists like Seth, Ritchie, and Watson. In this text, Caird wrote: "It is possible to have a purely objective psychology, i.e., a psychology which abstracts from the relation of man to the mind that knows him, just as it is possible to have a purely objective science of nature. Such a natural science of man, however, will necessarily abstract at the same time from the fact, that in man there is manifested that universal principle, in relation to which all things are and are known"(Caird 1883/1892: 449). The very same point is expressed by Seth who focused his attention on the intrinsic limits of every possible experimental approach to the study of mind: "the theory which derives knowledge from impressions is essentially a physiological theory which we, as spectators, form of the rise of knowledge in an organised individual placed in relation to a world which we already describe under all the categories of knowledge. What we observe is, strictly, an interaction between two things which are themselves objects in a known world" (Seth 1883: 22). For similar considerations, see also Watson 1881: 94-95 and Ritchie 1893: vi, 104.

substantially determined the overall character of any philosophical outlook whatsoever. In other words, the conflict between idealists and naturalist psychologists represented a clash of opposite philosophical options centering around the issue of finding an adequate account of the fact of the existence of mind in nature. Accordingly, it is at this level that different theoretical stances on very general themes like the essential features of reality or the proper nature of soul show their philosophical significance. The debate between psychology and philosophy can be then seen as a dispute between two incompatible accounts of the possibility of the cognitive apprehension of the properties that make up an object through which the world reveals itself to human mind.

In the light of what has been noted until now, it should not be particularly surprising that the need was felt to find a simple question that could set the stage of discussion for both philosophers and psychologists. This was identified in the Kantian problem of establishing the conditions of possibility of knowledge and meaningful experience. Undoubtedly, this was the way in which Green and, subsequently, almost all British Neo-Hegelian idealists (with probably the outstanding exception of Bradley, whose philosophical itinerary followed different, highly idiosyncratic routes) framed their radical opposition to the project of treating mind and meaning as natural phenomena that was contextually formulated by British psychologists⁸. But, and this is a point that

⁸ Contrary to what many interpreters seem to believe, the labels 'neo-Hegelian' and 'neo-Hegelianism' are far from being clear. I think that an imprecise use of these classificatory concepts has brought about considerable confusion about the nature of Dewey's early idealism. In particular, many interpreters seem to believe that there was something like a Neo-Hegelian school – composed of a group of thinkers sharing a certain number of theses – and that the young Dewey belonged to this group. In reality, British idealists themselves were well aware that there was nothing as a 'neo-Hegelian movement'. So, for instance, Green remarked in his review of Caird's *Philosophy of Kant* [evidently, *A Critical Account of the Philosophy of Kant*]: "[t]he title 'Hegelian' is rather wildly thrown about nowadays, and has naturally fallen into some disrepute. No one who by trial has become aware of the difficulty of mastering, and still more of appreciating, Hegel's system, would be in a hurry either to accept the title for himself or to bestow it on another" (Green 1877/1888: 129). This is a point that deserves particular attention. British idealists believed that Hegel's philosophy represented the correct standpoint from which to explain the nature of reality. In this sense, they all believed Hegel's absolute idealism to be the coronation of modern philosophy. However, they were not interested in simply repeating what Hegel had said. They were convinced that if Hegelianism is true, it must be possible to translate it in contemporary words, and use its concepts and methods to solve contemporary problems. This is the point that Caird made in his prefatory remarks to the *Essays in Philosophical Criticism*: "The writers of this volume agree in believing that the line of investigation which philosophy must follow, or in which it may be expected to make most important contributions to the intellectual life of man, is that which was opened up by Kant, and for the successful prosecution of which no one has done so much as Hegel [...]. The work of Kant

deserves the greatest attention, it was also the perspective point that many psychologists conceived of as the most adequate to emphasize the theoretical soundness of their position.

Lewes's widely influential *Problems of Life and Mind* is full of references to Kantian philosophy. The aim of this confrontation with Kant is twofold. First of all, it concerns the necessity to dispose of the latter's well-known objection that psychology cannot "become a science of observation and experiment" because of the impossibility of fulfilling the essential conditions of scientificity (Lewes 1879: 84 ff.). As is evident, psychologists cannot isolate and recombine at will the elements of inner observation. According to Kant, such a limitation could not help frustrating any attempt to apply an objective method to the study of mind. Lewes countered this powerful charge with an articulated objection composed of a factual consideration and a theoretical argument. First of all, it is important to

and Hegel, like the work of earlier philosophers, can have no speculative value except for those who are able critically to reproduce it, and so to assist in the sifting process by which its permanent meaning is separated from the accidents of its first expression. And such reproduction, again, is not possible except for those who are impelled by the very teaching they have received to give it a fresh expression and a new application". And then, referring to the present situation of English philosophy, he explained: "Valuable as may be the history of thought, the literal importation of Kant and Hegel into another country and time would not be possible if it were desirable, or desirable if it were possible. The mere change of time and place, if there were nothing more, implies new questions and a new attitude of mind in those whom the writer addresses, which would make a bare reproduction unmeaning. Moreover, this change of the mental atmosphere and environment is itself part of a development which must affect the doctrine also, if it is no mere dead tradition, but a seed of new intellectual life. Anyone who writes about philosophy must have his work judged, not by its relation to the intellectual wants of a past generation, but by its power to meet the wants of the present time" (Caird 1883a: 2; but see also Royce 1885: ix-x, and Bradley 1883: vi for similar considerations). Consequently, the unity of the neo-Hegelian movement is a sort of family resemblance, where the resemblances among the various neo-Hegelian positions are due to their common derivation from Hegelian philosophy. One of the merits of Shook's *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality* is precisely that of having criticized the wrong historiographical thesis that neo-Hegelian movement – or absolute idealism – can be "neatly pinned down and categorized" (Shook 2000: 21). Correctly Shook has concluded that it is not possible to maintain that Dewey was "a typical absolute idealist" for the reason that "that creature is mythical" (Shook 2000: 21). I agree with Shook on both the points. However, I think that the labels 'neo-Hegelian' and 'neo-Hegelianism' can be legitimately employed when it is made clear that they are used to refer to the group of philosophers who contributed to the collective volume *Essays in Philosophical Criticism*. More precisely, I will use 'neo-Hegelian' to indicate all those who believed that the aim of philosophy should be that of providing a criticism of categories (Haldane 1883: 51ff.; Seth 1883; see above 2.1. and 2.2.). So, according to this reading, Haldane, Caird and the Seth before the publication of *Hegelianism and Personality* (1887) are neo-Hegelian philosophers, while Green and Seth post 1887 are idealists but not of a neo-Hegelian kind (on this point, see Stern 2009: chapter 4, and in particular 127ff.). The distinction between British idealists and neo-Hegelians seems to me to be useful in bringing to light an important aspect of Dewey's philosophical growth, that is, the anti-neo-Hegelian character of his philosophical idealism (see above 2.2.).

note that psychological data are not in principles more internal and private than any other vital function or observable fact (Lewes 1879: 68-69). Knowledge has to do not with the faithful depiction of bare facts, but rather with the search for regularities holding amongst the elements. This anti-representationalist conception of knowledge – which presents many points of contact with Peirce’s pragmatic maxim – enabled Lewes to avoid the myth of subjectivity. An object, Lewes argued, is known in some of its qualities when “we can, from past experience, *foresee* what its effects will be” (Lewes 1879: 69). In the case of psychological explanations, “[t]he psychologist interprets certain visible facts as the signs of invisible feelings, just as he knows that sugar is sweet and that dogs bite” (Lewes 1879: 69). What prevented Kant from realizing that psychology can become a rigorous natural science was precisely his unfortunate commitment to a wrong and outmoded theory of knowledge. In any case, Lewes remarked, differently from the past the consistency of Kant’s objection can be now tested on sound empirical basis rather than on purely a priori, rational ground. It is a fact indeed that its theoretical plausibility has been largely undermined by the success of the new physiological psychology. Consequently, in the light of the most recent experimental evidences Kantian criticism turns out to be either a radically skeptical challenge to any form of knowledge or a self-refusing argument whose contradictory reveals the falseness of at least two of its main premises. Lewes argued that “it was open to [Kant] to regard Mind as a function of organism”, but he rather chose to remain committed to a pre-evolutionary view of mind (Lewes 1879:176). When mind comes to be seen as a wholly natural event and, consequently, psychology becomes a branch of biology, all the prejudices against the availability of a scientific explanation of mental phenomena lose their effectiveness (Lewes 1879: 70).

This remark leads directly to the second motive at the basis of Lewes’s willingness to reckon with Kant. Lewes’s explicit aim was to show that transcendental philosophy should be substituted with empirical psychology: the starting point of this contention is the realization that evolutionary thought provides a satisfactory account of the “*a priori* constituents of mind” in terms of inherited tendencies shaping individual experience (Lewes 1879: 171; see also Spencer 1855: 580; on this point, see Tjoa 1977: 125). If this is true, Lewes argued, there is no need to assume the existence of a priori forms of intuition and rules of

reasoning to account for the meaningfulness of experience⁹. What is needed, rather, is a scientific inquiry into the concrete, biological conditions that constitute experience as a natural event. When seen from this perspective – that is, from the point of view of a thorough naturalization of mentality – scientific psychology and transcendental philosophy stand out as two disciplines sharing the same subject-matter, but differing in their paradigms, methods of research, and, in the last analysis, heuristic capacity.

According to Lewes, transcendental philosophy is still committed to a too static view of mental structures. The latter led Kant to the conclusion that the existence of a mature, normal, and developed mind is to be admitted as a *fact* that philosophical reflection should take for granted (Lewes 1879: 171-172). In addition, transcendental philosophy relies upon the conviction that a sharp distinction can be drawn between a priori and a posteriori, thus accepting the highly controversial thesis of the pre-existing reality of the a priori machinery of the transcendental subject. So, by consciously endorsing these theoretical options, Kant limited the possibility of explaining meaning and objectivity as the defining characters of human experience. It is evident, Lewes charged, that is not particularly informative to say that the fundamental features of experience can be explained by being traced back to categories and forms of intuition that, in reality, are nothing but abstractions from the concrete life of an organism. In so doing, Lewes detected a fundamental conceptual confusion at the root of Kant's transcendental project: this amounts to the belief that postulated laws of thought

⁹ Lewes concisely expressed what he believed was Kant's misunderstanding of the role of a priori elements in the constitution of experience with the following words. "No physiologist will deny that the organism has an inherited structure which causes it to react in particular ways, and that this structure has been determined by ancestral modifications; that is to say, ancestral modes of reaction help to fashion the individual modes of reaction, and the stored-up wealth of collective experience enriches the experience of succeeding generations. It is in so far the condition of possible experience for the individual that without it his reactions would have been different. Kant first separates Experience from the concrete facts of which it is the abstract expression, detaches it from the organism and the modes of reaction which belong to the inherited structure, and then argues that without the modes of reaction such as Space and Time represent, no experience is possible. Finding that these general Forms of Sensibility cannot be given in individual sensations which presuppose them, he argues that they cannot belong to the sensations, nor to the sentient mechanism, ergo they must be a priori constituents of Mind" (Lewes 1879: 173). It is worth noting that the naturalization of a priori elements of experience represented one of the standard moves made by the critics of transcendental philosophy. The *locus classicus* is, obviously, the last chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*, entitled *Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience* (James 1890: Vol. II, 617ff.).

can be taken as “the conditions and determinations of the concrete phenomena from which [they] are abstracted” (Lewes 1879: 174).

On the contrary, scientific psychology aims at showing the concrete genesis of every supposed ‘transcendental’ category of thought or form of intuition. Since it looks for a strictly natural explanation of experience, it is much more attentive to the manifold possible deviations from normality that can be discovered in history (for instance, through the study of primitive societies) and in everyday life (pathologies, cases of madness, etc.). Consequently, Lewes concluded, scientific psychology represents a substantial advancement compared to transcendental philosophy for what concerns both its scope and its methodological awareness. On the one hand, it is characterized by a greater degree of scientificity because of its more refined comprehension of what a scientific explanation should be. On the other hand, it aims at achieving a satisfactory account of every possible element and constituent of experience, thus going beyond Kant’s uncritical acceptance of certain a priori forms of understanding and sensibility as bare facts not in need of explanation.

1.3.2. *Kant at the Crossroads of Psychology and Philosophy*

As is evident, Lewes’s reflections on the theoretical status of psychology as a science were conducted having Kant’s transcendental philosophy in mind. In the light of what has been said until now, however, it seems possible to raise an objection against the assumption from which we set out at the first, namely the assertion about the *centrality* of Kantian philosophy in the philosophical and psychological debate that took place in the Anglo-American intellectual world in the last two decades of 19th century. Indeed, even though it is not possible to deny that Kantian philosophy was greatly discussed at that time, one would be tempted to say that Lewes’s confrontation with Kant and, *a fortiori*, Neo-Hegelian British tradition was exclusively polemical, and that no room was left for a true and fruitful convergence between the two perspectives. It may seem, in other words, that since Lewes held that no real point of contact could be found between Kantianism and scientific psychology, because the latter should be substituted with the former, no real explicatory gain is achieved by insisting on their supposed common Kantian derivation. On this alternative reading, scientific empirical psychology and German idealism, both in its Kantian or

Hegelian version, are to be viewed as two radically incompatible approaches to the very same problem of explaining human experience.

In truth, the scenario was more complex than it may appear at first glance, and a brief look at Lewes's argument reveals that his appraisal of Kantianism was extremely articulated and, what is more important, not completely negative. It is true that in *Problems of Life and Mind* Lewes explicitly admitted that the maintenance of a transcendental perspective could not be accepted from the empirical point of view that he was willing to defend. However, he also implicitly recognized that some aspects of Kantian philosophy deserved to be preserved even in a wholly different theoretical framework. In particular, the constructivist strand that lies at the core of transcendental project – being the latter just one of the forms in which the former can be formulated – constituted, in Lewes's view, a reliable philosophical thesis. Consequently, one seems entitled to argue that Kantian constructivism – the idea that the objects of experience are constructed through a synthetic act of the mind – represented the general theoretical horizon in the light of which it became possible to account for the fact of meaning¹⁰. Therefore, it also represents – from a historiographical point of view – the theoretical horizon in the light of which it becomes possible to understand the reasons of the divergences existing between the two different

¹⁰ That constructivism was the general theoretical platform of empiricist explanation of meaning is at least partially proved by the following quotations. In his *Problems of Life and Mind* Lewes wrote: "For what is a Sense? It is an organ which indirectly tells of the outer world, as that outer world directly affects as through it. We do not feel objects, we construct them out of feelings. Every sensation is a sign; and the sign alone is at first present in Consciousness, though dragging with it oscillating neural units, which may easily sweep from this oscillating obscurity into the full energy of Consciousness, and then what is signified gradually emerges in Feeling" (Lewes 1879a: 346). And a few pages later he added: "It has been explained how we become conscious of Sensations and project them outside of us; but how do we become conscious of Thoughts and project them? The fact that we regard all our sensations as existing outside of us and consider them the qualities of objects, has its analogue in the fact that we consider ideas also to be phantoms passing before the Mind ; and if we do not attribute to these ideas an existence in the external sphere, we nevertheless project them as mental objects and treat them as if they were somehow distinct from the Ego which constructs and contemplates them" (Lewes 1879a: 346). Compare it with what Spencer said about the construction of our perception (consciousness) of space in his *The Principles of Psychology*: "And then, to the argument that whether extension is a form of thought or not, our inability to conceive ourselves as ever being without it, disables us from analyzing it, I reply, that though we may be disabled from analyzing it directly we may still remain able to analyze it indirectly. Though, in any subjective examination of our mental processes we may fail in finding any anterior elements of thought out of which to construct the idea; yet, by examining mental processes objectively we may gain the means of conceiving how our own consciousness of space was originally construct" (Spencer 1855: 231).

philosophical proposals. When seen from this perspective, indeed, the almost universal adherence to some sort of constructivism shows itself to be a much more relevant aspect than the contraposition on the particular ways of declining this fundamental insight. Consequently, two different aspects can be identified as being at stake in the claimed centrality of Kant's philosophy for the debate between psychologists and British idealists: on the one hand, the fundamental insight that objects, insofar as they are part of meaningful experience, are constructed; on the other hand, the problematic assumption, endorsed by Neo-Kantians and openly rejected by psychologists, that, to be consistent, constructivism is to be formulated in meta-empirical terms. Because of their importance in shaping Dewey's philosophical outlook, both aspects deserve to be taken into careful account.

Starting with the second point first, it is evident that the highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Kantian philosophy advanced by Lewes – as well as by many other psychologists of the time – could not pass uncriticized. It goes without saying that an interpretation of transcendental philosophy along these lines is extremely controversial from a theoretical point of view. But what is particularly worth remarking here is that it was perceived as a wholly unsatisfactory image of Kantian philosophy also by many of Lewes's contemporaries. It relies upon the idea that Kant's transcendental project should be read as providing something like a psychological theory of mind, a point that Neo-Hegelian idealists were not willing to coincide to their opponents¹¹.

A debate therefore arose about the correct interpretation of the very sense of Kant's transcendental turn. As a corrective of what they deemed to be a defective image of transcendental philosophy, neo-Hegelians drew a clear distinction between a psychological and a metaphysical reading of transcendental strategy, holding that only the latter is a faithful representation of Kant's views. The first one – that is, the one defended, amongst the others, by Lewes – is to be considered as an illegitimate interpretation of Kant's position, even if they were prone to admit that it is far from difficult to single out some passages from the *Critique of pure Reason* that can support it. According to their argument, the

¹¹ Neo-Hegelians criticisms to Lewes's psychological reading of Kant can be found clearly formulated in Watson's *Kant and His English Critics* (Watson 1881: 92ff.). But see also Green's *Mr. Spencer and Mr. G. H. Lewes: Their Application of the Doctrine of Evolution to Thought* (Green 1885a: 442ff.). For a general overview of this debate, with a particular eye on Watson's and Caird's objections, see Moretti 2006.

reason of such a confusion can be traced back in part to Kant's unfortunate expository method, and in part to his incapacity of freeing himself from some fundamental dogmatic prejudices – those prejudices “from which the Kantian criticism was ultimately destined to set us free”, but in which he unfortunately remained entangled¹² (Seth 1883: 19; Caird 1877: 510; see also Green 1883: 137; see below 2.1).

Neo-Hegelians charged psychological interpretation of transcendental machinery with having wholly misunderstood the spirit of Kantian philosophy. In this spirit, E. Caird and Seth put great emphasis on the fact that in the first *Critique* Kant provisionally accepts concepts and theses that are subjected to a powerful process of criticism and revision in the course of the analysis. In particular, they called the attention to the fact that even though a fully satisfactory correction of Kant's dualistic assumptions will be eventually provided only by Hegel's absolute idealism, many of the fundamental tenets on which the conclusions reached in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* depend – above all, the distinction between understanding and sensibility, the thesis that knowledge is merely phenomenal, the exploitation of a psychological language¹³ – are in fact

¹² With the greatest clarity, Seth stated that the Kantian philosophy is not a psychology in his important *Philosophy as Criticism of Categories*. He wrote: “[i]f now it be asked, by what right Kant draws the line exactly where he does, and cuts off from knowledge every thing but a spatial world of interacting substances, the answer must be that his conclusion depends ultimately on his uncritical acceptance of the dualistic assumption of preceding philosophy. We express the same thing in another form, when we say that the result is due to the attempt to construct a theory of knowledge from the standpoint of psychology. This standpoint brings with it the distinction between sense, as the source of knowledge, and understanding, as a faculty of comparing, connecting, and separating, the material supplied by sense. This is Locke's distinction, and it is Kant's too”. And then he added this all-important qualification: “Kant minimises the contribution of sense; he speaks of it on occasion as a mere blur, and in itself no better than nothing at all. But the amount referred to sense does not affect the principle of the distinction; so far as it is made in this form at all, its consequences will be essentially the same either with Hume, the denial that (so far as we know) any real world exists, or with Kant, the denial that such a world can ever be revealed to us by knowledge. Hence the importance of observing that the distinction is not a deduction from the theory of knowledge, but a presupposition drawn from another sphere” (Seth 1883: 18-19). Similar considerations are expressed in the very same years by almost all the other Neo-Hegelians. See, for instance, Watson 1881: 92ff..

¹³ The recognition of the expository dimension of Kantian thought did not prevent neo-Hegelian interpreters to see that there was something important at stake in Kant's adoption of psychological language. So, for instance, Seth was far from believing that Kant's exploitation of psychological language was theoretically unproblematic. On the contrary, he believed it responded to a precise theoretical need. Seth wrote: “[i]t is to be regretted, therefore, that Kant frequently described his undertaking as a criticism of faculties, instead of keeping by the more comprehensive and less misleading title (which, as we have seen, he also employs) of a criticism of conceptions.

powerfully modified in the transcendental deduction of categories. Since Lewes and many other critics of Kantianism do not manage to appreciate this distinction, their criticism of Kantian transcendental project completely misses the mark. Kant's unfortunate expository choices – which goes hand in hand with his concomitant reliance upon pre-critical assumptions – should not make us overlook the genuine core of critical philosophy, which consists in the discovery of the conditions upon which experience is founded¹⁴ (Seth 1883: 15).

Neo-Hegelians came up with a mature conception of transcendental method. According to their interpretation, the aim of transcendental philosophy is to criticize the legitimacy of every category that contribute to the constitution of knowledge. They saw its criterion consisting in showing the validity of these fundamental conceptions in the light of the whole system of experience (Seth 1883: 18; Haldane 1883: 43ff.). Consistently, they rightly concluded that an analysis of transcendental conditions is far from being a psychological analysis: rather, it is an attempt to single out the categories that make it possible to have knowledge of a meaningful and ordered experience, of which mental states are an important yet not exclusive part. This conception of transcendental method was made possible by Kant's characterization of experience not as a bundle of private, subjective events taking place in an individual mind, but as a whole coinciding with reality. This fundamental thesis – which is nothing but the statement of a consistent idealistic standpoint – was usually referred to as the doctrine of the relativity of knowledge or, to use Caird's own words, "the

Unfortunately this is not merely a verbal inconsistency; it represents two widely different views of the critical philosophy" (Seth 1883: 16; see also Caird 1877: 373ff.). Neo-Hegelianism was therefore conceived of by its very upholders as an attempt to separate the valid claims of critical philosophy – according to which objectivity is constructed by the mind – from the invalid ones – the view that there are distinct faculties of mind and that their nature should be accounted for in psychological terms.

¹⁴ Seth explicitly discusses the point in his *Philosophy as Criticism of Categories*. "It is supposed, for example, that the whole question turns upon the mental origin of certain conceptions, and this, as has been seen, is a fact which may very properly be denied. It appears to be forgotten amid the pros and cons of such an argument, that mental origin is in itself no clue to the function of a conception or the range of its validity, unless we connect our assertion with a whole theory as to the nature of experience in general. This, it must be allowed, Kant has not neglected to do; and his ultimate proof of the necessity of conceptions like substance and cause is simply that without them experience would be impossible. They are the most general principles on which we find a concatenated universe to depend. Their mental origin falls in such a deduction, completely into the background; and Kant is only obliged to assert it because of the absolute opposition which he set up between the necessary and the contingent, and the presupposition with which he started that experience can give us nothing but contingency. The conceptions derive their necessity from their relation to experience as a whole" (Seth 1883: 15-16).

relativity of thought and being" (Caird 1877: 404; on the general significance of this thesis for idealistic philosophy, see Mander 2011: 54 ff.). In the light of the transcendental revolution that Kant initiated and Hegel brought to its natural conclusion in the absolute idealism, experience and reality stand out as wholly coextensive terms. This is a thesis with which Dewey was well acquainted. S. Morris had argued in his *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. A Critical Exposition* that a philosophy that lives up to the epistemological and ontological standards elaborated by the post-Kantian German idealism cannot help acknowledging that science of being and science of knowledge reduce to one (Morris 1882: 20). Experience is the *locus* in which everything that has meaning has to reveal itself (Haldane 1888: 586).

Neo-Hegelians' conception of transcendental philosophy was therefore radically different from the view criticized by Lewes and other psychologists. Not only and not primarily because they denied the legitimacy of a psychological reading of the transcendental apparatus, but especially because they aimed at answering different questions¹⁵. Neo-Hegelian idealists were much less concerned with the explanation of the possibility of concrete experience than with the justification of the various theoretical frameworks through which an account of phenomena (scientific, moral, aesthetic) can be provided. However, the difference between the two approaches was not always clearly perceived by the participants to the debate – and, in particular, by the members of the

¹⁵ As is evident, neo-Hegelian interpretation of the transcendental project was far from being accepted as the standard reading. In particular, the assumption that Kantian transcendental project finds its perfect realization in Hegel's absolute idealism was perceived as extremely problematic. Neo-Hegelians defended their interpretative hypothesis at two different levels, one historiographical and the other distinctively theoretical. Leaving aside the second form of justification for a moment, since it will be discussed at length in the following pages, some brief remarks will be made here concerning the use of historiographical models to support theoretical positions. Neo-Hegelians provided a reconstruction of the historical development of German philosophy from Hegel to Kant that presents the different philosophical proposals formulated by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel as a progressive refinement of Kant's original intuition – that is, the idea that mind is the source of every possible relation and, thereby, the ultimate condition of possibility of meaningful experience. In addition, since in idealist circles it was believed that Green had shown beyond any reasonable doubt that Kantian philosophy was the natural solution of the skeptical challenge implicitly raised by Locke and explicitly formulated by Hume, it was rather natural for neo-Hegelians to see in Hegel's thought the coronation of modern philosophy. Caird's *Hegel* is probably the most outstanding example of this way of reading the history of modern philosophy (Caird 1883: chapter 6). The continuist historiographical account paved the way for the definition of an ambitious theoretical position that saw in Hegel's criticism of Kant the elaboration of the conceptual tools necessary to correct the dualism characteristic psychological science and dogmatic philosophies.

psychological school, who were willing to rule out the very possibility of idealist methods of investigations. The difficulty from the psychological side of realizing that the two approaches aimed at different ends was due to the fact that both dealt with the same subject-matter – that is, experience, perception, conception, etc. This identity of subject-matter brought about great conceptual confusion. Indeed, even though they were engaged in different theoretical enterprises, it was natural for psychologists and philosophers to employ the same terminology. Far from being the result of an easily avoidable conceptual confusion, this terminological conflation was grounded, so to say, in the thing itself. It was evident to both parties that experience, perception, conception, and other mental states can be accounted for both ‘subjectively’ and ‘objectively’ or, to use a more technical language, both from the point of view of the genesis and from the point of view of validity¹⁶. At the very same time, however, they were not wholly sure that the two approaches talked of the same thing. Consequently, neo-Hegelians’ insistence on the importance of conceiving transcendental philosophy as a criticism of categories was functional to defining the task that philosophy should undertake to become a truly scientific discipline. On their reading, the distinctive goal of transcendental analysis consists in the discovery of the theoretical assumptions that are *immanent* in any act of knowledge. It is not concerned with discovering the processes of the individual mind that give raise to individual experience.

All these differences notwithstanding, however, one should not overlook the fact that idealists and associationist psychologists agreed on the fundamental constructivist thesis that for a thing to be a known object – that is an object of meaningful experience – it has to be somehow constructed by mind. While British idealists followed the standard Kantian view according to which the

¹⁶ The fundamental duplicity of psychical states was stressed very neatly by Green in the first book of the *Prolegomena to Ethics*, entitled *Metaphysics of Knowledge*. In the second chapter, devoted to analyzing in concrete the fundamental features of human experience, it is remarked that the terms “knowledge, conception, perception” can refer both to “events in our mental history, the passing into certain states of consciousness, as well as that of which in those states we are conscious, the content and object of consciousness” (Green 1883: 62). In other words, it is only when the distinction between genesis and validity is blurred that it becomes possible to argue that only the psychological account of experience is acceptable. Obviously, psychologists were willing to accept such a radical conclusion because they aimed at reducing philosophy to psychological, empirical science. On the contrary, idealists maintained that the two level should be kept separate since they believed that validity cannot be boiled down to the facts that can explain its genesis. For a detailed discussion of the problem of the relationship between genesis and validity, see Ritchie 1993: chapter 1.

manifold of sense is synthesized by being brought under categories, psychologists attempted to translate the synthesizing activity of mind in strictly naturalistic terms. A common theory of meaning was thence put at the basis of a non-naïve description of objectivity that was radically opposed to any form of epistemological immediatism and intuitionism – broadly speaking, the view that the (meaning of an) object is something that the mind has to grasp rather than to construct. So a logician strongly influenced by associationist psychology like Venn could state without hesitation that any object, insofar as it is taken to have meaning, presupposes “a considerable mental process” since the latter is necessary for an object to be a *specific* object, “that is as possessing some degree of unity and as requiring to be distinguished from other such unities” (Venn 1889: 5-6). Taken without further qualifications, it would be practically impossible to discern whether Venn was trying to formulate an empiricist account of mental activity or whether he was expounding an idealistic version of constructivism.

With the remarkable exception of intuitionism, an almost universal agreement on what may be called a minimal conception of constructivism was a distinctive trait of English-speaking intellectual world at the end of 19th century. The controversy between idealists and naturalistic psychologists revolved only around the way in which the fundamental constructivist insight should be articulated. The success of the constructivist theory of meaning was due precisely to the fact that the latter provided a theoretical platform that was general enough and broad enough to support different philosophical proposals. Obviously, the conceptual enlargement of the constructivist model went hand in hand with a dramatic impoverishment of its philosophical refinement – a simplification that stands out as particularly evident when such a minimal conception of constructivism is put in comparison with Kant’s original formulation. Nonetheless, the simplification revealed itself to be extremely fruitful from a heuristic perspective because it opened the door to new directions of inquiry that brought about a better clarification of various aspects traditionally considered extremely problematic from both a philosophical and a scientific perspective. The outstanding importance attached to the issue of accounting for the nature of perception is probably the clearest example of the profound modifications introduced in the philosophical agenda of that time by the work of theoretical reassessment that so deeply influenced the reception of Kantian philosophy in Great Britain and America.

The significance of this shift of interest from general questions to technical issues is particularly evident when psychology is taken into consideration. On the side of psychology the regression to a minimal conception of constructivism was very useful in transforming an extremely complex philosophical theory concerning the constitution of meaningful experience into a scientific hypothesis whose truth can be ascertained experimentally. Kant's transcendental theory of objectivity was often read through the spectacles of Mill's definition of the meaning of an object as a "Permanent Possibility of Sensation", as it was provided in chapter eleven of *The Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, entitled *The Psychological Theory of the Belief in an External World*¹⁷ (Mill 1865/1979: 177-183). Thus, as a consequence of the assimilation of the two perspectives it became possible for associationist psychologists to develop a consistent account of the distinction between sensation (a purely subjective state of mind) and perception (an objective representation of things existing in external world), without been compelled to have recourse to any assumption not in principle explainable in terms of psychological laws of association and, in the last analysis, physiological events happening in the brain (see, for instance, Lewes 1879a: 355; but see also Green 1885a: 536). Thus, the problem that traditionally haunted psychologists, and which concerned how to explain the constitution of objectivity from purely subjective data, was eventually set up on a sound and promising basis. Consequently, thanks to the adherence to the constructivist theory of meaning and objectivity, the language of psychology enhanced its explicative capacity and showed to be powerful enough to explain in purely naturalistic terms the formation of objective knowledge from subjective, private data.

¹⁷ The unexpressed thesis that lies at the basis of what is said here is that the conceptual apparatus of psychology was strongly influenced, even though in a very indirect manner, by Kantian constructivism. In particular, it is assumed that the very distinction between sensation and perception – which had been firstly introduced by Reid (see in particular Seth 1885/1890: Lecture III) – was distinctively Kantian in spirit, and was often articulate having Kant's transcendental philosophy in mind. This is true in particular for the German-speaking world, but it holds also for British psychology since it was deeply influenced by the results achieved by German physiologists like Müller, Helmholtz, and Wundt. On the persistence of Kantian themes in nineteenth century German psychology, see Hatfield 1990: 5 (for an indirect discussion of this point, see below 3.1.2.). On the role of Müller in the process of 'Kantianization' of physiological psychology, see Ergenhahn 2009: 236, Wettersten 1992: 65, and, in particular, Wahrig-Schmidt 1992: 45ff. On the intellectual relationship between Helmholtz and Lewes, see Rylance 2000: 328-29. On the reciprocal influence between Helmholtz and Bain, see Morabito 1998a: 25ff.. For a discussion of the influence of British philosophy (in particular Mill and Whewell) on German's scientific and philosophical debate, see Poggi 1977: chapter 5.

However, the crossbreed between associationism and transcendentalism had some influence also upon the particular way in which Kantian philosophy was read, assimilated, and presented by British idealists in general, and neo-Hegelians in particular (see Pallenberg 2006: 85). So, for instance, when Caird tried to paraphrase the Kantian conception of objectivity in more contemporary terms, he had recourse to the (non-Kantian) language exploited by psychologists of his time¹⁸. This point can be highlighted with a simple example. In his *General View of the Analytic*, in the context of an attempt to formulate a reliable interpretation of Kant's distinction between sense and understanding, Caird noted that, according to Kant, experience is coextensive with judgment, which he defined as the act through which "the data of sense are referred to objective reality" (Caird 1877: 281). Every time something is said to appear to our sense, the manifold of sense which constitutes the matter of the object is already qualified by being synthesizing in a "connected system of phenomena" (Caird 1877: 280). Caird therefore concluded that judgment is already present at the very level of perception: it is this presence that warrants the objectivity of our immediate acquaintance with the world (Caird 1877: 284).

Evidently, to a limited extent this is a faithful depiction of Kant's transcendental philosophy. Besides, it was Kant himself who explicitly recognized that "the same function that gives unity to the different representations in a judgment also gives unity to the mere synthesis of different representation in an intuition" (Kant 1781/1787: A79/B105). What is remarkably innovative is precisely the conceptual framework in which the Kantian-like thesis is formulated, as well as the language used to express it. This hinges upon a) the equation of Kant's and Mill's definition of objectivity and b) the controversial assumption that Kantian problems were substantially identical to the ones

¹⁸ In this sense, it is useful to call the attention to Seth's *Epistemology in Locke and Kant* (1893), where the exploitation of a language different from the one coined by Kant is particularly clear: "[Kant] speaks of the mind as prescribing laws a priori to nature, and of nature as submitting to the legislation of the understanding; but he smooths the paradox for us by reminding us that 'this nature is in itself nothing but a sum of phenomena, consequently not a thing-in-itself but only a number of ideas in my mind (eine Menge von Vorstellungen des Gemüths)'. In such passages there is no mistaking Kant's meaning; even in his phraseology he recalls Berkeley and Mill, except that for associated sensations we have rationally constructed perceptions. Otherwise Kant's phenomenal world of present perceptions and possible perceptions corresponds exactly to Mill's world of actual sensations and permanent possibilities of sensation or Berkeley's world of actual and possible sense-phenomena. The recurring phrase of the Critique, possible experience", is itself significant of the affinity of standpoint" (Seth 1893: 183).

tackled by contemporary psychologists. Kant's problem, Caird argued, is that of explaining how perception can refer to an external world; his solution consists in showing that objective reference is made possible by the synthetic activity of mind. Mind transcends the immediate sensation present at a given time, and by doing so refers its material to an object. The definition of objectivity that follows from these premises is that "when we say that a perception refers to an object, we mean that under certain conditions the *same* perception might always be had". This is possible only because "certain data of sense are fixed in reference to other data", so that when a determinate sensation appears, mind connects its content to the contents of other sensations (Caird 1877: 283).

As is evident, this model of explanation of the relation created by mind amongst different sensation presents a structure that is essentially coincident with the one that Mill had put at the basis of his own definition of objectivity – a similarity that Caird explicitly acknowledged, even though he was also very careful to stress the differences between the two approaches for what concerns the origin of such a relation (Caird 1877: 285). But this means that the translation of Kantian philosophy in a different language, widely influenced by associationist psychology, brought about several distortions and theoretical stretches that, in some cases, dramatically altered the very sense of Kant's philosophical proposal. In particular, the assimilation with Mill's conception of objectivity gave to transcendental philosophy a phenomenalist torsion that went hand in hand with a radically dualistic reading of the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena. This assumption had also important consequences on the way Hegel's absolute idealism was read as providing the solution of Kantian deficiencies and pitfalls. In any case, the interpretation of the transcendental project along the line opened by Mill's reflection on the nature of objectivity should be read as an effort of making Kant's lesson palatable to English mind. Insofar, any possible evaluation of its philosophical significance, and, consequently, any possible charge with lacking faithfulness to both the letter and the spirit of the original, cannot be divorced from the consideration of its actual effectiveness in introducing German Idealism in the Anglo-American philosophical debate of the end of 19th century. The very fact that German philosophy in general, and Kantian philosophy in particular, were perceived as being a living theoretical option by almost the totality of the participants to that debate – no matter whether as a set of fruitful insights that deserved to be exploited or as a group of errors to be avoided and corrected – was in no small

degree a successful achievement of British neo-Hegelian and neo-Kantian movement (see in particular Watson 1881; see also Wallace 1894: chapter 2 and 3).

1.4. *The Proposal of a New Canon*

If we now return to the initial point, all these remarks seem promising in shedding new light on the interpretative problem that has given rise to the current discussion – that is, the necessity of putting under partial revision the settled canon of Deweyan texts and, consequently, the widely accepted interpretation that has been advanced on its basis. It has been argued above that the traditional image of Dewey's early philosophy is substantially correct if it is taken as a general account of its main features. Nonetheless, it has also been noted that it is unacceptable if it is used as a map to yield a reconstruction of the particular motives that drove the development of his philosophical proposal. More precisely, it has been remarked that the general categories usually adopted to describe Dewey's early idealism are unfit to grasp the rationale behind his choice to side with idealists against reductionist and naturalist psychologists. Similarly, it is believed that they cannot account for his decision to forge a heterodox version of voluntaristic psychological idealism rather than merely relying upon the Neo-Kantian form of idealism upheld by Green or the orthodox version of Neo-Hegelianism defended, amongst the others, by Caird, Seth, and – even though with a stronger religious emphasis – by his teacher Sylvester Morris. The leading assumption that lies at the basis of the dissatisfaction with the standard picture of Dewey's early philosophy is the conviction that great philosophical conflicts are decided in seemingly minor, technical battlefields. The aim of previous analyses has been precisely to show that it was in those minor battlefields that the different traditions that confronted each other in the British philosophical debate of the end of 19th century defined their respective theoretical positions.

In the light of what has been said until now, it should be more clearer why it has been maintained that the young Dewey's fundamental concern was that of finding a satisfactory account of meaningful experience. The statement of the relevance of this issue in the economy of his thought is confirmed by its importance for the debate in which he took part. Since meaning was conceived of

as a product of mind activity, and since mind was, amongst the other things, the distinctive subject-matter of psychology, an analysis concerning the nature of meaning and objectivity naturally raised the problem of clarifying the scientific status of that discipline and, consequently, its possible relation with philosophy. This problem haunted Dewey for many years, and was eventually resolved only through the development of a functionalist theory of the psychical. Moreover, the attention to the meaningful character of human experience forced him to take a stand on the issue of the nature of reality. Finally, it led him to inquire into those acts of mind through which meaningful experience is formed, thus opening the door to a radical confrontation with the transcendental accounts of experience. In other words, the issue of meaning supplied Dewey with a general standpoint from which to weigh the validity of the theoretical proposals advanced by other philosophers. It also represented the conceptual framework on the background of which Dewey elaborated his solution to the very same problems that were tackled by the philosophical proposals he rejected.

The resulting interpretative assumption – whose effectiveness and plausibility has obviously to be tested empirically – is that a more restricted approach to Dewey's early works that focuses attention upon his theory of meaning can yield a more consistent image of his idealistic philosophy. The result of this work of theoretical redescription is a different hierarchy of concepts and problems which paves the way for a reconsideration of the significance of the different theses that form Dewey's early thought. It is believed that such a redefinition entails an increase of explanatory capacity. When seen from this perspective, indeed, even the concept of experience stands out as a central element of Dewey's thought only because it supplies the conceptual grounding for the idea of idealization, which is the counterpart, on the theoretical side, of the ethical concept of self-realization. Idealization has to do with those processes through which sensuous material gets imbued with meanings. It represents therefore the backbone of experience, and the real condition of possibility of its meaningfulness. So, the recognition of the relationship of conceptual dependence between experience and idealization makes it possible to appreciate in which sense Dewey's adoption and progressive refinement of the language of experience was strictly interwoven with the search for a consistent solution to the question of meaning that was troubling contemporary philosophy. As a consequence of this shift of perspective, Dewey's conceptual apparatus can be clarified to a greater degree.

Consequently, in the present chapter it will be maintained that idealization rather than experience is the key notion to understanding Dewey's early theory of meaning. This interpretative thesis is supported by some facts. First of all, the notion of idealization is less confused and less undetermined than the notion of experience. Indeed, while the latter was intended in very different ways by the members of the rival traditions, the concept of idealization was much less used and discussed. Because of its greater degree of definiteness, its philosophical import is therefore much easier to evaluate¹⁹. In addition, the concept of idealization is theoretically homogenous with the notion of habit, which constitutes the hinge on which Dewey's instrumentalist and naturalist theory of meaning turns. The structural similarity between the two concepts does not simply enable us to conclude for the centrality of the notion of idealization in Dewey's early philosophy; it also indicates in concrete what are the lines of continuity in Dewey's thought. In so doing, it helps us to shed new light on Dewey's intellectual development.

Finally, there is a further aspect that supports the choice of privileging the notion of idealization over the concept of experience. By focusing the attention on the former, indeed, it is made evident that Dewey's so-called idealistic phase – and, *a fortiori*, his early idealistic theory of meaning – is much less monolithic than has usually been considered to be. Indeed, it is only relatively late that the young Dewey started exploiting the notion of idealization. It was not until the end of 1886 that he began working out a consistent account of mental activity in terms of processes of idealization – the most satisfactory exposition of his views is provided into the little known article *Knowledge as Idealization*, published on *Mind* in July 1887. This fact is important because it allows us to introduce an useful distinction between an early phase of Dewey's idealistic period, substantially coincident with his stay at Johns Hopkins University (1882-1884) and in which he relied upon an unoriginal form of neo-Hegelianism, and a second phase, which corresponds in the main with the period he spent at the

¹⁹ More in general, the primacy of idealization over experience reflects the conviction that the latter does not represent the best perspective from which to understand the goals that Dewey was trying to achieve. Even though not a contradictory concept as has sometimes been taken to be, Dewey's notion of experience is nevertheless extremely complex since it represents the point in which all the different theoretical suggestions that Dewey attempted to merge together enter in conflict one with the others. In a certain sense, it can be argued that the various shifts that characterize the history of Dewey's account of experience are evidences of more fundamental changes in other parts of his thought. This methodological and interpretative insight will be exploited in the rest of this work.

University of Michigan and at the University of Minnesota (1884-1888), in which he struggled to develop his highly idiosyncratic version of psychological idealism as a basis for a psychological, yet not reductionist account of meaning. The theoretical continuity between the two positions is warranted by Dewey's adherence to a standard idealistic theory of meaning and objectivity. The discontinuity is due a) to his insistence on the coincidence between psychology and philosophy, b) to his conviction that the results achieved by idealistic philosophy should be couched in psychological garb, c) to his understanding of the necessity of refining the terminology used by neo-Hegelians. The adoption of the concept of idealization makes explicit Dewey's departure from neo-Hegelian movement. This is undoubtedly (even though not exclusively) a direct consequence of his enthusiastic, but not uncritical adherence to Wundt's new scientific psychology. It went hand in hand with a profound reorganization of the conceptual apparatus of his philosophy, and paved the way for a different evaluation of his theoretical debts to his sources.

The last remark leads directly to a second point that deserves great attention – that is, Dewey's relation with Kantian transcendental philosophy. Deweyan scholars have usually maintained that Dewey's early philosophy is distinctively Hegelian. One of the greatest merits of Shook's *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality* has been that of calling attention to the neo-Hegelian tradition in which Dewey was reared. Shook has insisted on the relatively small role played by Hegel's philosophy in fostering Dewey's philosophical development (but for a different evaluation of this critical point, see Johnston 2006). Whether or not the young Dewey extensively read Hegel's texts, Shook has pointed out, it is evident that the spectacles through which Dewey may have assimilated his thought were typically neo-Hegelian. This means, in other words, that his agenda of problems was almost entirely determined by neo-Hegelian concerns, and that his approach to Hegel as a possible source of philosophical inspiration was far from being naïve.

I agree with Shook on both these points, even though I am not convinced that Dewey's early philosophy, taken in its wholeness (1882-1887), should be "categorized as belonging to the Cairdian phase of idealism"²⁰ (Shook 2000: 66;

²⁰ Shook's fundamental intuition is confirmed by an important consideration advanced by Good in his book *A Search for Unity in Diversity*. Good has insightfully remarked that Dewey's Hegelian period does not coincide with his early idealism, but rather with the long process of revision of his first theoretical proposal that started with his return to Michigan after one year spent teaching at

see also Johnston 2010: 16-17). At the same time, however, the recognition of the relevance of neo-Hegelianism for Dewey's philosophical views should not make forget that he was highly critical of many fundamental tenets held by neo-Hegelians. One of the points of greatest disagreement with his fellow idealists concerned precisely the correct interpretation to be given of Hegel's correction of Kantian transcendental project. The periodization of Dewey's early philosophy proposed above reveals itself useful for clarifying this point. Indeed, while in his first important article on Kant and the philosophic method Dewey endorsed the standard neo-Hegelian view according to which Hegelian absolute idealism sublates and transcends Kant's critical idealism, a very different reading of their relation is provided in the couple of articles published on *Mind* in 1886 – that is, *The Psychological Standpoint* and *Psychology as Philosophic Method*. In these texts, Dewey acknowledged that the fundamental question raised by Kant concerning the possibility of a meaningful experience is not satisfactorily answered by Hegel. Consequently, he tried to recover the insight lying at the basis of Kant's project of formulating a transcendental psychology. This insight consists in the recognition that meaning cannot be reduced to its logical aspect, but has to be accounted for in its concreteness, that is, in its being a fact actually encountered in experience.

It follows therefore that the confrontation with Kant is a much more important factor in Dewey's early philosophical development than has usually been acknowledged. But this also means that the conclusion that Dewey's criticism of Kant's residual dualism amounts to an overall rejection of the latter's philosophy has to be rejected. As Johnston has correctly pointed out, Dewey was not interested in denying the validity of the distinction between sense and understanding or, to use Dewey's own words, between perception and conception²¹ (Johnston 2006: 521). His aim was rather to precise and define the

the University of Minnesota (1888). Undoubtedly, the young Dewey was strongly influenced by American Hegelianism, in particular as a consequence of his personal acquaintance with T. Davidson and W. T. Harris, the editor of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* and one of the leading members of St. Louis Hegelians (Good 2006: chapter 2). Nonetheless, Dewey's full appreciation of Hegel's philosophy came only in a second moment. In chapters 2 and 3 it will be shown through which channels some important Hegelian themes acted in redirecting Dewey's thought away from his early intellectualism toward a functionalist and naturalistic account of meaning, experience, and mentality. No comparable Hegelian influence can be observed in Dewey's early texts.

²¹ At the end of 19th century, 'perception' was commonly used to translate the German term 'Anschauung' (for a clear statement of this translation option see, for instance, Caird 1877: x). It is worth noting that the decision to translate 'Anschauung' with 'perception' was far from being theoretically neutral. From a strictly interpretative point of view, this choice created some confusion because it became impossible for an English reader to grasp Kant's distinction between 'Anschauung' and 'Wahrnehmung' since they were both translated as 'perception' (see, for

relationship between them on the basis of both neo-Hegelian criticisms of it and the results achieved by the new psychological sciences. The final outcome of this effort of conceptual clarification was, in Dewey's intention, to rescue Kantian philosophy from its own pitfalls without relapsing into those contradictions that tainted neo-Hegelian philosophy.

In conclusion, it is now possible to see in which sense the shift of attention from general problems to particular and 'technical' questions goes hand in hand with a revision of the canon of books and articles that should be considered representative of Dewey's early philosophical proposal. Such a revision is twofold, and consists of an integration with new materials as well as of a different evaluation of some texts usually taken to be central for the comprehension of his thought. First of all, instead of focusing on those works in which Dewey's philosophical standpoint is expounded at large, greater emphasis will be put on those passages in which Dewey discussed with a wealth of details specific issues concerning the nature of meaning, the relation between perception and thought in experience, the role of mind in the process of constitution of experience. Consequently, greater attention will be devoted to the analysis of the article *Knowledge as Idealization* and to the unfortunately neglected description of the process of idealization expounded in the second part of his *Psychology*. A discussion of the construction of perceived world will be provided, in the conviction that it is at this level that the originality of Dewey's proposal can be best appreciated. Then, an attempt will be made to highlight the general philosophical consequences following from the assumption of the centrality of the notion of idealization in Dewey's thought. In particular, a different explanation of his relationship with neo-Hegelians will be outlined, which revolves around a reconsideration of Dewey's notion of absolute self.

Secondly – but this point will be discussed first – a sharp line will be drawn between Dewey's first exposition of his views in *Kant and the Philosophic Method* and the philosophical proposal that he articulated in *The Psychological Standpoint*

instance, Caird 1877: 354). Caird realized this problem and in *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* decided to maintain his previous translation of 'Anschauung' with 'perception', and to render 'Wahrnehmung' with 'sense-perception' (Caird 1889: x). But it seems plausible to argue that such a translation choice had some consequences on the theoretical debate between philosophers and psychologists. The point is that 'perception' was a term used by psychologists to indicate the product of the association of sensations. Following Kant, idealists maintained that perception cannot be separated from concepts. In so doing, they were led to (over-)emphasized the importance of the conceptual element for the constitution of experience. This last remark is only a suggestion; it does not have to be closely adhered to.

and *Psychology as Philosophic Method*. The attention will be focused almost exclusively on the latter, in the conviction that the former was less a formulation of an original theory of experience than an exercise in the style of neo-Hegelianism. The differences between them will be therefore exasperated for expository reasons.

As a consequence of these changes it is guessed that the standard picture of Dewey's intellectual development may acquire a greater definiteness and significance. Evidently, the validity of such a shift of attention cannot be determined in the abstract, but has to be judged by reference to its interpretative fecundity. In the last analysis, its cash-value consists of its effectiveness in clarifying the conceptual basis of Dewey's thought and in highlighting the moving force of his philosophical growth.

2. The Young Dewey between Kant and Hegel

2.1. The Abiding Truth of Kantianism: "Synthesis is the Sine Qua non"

2.1.1. Mediation and Whole: The Nature of Meaning

Dewey's allegiance to British idealistic tradition consists less in the adhesion to a well-formed and ready-made set of doctrines than in the adoption of a philosophical outlook. The young Dewey was more interested in the way in which neo-Hegelians tackled relevant philosophical problems than in the actual solutions they advanced. Nonetheless, there are some very general assumptions that Dewey accepted without questioning – I refer here to the Dewey of the 1886 articles and of the *Psychology* – since their refusal would have necessarily entailed the negation of the very possibility of formulating a consistent idealism. In particular, he never questioned the validity of two main tenets of an idealistic theory of meaning – a conviction that Dewey never abandoned even when their

acceptance compelled him to undertake great efforts to accommodate them within a thoroughly naturalistic framework.

The first tenet is the view that meaning necessarily entails a mediate factor – or, better stated, *is* the very fact of mediation – which unifies different unrelated elements. The objectivity of knowledge depends on the act of drawing relations linking different items together into a larger whole (Green 1883: 37). As has been noted in the previous section, in holding that meaning is to be traced back to synthesis, idealists were simply conforming themselves to the standard view of the time. The difference introduced by them has to do with the emphasis on the notion of whole – an emphasis which found its best expression in the holistic thesis that the whole is essentially prior to its parts. In open contrast to the view defended by classical empiricists, Anglo-American idealists argued for the impossibility of explaining the qualitative unity that constitutes a certain thing as a thing of a certain kind as a compound of previously independent parts. Indeed, since it is only as parts of a whole that different elements acquire their meaning – as a consequence of their being put in relation one to the others –, it would be contradictory to maintain that a part has a meaning *before* entering in relation with other parts. The traditional view of the relation between parts and whole has therefore to be reversed: far from being a mere sum of its component elements, the whole defines the concrete conditions of meaningfulness of its parts²².

²² An example drawn from a relatively late text by Dewey may be useful to better clarify this point. In the opening pages of his *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891), Dewey attempted to determine the proper bounds of morality. In order to achieve this goal, Dewey remarked, a criterion has to be provided that allows us to distinguish between moral actions and purely physical actions. The solution advanced by Dewey consists in defining the essential traits of that particular synthesis that makes it possible for an action to have a moral significance. Indeed, an action is meaningful from a moral point of view only when it is conceived by the agent himself as being in relation to an end (EW3: 242). If one looks to a moral action as it is in itself, so to say, apart from its connection with the goals and desires that it aims to satisfy, what one finds is an objective event taking place in the world – a natural event that is devoid of moral quality. Physical actions acquire a distinctively moral meaning as a consequence of their being inserted into a web of relations through which a connection is instituted between one or more means and a chosen end. In turn, the end is defined by its being part of the web of relations. Dewey was very careful in denying that morality may consist in the brute fact of there existing an end of conduct. A moral act does not amount to the choice of the end of conduct. Taken in itself, that is, apart from the means that enable the agent to realize it, an end is a mental image, a fact that is as morally meaningful as any natural event conceived in its aloofness. Moral meaning is the structure of a determinate ‘logical space’, to use Sellars’ expression: the structure precedes its internal articulations as a whole precedes its parts. We will return on this point in chapter 3, 2.2.1..

It is in this spirit that Caird criticized Kant for assuming the independence of sensibility and understanding. On Caird's reading, the dualism of concepts and intuitions prevented Kant from formulating a sound and truly idealistic account of objectivity. Caird pointed out that Kant's transcendental deduction of categories could not help from relapsing into an unsatisfactory form of dualism since it fell short of discovering the common root from which the two sources of experience stem. Caird did not mean to deny that Kant had highlighted the reciprocal presupposition of perceptions and conceptions reciprocally, but – and this is the point that Caird was eager to emphasize – such a reciprocal presupposition was not conceived of “as resulting from the nature of the elements themselves” (Caird 1877: 371). Indeed, these two elements were taken by Kant to be only externally related: “[t]heir union”, to use Caird's own words, “is a necessity imposed from without” (Caird 1877: 371). This reservation was expressed by Caird in traditional idealistic terms by saying that understanding and sensibility “are not treated as factors of a relation, which lose their *meaning* when taken away from each other, and from *the unity of one definite whole*” (Caird 1877: 371 italics added; see Caird 1883: 142; see also Shook 2000). Rather, they are treated as wholly independent entities that are formed before the act of synthesis.

However, British idealists in general, and Caird in particular, were convinced that Kant's thought carried within itself the conceptual resources needed to overcome its own limits and defects. The way out from all these difficulties consists in understanding the potentiality of the notion of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is the name that British idealists gave to the higher unity of experience that is at the basis of the categories of understanding and provides their ultimate condition of possibility. This is the sense that Kant attached to the notion of the transcendental unity of apperception, and which – at least according to Caird – he was unable to develop into a consistent theory of experience, meaning, and objectivity (Caird 1877: 374-375). More clearly stated, Kant glimpsed that reason (taken in its broad sense as the faculty of cognition from principles *a priori*) should be conceived as an organism, but he did not fully realize the speculative power of the concept of self-consciousness. It is for this reason that he did not manage to appreciate the radicality of his own philosophical proposal.

In particular, Kant did not realize that the theory of experience presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason* leads to a rejection of the distinction between an *a priori* form of understanding and an *a posteriori* material of sense. Because of the

unwarranted assumption that experience is restricted to phenomena only, Kant was compelled to maintain that reason can provide only the form of experience but not its material. So, Caird remarked, the notion of the unity of self-consciousness reveals itself to be constitutively interwoven with the dualistic bias at the basis of critical philosophy. In other words, Kant's incapacity of freeing himself from his theoretical mortgages goes hand in hand with his incapacity of definitively leaving behind himself the idea that thought is analytical. Insofar as he kept faithful to the idea that human understanding is essentially discursive, Kant could not rescue the notion of synthetic unity of apperception from a purely formalistic reading, according to which self-consciousness is an $I = I$ wholly "apart from its relation to the matter of sense" (Caird 1877: 377). But such a formalistic reading was far from being the only viable solution to the issue of the nature of self-consciousness. To avoid this conclusion it would have been enough to embrace the view that Kant came to formulate only as a possibility, that is, that understanding is intuitive or perceptive rather than discursive (Caird 1877: 384ff.; see also Shook 2000: 38ff.). Once it is admitted that reason creates its own material, self-consciousness can be conceived of as the unity in difference within which the various distinctions between subject and object, sensibility and understanding, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, analytical and synthetic judgments arise (Caird 1883/1892: 424). Its true philosophical significance is that of an original whole that necessarily – which means, not extrinsically – connects the categories and the manifold of sense. In self-consciousness "duality and unity are [...] inseparably blended" (Caird 1883: 149). Self-consciousness is the ultimate structure of every possible meaning since it is the encompassing circle of every possible relation.

Even though these remarks can be read as leading to unverifiable theological conclusions about the nature of self-consciousness, there was nothing more remote from Caird's intentions than to leave the secure ground of the analysis of concrete experience. As all the other neo-Hegelians, Caird aimed at formulating a sound 'epistemological' theory of experience – that is, an account of what is present and constitutive of any fact of knowledge. It is only because the idea of self-consciousness represents the ultimate condition of possibility of empirical knowledge that Caird paid great attention to it. The theoretical fertility of the thesis that self-consciousness as a whole precedes the distinction between subject and object consists in that it makes it possible to understand the fact that a subject has the world in view. The greatest limit of Kant's critical philosophy is that it

starts from the presumption of an absolute separateness between subject and object, and, as a consequence of this dogmatic assumption, it does not even attempt to deduce their opposition. It thus eventuates in the conclusion that self-consciousness is the ultimate source of objectivity, but empirical knowledge cannot grasp the reality of things because intelligible, noumenal world lies outside the scope of human understanding. A non-dogmatic philosophy – in Kantian sense – has therefore to undertake the task of explaining the ‘harmony’ existing between our thoughts and the objective world. Caird – whose main aim was that of developing a consistent post-Kantian idealistic theory of reality – was aware that the coincidence between mind and reality could not be accounted for except on the basis of an organic unity lying at their basis (Caird 1883/1892: 466). His emphasis on the notion of the whole and his insistence upon the self-relatedness of the organic unity responded precisely to this theoretical demand: they were functional to the clarification of the fact of meaning, as well as to the definition of a space for philosophical inquiry.

Before moving on to discussing the main traits of the epistemological reading of Kantian philosophy, it is important to draw the attention to some conclusions that derive from Caird’s idealistic criticism of transcendental philosophy. Their relevance for the present argument is due to the fact that they represent the background of the young Dewey’s philosophical reflection on the nature of meaning and objectivity. First of all, the acknowledgment of the impossibility of transcending self-consciousness provides a sound justification of the thesis of the relativity of knowledge. The ultimate reason why idealists argued that it is meaningless to look for an object external to the knowing mind is because no objectivity is possible outside the circle of experience. The idea of the relativity of knowledge and the idea that meaning and objectivity implies the existence of a whole within which only relations are possible are therefore correlative theses. Secondly, it is worth remembering that the neo-Hegelian acceptance of an epistemological reading of Kant’s transcendental philosophy does not amount in any sense to a form of subjectivism. The issue has been already tackled with some length in 1.3.3., so that it is not necessary to dwell on it further here. It is enough to remark that from the neo-Hegelian perspective epistemology coincides with metaphysics. Since categories of mind are, *ipso facto*, structures of objectivity, an analysis of the conditions of possibility of meaningful experience is, contextually, a theory of reality, a metaphysics. In a certain sense,

this was nothing but a translation of Hegel's famous dictum that logic coincides with metaphysics (Hegel 1874: 45).

This consideration is of particular interest. It has been repeatedly stated that the idealistic theory of objectivity relies upon the removal of the residual traces of dualism that unfortunately characterize Kant's transcendental philosophy. One of the main problems with which British neo-Hegelians were concerned was that of accounting for the motives that led Kant to embrace the dogmatic assumption of an irreducible difference between sense and thought. The identification of the cause of his lapse into a pre-critical conception of thought and objectivity enabled British idealists not only to diagnose the disease, but also to give a prognosis. Neo-Hegelians saw Kant's transcendental proposal as the result of a compromise between the two most important philosophical traditions of modernity (rationalism and empiricism), and were persuaded that its 'irenism' was the ultimate reason of its failure. They also read the development of German idealistic thought from Fichte to Hegel as a series of steps in the process of refinement of Kant's original constructivist insight. This reading was expressly formulated in many of their historiographical works, but it somehow directed – no matter whether implicitly or explicitly – their theoretical analyses. The thesis that the Kantian idea of self-consciousness, when brought to its natural conclusion, necessarily leads to Hegel's idea of Logic as the science of self-determination of reason was just another way of stating the same point (Caird 1883: Hegel 1874: 85ff.; Stirling 1898: 98). Hegel was considered the one who first pointed out with clarity the "adamantine circle within which the strife of opposites is waged", and who eventually placed philosophical reflections on solid footing (Caird 1883: 141). It was Hegel, in other words, the one who put in the right form the genuine theoretical insight that was initially glimpsed in the transcendental deduction of categories, thus freeing the latter from the limitation to phenomenal world and highlighting the organicity and unity that are implicitly presupposed in the Kantian notion of self-consciousness (Caird 1883: 142).

2.1.2. *The Thinking Subject as the Ultimate Source of Meaning*

Previous remarks lead naturally to the analysis of the second tenet of the idealistic account of meaning and objectivity. In several occasions it has been noticed *en passant* that amongst the technical aspects that contribute to define the distinctive character of neo-Hegelianism, the distinction between an epistemological and a psychological interpretation of the notion of self-consciousness is undoubtedly the most relevant. It is now time to tackle this issue more extensively. The reason why great stress has been placed on the difference between these two way of conceiving self-consciousness is twofold: on the one hand, it highlights the essential features of the idealistic conception of meaning; on the other hand, it sheds light on the theoretical motives that lie at the basis of the contrast between idealists and the upholders of different constructivist approaches to the issue of meaning and objectivity. The second tenet that properly qualifies neo-Hegelian position – and the young Dewey’s view insofar as he belonged to neo-Hegelian movement – concerns precisely this point, and amounts to the assumption that the ultimate source of meaning is a *meta-empirical* mind rather than a supposed absolutely external object (intuitionism *à la* Hamilton) or a group of operations taking place at brain level (new experimental psychology).

Caird advanced a concise definition of what idealists commonly accepted as a satisfactory explanation of meaning and objectivity in his polemic answer to Balfour’s criticism of transcendentalism. In this text, Caird wrote that “Idealism is based on the truth that the only intelligible meaning of objectivity or existence, is objectivity *for a thinking subject*, and that of an object external to thought we can say nothing” (Caird 1879: 112)²³. In conformity with Kantian lesson, the thinking

²³ Caird’s *Mr. Balfour on Transcendentalism*, from which this passage is taken, is a critical response to Balfour’s provocative article entitled *Transcendentalism*, in which a criticism of Kantian philosophy is formulated from the side of an empiricist and common-sensical philosophy. Balfour was convinced that Kant’s transcendental deduction should be supplanted by empirical and scientific ‘deduction’ of consciousness. In so doing, he tried to recover the truth and certainty of the common-sense belief in the existence and independence of the external world that he saw menaced by the idealism of post-Kantian systems (Balfour 1879a: 95ff.). Caird’s answer was directed toward clarifying the nature of the Kantian enterprise. In particular, he stressed the fact that transcendentalism is not concerned with giving a proof of the existence of external world, but merely with defining the conditions of possibility of a meaningful experience (Caird 1879: 113-114). Consequently, he concluded, Balfour’s criticism is misdirected and inappropriate because the author is not “sufficiently familiar with Kant, or with any mode of thought which can, in Kant’s

subject was conceived not as a thing, but as a function whose exclusive role consists in synthesizing its material (Seth 1887: 13). The standard idealistic theory of meaning and objectivity can be therefore outlined as follows: meaning is made of relations, and relations are the product of a subject or agent which is constitutively and essentially not empirical. An account of meaning along these lines is an outgrowth of Kant's departure point in B Deduction, where the pivotal thesis is clearly expounded that every combination of the manifold of sense into the unity of the object in accordance with a (pure) category of understanding is an act of the spontaneity of reason that cannot be accounted for in terms of sensibility²⁴. The realization that actual, meaningful experience cannot be accounted for neither in a rationalist nor in an empirical way was universally recognized as Kant's greatest merit and the single theoretical move that enabled philosophy to enter into its mature, self-conscious phase.

sense, be called 'transcendental', to make his criticism in this case very effective" (Caird 1879: 111). Again, the issue at stake was, in the last analysis, the nature of mind and the proper method to account for it. The debate on the correct interpretation of transcendentalism raised by Balfour's article involved a certain number of distinguished philosophers of the time. Not only Caird and Balfour, but also Watson and Sidgwick took part in that debate. In particular, see Watson 1880, and Balfour's response (Balfour 1881); see also Sidgwick 1879 and Caird's response (Caird 1879a). For a lucid and clear discussion of this debate, see Pallenberg 2006.

²⁴ The passage – actually one of the most famous of all the Critique of Pure Reason – runs as follows: "the combination (conjunctio) of a manifold in general can never come to us through the senses, and therefore cannot already be contained in the pure form of sensible intuition; for it is an act of the spontaneity of the power of representation, and, since one must call the latter understanding, in distinction from sensibility, all combination [...] is an action of the understanding, which we would designate with the general title synthesis in order at the same time to draw attention to the fact that we can represent nothing as combined in the object without having previously combined it ourselves, and that among all representations combination is one is not given through objects but can be executed only by the subject itself, since it is an act of its self-activity" (Kant 1781/87 B 130). It is important to note that the British idealistic reception and assimilation of transcendental philosophy introduced remarkable changes in Kant's original formulation. Two of them are particularly relevant for the issue under discussion. Firstly, a greater stress was put on the notion of relation as the essence of every possible category of understanding. Secondly, the technical concept of understanding, along with the concept of synthetic unity of apperception, was translated in the rather different notions of eternal consciousness (Green), absolute idea or thought (Caird), or self-consciousness (Seth). The two modifications point to a common end – that is, the simplification of Kant's extremely complex account of objectivity. However, an important difference is worthy of note here. Indeed, while there was a substantial agreement among British idealists about the exploitation of the language of relations, the rendering of Kant's notion of understanding presented greater difficulties that were intimately interwoven with the different metaphysical views held by the various authors. Their divergences on the correct interpretation of Kant's synthetic unity of apperception should be taken as evidences of a more radical divergence on the correct interpretation of the whole transcendental project. On this point, see below 2.2..

The expository strategy adopted by British idealists partially covered their true intentions. Even though empiricism and rationalism were presented as two alternative views to which transcendental philosophy and post-Kantian idealism equally opposed, it is evident that their greatest efforts were devoted to coming to terms with the empiricist account of meaning rather than with the rationalist view. While rationalism was not considered a lively philosophical option, empiricism – especially in its contemporary, revised form defended by Spencer and other associationist psychologists – raised a powerful objection against the idealistic theory of meaning and objectivity. Traditional empiricists had argued that only impressions are “real and objective”, and that all relations introduced by mind necessarily distort the data of sense (Green 1883: 16; see also Green 1874). Therefore, reality can be grasped only when the activity of mind is completely bracketed off, and what is given is gazed without allowing mediation to interfere²⁵. This theoretical proposal was convincingly criticized by Green in his *Introduction to Hume*, and was consequently abandoned as an unviable position even by those who believed that empiricism represents a sound approach to philosophical problems (see, for instance, Sidgwick 1882: 535-536; see also Schulz 2004: 358-359).

Moreover, Green remarked, even though Locke actually defended psychological atomism, he was nonetheless aware that meaning, knowledge, and experience cannot be accounted for if relations are not introduced. Since he endorsed the standard view that mathematical and moral truths entirely depend upon relations drawn by mind, he could not help but recognizing that reality principle is too restrictive because it condemns as unreal an important part of human knowledge. Locke and his fellow empiricists therefore were compelled to find room in their systems for a different theory of relations, and, obviously, this could not be done without subjecting to revision some of the fundamental assumptions that lie at the basis of philosophical empiricism.

Unfortunately, Locke did not attempt to consistently develop the pivotal insight that characterizes his revolutionary approach, that is, his “readiness to follow the lead of Ideas” (Green: 1874: 5). Far from pursuing his project of

²⁵ At the basis of the classical empiricist treatment of mental activity lies the so-called ‘reality principle’, that is, the conviction that mind is a purely individual and subjective entity whose products shut out from objective reality. According to the reality principle, “the distinction between reality and fantasy matches the distinction between what the mind receives passively from sensation and what it actively creates in thought” (Klein 2009: 418).

equating reality and ideas, he constantly shifted from the language of ideas to the language of objects. Locke did not find particular difficulties in speaking of “real ideas”, and conceding that reality is a consequence of their having a conformity with the existence of things (Green 1874: 24; see also Bonino 2003: 166ff.). Consequently, relations – and Locke referred in particular to those constituting the category of substance, thus making it possible to construct an object – are encountered in the world, apart from the synthetic and creative activity of mind. However, when such a correspondence view of truth is accepted, the pure plane of ideas is abandoned in behalf of a more traditional representation of the relationship between mental activity and reality. Green stressed Locke’s inconsistency by noting that the latter never rigorously applied the reality principle: rather the contrary, he was well disposed to sacrifice “the opposition between the real and the mental” when its consistent exploitation would have led him to contradictory conclusions (Green 1874: 94). As Green pointed out, the continuous oscillation between sense-language and object-language shows Locke’s attention to the demands of common-sense, as well as his sensitivity for the theoretical assumptions of popular philosophy and psychology – in particular, the idea of a radical difference between mind and external objects. And it was precisely this lack of radicality that if, on the one hand, saved him from the inconsistencies inherent in the empiricist program of tracing back reality to actual impressions given by senses, on the other prevented him from formulating a consistent version of empiricism.

Hume came nearer to a truly empiricist solution of the issue of the origin and nature of relations by individuating in the notion of habit the ultimate source of every possible synthesis. By explicitly acknowledging the ‘mental’ character of every possible synthesis, Hume’s analysis of mental activity presented itself as a radical attempt to explain – or to explain away, as Green believed – the constitution of objectivity without relying upon unwarranted realistic assumptions. Associationist psychologists read Hume’s philosophical proposal as an attempt to formulate a constructivist account of meaning without endorsing a transcendental perspective. The possibility of avoiding the Scylla of naïve realism and the Charybdis of transcendentalism and idealism was one of its greatest points of strength.

It was Green again who undertook the task of showing the shortcomings of those views that emphasize the theoretical viability of Humean thought. Green maintained that the main error of contemporary psychologists was that of not

realizing that Hume's intentions were avowedly negative, and that his distinctive theoretical aim was not to provide a consistent conceptual framework within which a naturalistic theory of mind could be formulated, but rather to prove the insufficiency of the doctrine of association "to account for an intelligent, as opposed to a merely instinctive or habitual, experience" (Green 1874: 2). Hume did not attempt to set the stage for psychological inquiry; on the contrary, he tried to highlight the contradictions intrinsic to the very idea of treating mind as a natural object. Hume's lasting philosophical significance, Green argued, is wholly exhausted by the negative results that he reached in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*²⁶.

It is not possible to follow in detail Green's extremely articulated analysis of how Hume managed to derive his skeptical conclusions from Locke's original premises. What is worth being discussed here is rather the technical criticism that Green raised against the associationist theory. Green's contention is that the associationist paradigm adopted by Spencer and Lewes, to name only the most outstanding representatives of that tradition, reveals its theoretical weakness precisely at the level in which it should prove its heuristic validity, that is, at the level of the explanation of perception. Traditionally, the main defect of associationist psychology was traced back to its incapacity of providing a theory that could account for the higher activities of mind like imagination or thought. According to the standard view, while acts as thinking or believing necessarily involve a creative act of mind, perception is to be conceived of as a relatively simple mental state in which the knowing subject is passively affected by things existing in external world. Because of its passivity, therefore, it seemed possible to try to account for it without introducing any reference to a constructive activity performed by a thinking subject. For the very same reason, the four explicative principles adopted by associationist psychologists – that is, the principles of contiguity, similarity, retentiveness, and agreement and difference as they were defined by Bain (Bain 1968) – were considered insufficient to give credit to the complexity of voluntary thought. Thus, many opponents of associationism were satisfied with conceding that perception could be treated in

²⁶ In this sense, Green was led to conclude that the natural prosecution of Hume's critical efforts is not represented by English and Scottish schools of empiricism, but by Kant's transcendental redefinition of the notion of objectivity in terms of the categories of understanding. Again, historiographical and theoretical concerns show themselves to be strictly interwoven and reciprocally interdependent factors in the process of elaboration of a consistent form of idealism.

purely psychological terms, provided that it were acknowledged that higher mental activities were not susceptible to that kind of analysis.

One of Green's greatest merits was that of shifting the attention from the higher to the grounding level of meaning, thus showing the necessity to sharply distinguish psychological investigations from epistemological or metaphysical considerations, and consequently highlighting that that compromise was grounded on a weak basis. Since it is in perception that reality starts revealing itself to the knower as a meaningful world, perception has to be viewed as having the same degree of complexity that characterizes the most refined forms of reflection (Green 1883: 70). The only difference between the former and the latter concerns the relative opacity of meaning that characterizes perception in comparison with thought. Thence, if this argument is correct, in both cases a thinking self is presupposed as the ultimate condition of possibility of meaning. This conclusion amounts to a bankruptcy of associationism since the assumption of a thinking self is precisely what associationist psychologists cannot admit. This powerful thesis is clearly formulated in the *General Introduction*, and further articulated in the second chapter of the *Prolegomena to Ethics*, where Lewes's empiricist account of perception is taken into account.

In this text, Green argued that Lewes had correctly realized that perception is "the synthesis of all the sensations we have had of the object in relation to our several sense" so that any object consists in a "group of sensibles" (Green 1883: 65). This account of perception and objectivity is obviously in strong continuity with Mill's definition of object as a permanent possibility of sensations, and represents an important point of agreement with transcendental and idealistic traditions, along the general interpretative lines that have been sketched in the first part of this chapter. Nonetheless, Green noticed that the proper significance of the constructivist option has been completely misconceived by associationist psychology. The problem concerns not the fact of synthesis, but the nature of what is combined in that synthesis. Empiricists hold the view that synthesis is performed upon "feelings as caused by the action of external irritants on nervous system", thus not realizing that it is utterly meaningless to say that a feeling, conceived as a singular, unrepeatable event in the psychical life of an individual can be synthesized with other past feelings (Green 1883: 66). A present feeling may surely call up and revive a past feeling, but such a reinstatement does not yield any perception of the correspondent object. Indeed, while it brings about another feeling that is distinct from the first one, it does not bring about a

perception that passes the threshold of consciousness. To use Green's own words, the mere revival of past feelings entails that past and present feelings can "only be combined, either in the way of producing and giving place to a further feeling [...] or in the sense that their effects are accumulated in the nervous organism as to modify its reaction upon stimulus" (Green 1883: 66).

The only synthesis that is plausible within an empiricist framework is the mere combination (or fusion) of *feelings* in which "their multiplicity as feelings is lost" (Green 1883: 67; see, for instance, J. Mill 1869: Vol. I, 12ff.). On the contrary, the kind of synthesis necessary to account for a perception has to preserve the qualitative differences that characterize the various *sensations* that constitute an object²⁷ (Green 1883: 67). This is possible if only if sensations are present to a consciousness that objectifies them, thus subtracting them from the corrosive action of time and elevating them into the realm of meaning. Every act of perception is a synthesis that, by linking present sensations with other possible sensations that have been previously experienced as somehow related to the former, anticipates those consequences that will be expected to result from a certain action. So, if one has a rose in her hands, she knows that if she smells it she will perceive a pleasant scent, provided that she has already smelt a rose at least once in her life. The relations that are drawn between the two different sets of sensations constitute all the meaning and objectivity that can be attached to that group of sensibles. "Common objects of experience", Green concluded, "have their being only for, and result from the action of, a self-distinguishing consciousness" (Green 1883: 68).

As has been already remarked above, with his criticism of Lewes's associationist account of perception Green aimed at showing that the conceptual richness of the notion of consciousness cannot be exhausted by any psychological inquiry into its antecedents or conditions. Consciousness is not a natural phenomenon existing alongside with all the other natural events that compound the physical world. This means that the succession of 'mental' states, which constitutes the subject-matter of psychology, is constitutively different from the

²⁷ By distinguishing between feeling and sensation, it is plausible that Green intended to linguistically mark the difference between the subjective, private state of an individual mind (feeling) and the objective quality of the world (sensation). However, Green does not keep faithful to this distinction in the rest of the argument. That Green's analysis of sensation represented the weakest point of his whole philosophy was clearly recognized by Seth in his *Hegelianism and Personality*, where he wrote that "it is evident that, to Green [...], the facts of sense – the sense-qualities of things – constitute a serious embarrassment" (Seth 1887: 74).

consciousness of a succession, which is the subject-matter of epistemology. The difference between them consists in the fact that a succession of states entails that when a certain event comes to existence the previous one has disappeared, while the consciousness of that succession is a whole in which all the elements are contemporary present (Green 1883: 61). Green expressed this point by saying that consciousness is eternal, and then further qualified this statement by remarking that the eternality of consciousness is a consequence of its power of neutralizing time²⁸ (Green 1883: 71).

Since the temporal order between the 'first' and 'then' – precisely because it is an order – is a relation that links together two different elements, it necessarily involves a thinking subject that draws that relation. Therefore, it is an act of consciousness that makes it possible to identify those feelings that psychologists find to be associated with perceptions. Consequently, Green was prompted to attempt to provide an idealistic account of sensation. Green did not want to treat sensations as ultimate *data* since the implicit acknowledgment of the impossibility of constructively accounting for them would have entailed a relapse into that kind of dogmatism that he and his fellow idealists were so careful to denounce as the fundamental error of Kant's transcendental philosophy. Not only the synthesis of different sensations into a perception involves an act of

²⁸ Undoubtedly, the adoption of the expression 'eternal consciousness' to refer to the Kantian synthetic unity of apperception was an unhappy terminological choice. It raised unnecessary confusions that prevented his critics from seeing the real theoretical significance of his philosophical proposal. In particular, Green's metaphysics of knowledge (this is the title of the first book of the *Prolegomena to Ethics* says) was read by many of his contemporaries as an illicit attempt to advance a theological interpretation of the universe, disguising it under the cloak of a transcendental analysis of the conditions of possibility of experience. Now, it cannot be denied that Green's exposition suffers for a lamentable terminological indeterminacy, which makes it very difficult to understand what is the question that, from time to time, Green intended to face (so, for instance, the term 'perception' is used in the second chapter of the *Prolegomena to Ethics* to refer indiscriminately both to the act of perceiving and to the content perceived, thus harmfully conflating the two planes – psychological and epistemological – that have been distinguished with great difficulty in the first chapter of the book). In any case, the idea that Green intended to convey with the expression 'eternal consciousness' is simple and, to a certain extent, rather uncontroversial. Green's main aim was to stress the fact that the very possibility of determining the existence of an event in time entails a principle that is not in time because the latter is one of its fundamental determinations or categories (Green 1883: 71). Seth criticized Green for conflating the 'epistemological' and the 'metaphysical' level of analysis of experience (see Seth 1894: 576ff.; but see also Ritchie 1893:15-16). For a general discussion of this important point see Nicholson 2006: 147-148; see also Fairbrother 1896: 158ff. For a discussion of neo-Hegelian movement see Stern 2009: 127ff..

consciousness, but a certain degree of activity of consciousness is necessary to discriminate and constitute the raw material that is connected in a perception²⁹.

The results of this radical constructivist approach is that the entire meaning of a sensation comes to be conceived of as a set of relations that it entertains with all the others elements of a certain logical space. Green did not find any difficulty in admitting that sensations, as known facts, “can only form an object of experience in being determined by an intelligent subject which distinguishes it from itself and contemplates it in relation to other sensations” (Green 1883: 47). Since sensations are known, they are subjected to the same conditions that hold for external objects. Eternal consciousness is the condition of possibility of the identification of an event in time, and, consequently, of the existence of an objective and meaningful world³⁰.

Now, in the light of these remarks it should appear more clearly why Green was so determined to distinguish between the psychological and the epistemological or metaphysical point of view, even though the distinction was open to so many criticisms and misunderstandings. Such a distinction was functional to the delimitation of the scope and possible goal of psychology as a natural science, and, at the very same time, to the parallel definition of

²⁹ A cue to the solution of the problem was offered by Bain’s law of relativity of knowledge and, in particular, by its application to the explanation of the possibility of recognizing a sensation. In his watershed book *The Senses and the Intellect* – and, more precisely, in the third revised edition published in 1868 – Bain enunciated the law of relativity of knowledge in the following words: “[i]n every feeling [and] in every act of knowing, two things are known together. [...] Whatever we can conceive implies some other thing or things also conceivable, the contrast, co-relative, or negative of that” (Bain 1868: 8-9). So, for instance, the sensation (or quality) red cannot be recognized if it cannot be distinguished from the other colors. “If we had never been affected by any colour except red, colour would never have been recognized by us” (Bain 1868: 9). Evidently, an explanation along these lines is conform to the idealistic project of tracing every form of meaning and objectivity back to the relations that constitute it. Consequently, it was rather natural for Green to adopt the law of relativity of knowledge as the theoretical device necessary to avoid any appeal to givenness as a principle of explanation of sensations.

³⁰ In more contemporary terms, it may be said that Green’s defense of an eternal consciousness can be formulated as a transcendental argument of the form: A) there is an experience of events succeeding in time, B) eternal consciousness is a necessary condition of possibility of such an experience, thence C) it is necessary true that an eternal consciousness must be presupposed. Eternal consciousness defines the conditions of conceivability of empirical objects – both external, as commonsensical objects, and internal, as sensations and mental states. Accordingly, its appropriate use in philosophical discourse has nothing to do with an ontological or metaphysical inquiry into the nature of things. It is a purely ‘epistemological’ notion, whose philosophical significance is exhausted by its capacity of accounting for the fact of meaning and objectivity. For an example of this kind of use of the notion of transcendental argument in the philosophical debate of the time, see Balfour 1879a: 94.

consciousness as the infinite and all-encompassing horizon of meaning and reality (Green 1883: 60). Or, to state it in different words, it was functional to the formulation of a distinction between genesis and validity – a distinction that was universally accepted as a fundamental tenet of the standard idealistic view (Ritchie 1893: chapter 1). While Green did not use this conceptual couple to highlight his position, the recognition of the importance of separating genesis and validity is implicit in his fierce opposition to any reductionist and naturalistic project. Feelings as singular, unrepeatable events in the life of an individual necessarily fall within the scope of eternal consciousness. It is this latter that defines the conditions of their meaningfulness and existence. Consequently, it would be utterly nonsensical to account for eternal consciousness in terms of psychological data since it would amount to explain the unconditioned through an appeal to the conditioned. Eternal consciousness is a whole: it cannot be accounted for without falling into a metaphysical hypostatization of some of its elements³¹.

³¹ This argument was particularly useful in counteracting the objections raised by the proponents of evolutionism, according to whom consciousness has to be accounted for in terms of purely physical events. The criticism that evolutionists and empiricists directed against idealists concerned the possibility of conceiving the reality of the external world independently from the existence of a consciousness that thinks it. As is evident, there was a time in which no man – and, accordingly, no consciousness – was present on earth. Consequently, it is reasonable to maintain that consciousness appeared at a determinate moment in the world's history. If this is true, and its truth seems indisputable, one seems entitled to conclude a) that consciousness cannot coincide with the whole reality, and b) that it is possible to find purely physical antecedents of consciousness that are the causes of its origin. British idealists did not accept these conclusions, as well as the idea that idealism and evolutionism should be viewed as contradictory approaches. On the contrary, they argued that evolutionism and idealism can be reconciled without particular difficulties once it is recognized that a genetic account of reality presupposes the dimension of validity (Caird 1883/1892: 471; see also Fairbrother 1896: 17ff.). A genetic explanation is an attempt to find the causes that have produced what is actually present. Thence, what is actually present – in the case under discussion, consciousness – is necessarily presupposed in every inquiry, not only because it provides the standard of its validity as an explanation of its subject-matter, but also because it represents the whole reality from which one of its part is selected and treated as a separate element. Methodological considerations and ontological remarks point therefore to a common conclusion: it is a categorial error to hold that the plane of validity can be entirely exhausted by an analysis of its historical and genetic conditions, because precisely the opposite is true (Green 1883: 79). Validity – that is, meaning and objectivity *already* formed – represents the whole within which only genesis becomes possible. Thus, far from amounting to a rejection of idealism, a thorough analysis of the theoretical presuppositions of evolutionism necessary leads to a verification of the fundamental tenets of a consistent idealistic conception of reality.

2.1.3. Dewey's Permanent Idealistic Deposit

It is now possible to briefly recapitulate the results that have been achieved in the previous exposition of the main features of British idealism. The abiding truth of Kantianism that Dewey expressed with the concise formula "synthesis is the sine qua non" consists in the conjunction of a) the idea that meaning presupposes the existence of a self-related whole within which only relations are possible with b) the assumption that meaning cannot be accounted for unless on the basis of a meta-empirical mind. It has already been remarked that British idealism was distinctively more Kantian than Hegelian, even in those cases in which an Hegelian derivation was openly stressed and advocated. It was Kant who was perceived as having clearly formulated the problems that any serious philosophy should attempt to answer. Undoubtedly, it was a Kant read through Hegel's spectacles, a Kant deeply modified by the profound revisions that German idealists made of his thought³². Hegel's merit was that of having made a further step beyond Kant in showing the intrinsic contradictoriness and worthlessness of the idea of thing-in-itself. He had shown that within an idealistic conceptual framework there is no need to introduce elements that cannot be 'deduced', but have to be accepted as completely determined before and independently from the synthetic, constructive activity of mind. Hegel brought to its natural conclusion Kant's epoch-making insight that reason is an organism. Idealists' insistence on the notion of whole was another way of underlining the same point.

³² The felt necessity to go back to Kant, and the particular way in which the rediscovery of Kantian philosophy was pursued, are neatly summarized in an interesting remark made by Ritchie in his important article *Origin and Validity*, originally published in *Mind* in 1888, and then included in the book *Darwin and Hegel* as its first, introductory chapter. After explicitly recognizing that many different interpretations of Kant had been advanced, which had led to "different estimates of the relative importance of different parts of his system", Ritchie focused his attention on "the point on which we must all always go 'back to Kant' and on which we cannot go back behind him". This he identified in Kant's "conception of 'transcendental proof' and his view of the a priori element in all knowledge": the fundamental philosophical truth that German idealists had the merit of bringing to light is the constructivist and holistic approach that characterizes both transcendental philosophy (even though only in a relatively undeveloped form) and post-Kantian idealistic thought (Ritchie 1893: 8). Ritchie's remarks fairly represents the standard view among neo-Hegelians. British idealism, taken in its generality, is a highly simplified version of Kantianism in which no particular attention is paid to the central question of the transcendental deduction of categories and to the correspondent problem of explaining how it is possible to draw a dividing line between theoretical and practical reason. Neo-Hegelianism was nothing but an attempt to formulate the constructivist insight in a genuinely epistemological way.

British idealism in general, and neo-Hegelianism in particular, provided the conceptual framework within which Dewey was reared, and in whose light his original philosophical proposal – evidently, his psychological idealism as formulated in the 1886 articles and in the *Psychology*, not his first attempts to find a voice and a place in the philosophical debate of the time – acquires its proper significance. Dewey's adherence to the idea of a constructivism without givenness was so unconditioned that not only he never questioned its validity, but he never attempted to discuss its central tenets in detail. Consequently, he assumed as wholly uncontroversial that meaning is nothing else than relations, or that consciousness is a whole that precedes its parts, giving them their proper meaning. Dewey's unreserved adoption of organicist metaphors is another evidence of his deep-seated confidence in the substantial correctness of the idealistic point of view. So, it is not irrelevant that the criticism of the associationist theory of sensations that Dewey expounded in his *Knowledge and Idealization* was identical to the argument advanced by Green in his *Prolegomena to Ethics* (EW1: 185). From Dewey's point of view, it would have been totally meaningless and useless to try to prove what was considered a platitude – at least, in idealistic circles.

At the very same time, however, the two sub-theses that properly qualify the idealistic conception of meaning and objectivity – the holistic and organicist insistence on the primacy of self-related whole over its parts, and the assumption that meaning and objectivity cannot be accounted for unless on the basis of a meta-empirical mind – were undetermined enough to support different philosophical readings of them. It is for this reason that the British idealistic tradition presented a variety of positions that makes it almost impossible to boil them down to a single form. Amongst Anglo-American idealists (with the remarkable exception of Bradley), Dewey was undoubtedly the most sensitive both to the difficulties related to such an indeterminacy and to the opportunities that the latter necessarily opened. Starting from 1886, two points struck him as particularly problematic. On the one hand, Dewey became more and more dissatisfied with neo-Hegelian resolution of meaningful experience into categories of thought, along the lines formulated by Seth and Haldane in the first two essays of the collective volume *Essays in Philosophical Criticism*. On the other hand, he started expressing strong reservations about the traditional and dualistic interpretation of the relation existing between the eternal consciousness,

as the ultimate source of objectivity and meaning, and the concrete, individual consciousness.

For strictly chronological reasons, Dewey was much more acquainted than his fellow idealists with the most recent psychological and physiological discoveries of the time. Thanks to his apprenticeship with Stanley Hall he came to realize the heuristic potentiality of a scientific approach to mind, and he felt confident that physiological results can be accepted by philosophical reflection without any risk of undermining the theoretical validity of idealism. Moreover, as a consequence of his reading of James Ward's fundamental article *Psychological Principles I: The Standpoint of Psychology* – originally published in *Mind* (1883) and then expanded and included in the entry *Psychology* written for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th edition (1886) –, Dewey was convinced that philosophy and psychology (or, at least, a certain kind of psychology) actually converge into a common notion of experience (Shook 2000: 45). Consequently, he was naturally led to adopt a different and more articulated view of consciousness, which was the result of the replacement of logic with psychology as the proper method of philosophy. Dewey's understanding of the unsatisfactoriness of previous idealistic approaches and his concomitant realization of the necessity to integrate psychology, physiology, and idealism into a coherent theoretical framework constitute the originality of Dewey's philosophical proposal.

2.2. *From Hegel to Kant and Back Again: Dewey's Psychological Idealism*

The conviction that Kant's critical philosophy finds its consistent coronation in Hegel's absolute idealism, alongside with a radical simplification of Kant's theoretical machinery that preserves only those aspects considered functional to the formulation of an organicist theory of reason, is one of the distinctive traits of British neo-Hegelianism. Its philosophical relevance was strictly related to its importance as a criterion of selection and evaluation of the possible theoretical options that stem from the adoption of Hegel's logic as the method of philosophical reflection. It should not be surprising, therefore, that it is precisely at this level – at the level of the interpretation of the continuity between Kant and Hegel – that Dewey tackled the issue of the theoretical availability of neo-

Hegelianism. As has been remarked at the end of the last section, even though Dewey agreed with neo-Hegelians on the minimal interpretation of transcendental philosophy as a form of constructivism without givenness, he was critical of some of their most characteristic theses. Dewey's critical confrontation with neo-Hegelian tradition had a strongly biographical tone since it was, at the very same time, a coming to term with his own philosophical apprenticeship. Indeed, his rejection of neo-Hegelianism coincided with a realization of the inadequateness of his own early theoretical approach to philosophical issues, as it was formulated in *Kant and the Philosophic Method*.

In that article, indeed, Dewey uncritically accepted the standard neo-Hegelian views as both the starting point and the conceptual framework of his reflections. Accordingly, he maintained that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* represents the "turning point of modern philosophy" in which the complementary errors of rationalists and empiricists are corrected; and then he went on to argue that it is "in Hegel and his 'Logic'" that can be found "the fulfilling of the Ideal" only foreseen by Kant (EW1: 43). Since transcendental philosophy relies upon the theoretical assumption that "Reason" is "synthetic only in reference to foreign material", the highest category that can be reached from that dualistic starting point is the category of reciprocity. Reciprocity he defined as "that external relation" that holds between subject and object in knowledge, the two poles of knowledge being conceived as independent entities complete in themselves, "but mutually [acting] upon each other" (EW1: 41; see also Morris 1880: 20 and 57-58). Rather classically, he suggested that the solution to the difficulties and shortcomings of transcendental philosophy were to be found a) in the recognition that the relation between subject and object is organic rather than external, and b) in a more radical analysis of the categories that determine the nature of both the object and the subject. Categories "must be deduced from Reason alone", thus privileging the internal determination of their "meaning and worth" over the reference to their "objective character", that is, their application to material delivered by sensibility. Indeed, categories "belong to a sphere where the antithesis between subject and object is still potential, or *an sich*" (EW1: 44). Consequently, the only notion that is rich enough and complex enough to properly describe experience is the idea of organism. The absolute deduction of categories, Dewey remarked, aims at discovering a system of categories of reason, "an organic unity", in which every category "has its own place fixed" (EW1: 44). By doing so, the conceptual texture of experience is

brought to light, and it shown that it consists in the “relations of its content, through which alone this content has character and meaning” (EW1: 43). The method of philosophy – this is the conclusion to which Dewey arrives at in his early *Kant and the Philosophic Method* – amounts to the dissection of experience with an eye to single out the categories that makes possible the construction of physical, moral, aesthetical, and religious world. Such conclusion – which was substantially identical to the results reached by Seth in his widely influential *Philosophy as Criticism of Categories*, and by Haldane in his *The Relation of Philosophy to Science*, two manifestos of British neo-Hegelianism – represents the best evidence of Dewey’s unreserved allegiance to neo-Hegelian movement in the first phase of his philosophical career.

In his *Psychology as Philosophic Method*, published in 1886 on *Mind* as the second of a series of two articles – the other being *The Psychological Standpoint* – devoted to inquiring into the possibility of combining transcendental and empirical philosophy into a consistent theoretical approach, Dewey undertook a major effort to put neo-Hegelian views under close scrutiny (Good 2006: 138). His main reservations concerned here neo-Hegelians’ insistence on the idea of philosophy as a criticism of categories, on the one hand, and their conviction that logic, conceived in strictly Hegelian terms, wholly exhausted the scope of transcendental analysis, on the other hand³³. His strategy to approach and deal with this complex set of issues was articulated on various levels. But first and foremost, Dewey markedly changed his terminology in order to more sharply emphasize his break from neo-Hegelian interpretation – both historiographical and theoretical – of the relationship between Kant and Hegel. Dewey stopped using the notion of category and substituted it with the concept of relation. Such a shift from ‘category’ to ‘relation’ went hand in hand with a substantial revision of the theory that underlies that terminological choice.

Relation was a key-notion of Green’s metaphysics of knowledge and one of the distinctive traits of his thought. But what is important to note for present

³³ The best illustration of this approach is provided by Seth: “Hegel justly, therefore, sets aside the subjective prejudice which infects Kant’s investigation, and insists upon the necessity of a perfectly disinterested investigation of our conceptions. His *Logic* is to be an analysis of the nature of thought undertaken without any preconceptions – an examination of our conceptions or categories on their own account, with a view to define them precisely and fix their mutual relations. The result is, as I have tried to show on another occasion, that instead of an impossible criticism *ab extra* of thought as such, we get an immanent criticism of one conception by another. The whole theory of knowledge resolves itself, indeed, into this immanent criticism of categories” (Seth 1887: 85-86).

purposes is that it represented a point of disagreement between Green's approach and the one followed by neo-Hegelians. Sullivan has intriguingly suggested that Green's preference for the term 'relation' was probably due to his willingness to "reinforce its active (and verbal) connection to Kant's synthetic unity of apperception" (Sullivan 2002: 636 fn.). So, according to this reading – with which I am in agreement – while speaking of categories should be taken as an evidence of a close proximity to the Hegelian philosophy and to the neo-Hegelian project of translating in 'epistemological' terms the fundamental insights of post-Kantian idealism, speaking of relation implicitly involved a reference to Kant's transcendental project. Contrary to neo-Hegelians, therefore, who were concerned with the definition of metaphysics as a science constitutively distinct from natural sciences, a science whose only task is to analyze the different languages in which the world can be understood, Green looked for a *philosophical* rather than a *psychological* treatment of mind – on this point, no difference can be detected between the two approaches – but he kept faithful to the more traditional and more conservative way of reading Kant's transcendental project as an analysis of the mental processes that construct the objective world.

Dewey followed Green on this point³⁴. Obviously, this does not mean that Dewey intended to embrace Green's version of idealism. He was well aware that

³⁴ This remark is important not only because it helps to shed light on the direction of Dewey's intellectual development, but also because it highlights some previously neglected aspects of his ambitious attempt to reconcile empiricist and transcendentalist traditions. In particular, it allows us to formulate a different evaluation of the influence exerted by Green's neo-Kantianism on Dewey's absolute idealism. Recent Dewey scholarship has insisted on the theoretical differences between Dewey's and Green's versions of idealism. Scholars such as Welchman and Shook have correctly emphasized the passages in which Dewey took the distance from Green (Welchman 1989: 409ff.; Shook 2000: 66). This has been made in order to counterbalance the traditional interpretation according to which Dewey's early philosophy was a variation on the theme of Green's neo-Kantian form of idealism (see, for instance, White 1944). In a certain sense, therefore, the one-sided emphasis of the differences between Dewey and Green was a necessary reaction against a previously one-sided emphasis of their similarity: its aim was to give the due credit to the novelty and originality of Dewey's psychological philosophy. However, an account along these lines of Dewey's philosophical evolution leaves some important aspects unaccounted and unaccountable. So, for instance, if the differences are emphasized, it becomes almost impossible to explain why in his relatively late *On the Current Conception of the Term 'Self'* (1890) Dewey continued to pay great attention to Green's philosophy. This is the great problem that Shook has to face in his reconstruction of Dewey's philosophical development, and to which I think he did not manage to find a satisfactory answer (Shook 2000: 133ff.). On the contrary, in the light of Sullivan's insightful consideration, it is easier to see why Dewey was prone to argue that even though the specific solution that Green advanced was wrong, nonetheless the problem that he intended to tackle was absolutely "genuine" (EW 3: 74). It also becomes clearer why, in the opening pages of *The*

the latter was fatally flawed by dualistic remnants that Green was not able to completely overcome³⁵. It would be erroneous, therefore, to read Dewey's acknowledgment of Green's philosophical relevance and his concomitant criticism of neo-Hegelianism as if he merely intended to substitute the latter with the former. Dewey's reading of Green's philosophy was highly selective: it was controlled by definite theoretical needs that prevented a *wholesale* adoption or a *wholesale* rejection. Nonetheless, it is impossible to deny that Dewey was attracted by some aspects of Green's neo-Kantian metaphysics of knowledge. It was Dewey himself, indeed, who declared in the opening lines of *The Psychological Standpoint* that Green's thought struck him as particularly relevant because of its capacity of showing "with such admirable lucidity and force" the *psychological standpoint* that was at the basis of the disagreement between transcendentalists and empiricists (EW1: 123). Green's insistence on the language of relations, as a decisive aspect into a more complex strategy aiming at formulating a sound idealistic psychology, is what attracted Dewey attention.

Shook has argued that it is very likely that Dewey hoped for an answer to his "path-breaking articles from any of his intended audience", which should be identified with the representatives of British neo-Hegelian movement (Shook 2000: 63). Unfortunately, an answer from the idealist side never arrived. Nonetheless, Dewey was right in believing that his philosophical proposal could

Psychological Standpoint, Dewey emphatically remarked that "English philosophy cannot now be what it would have been, if (to name only one of the writers) the late Prof. Green had not written" (EW1: 122). If the reading defended here is correct, the theoretical plausibility and the historical relevance of Green's philosophical view are asserted and emphasized because the latter was read by Dewey as an evidence that another approach to the issue of Kantian constructivism, different from the one endorsed by neo-Hegelians, was possible.

³⁵ In particular, Dewey could not accept Green's conclusion about the impossibility of knowing the nature of the eternal consciousness – that is, of the ultimate conditions of possibility of the existence of an objectivity world. According to Green, through the transcendental analysis on the conditions of possibility of our empirical knowledge of the world – what Green called 'metaphysics of knowledge' – human beings come to realize that eternal consciousness is the ultimate source of objectivity and meaning. However, the specific quality of eternal consciousness lies necessary beyond the scope of human knowledge. In Green's words, even though "*that* there is such a consciousness is implied in the existence of the world", "*what* it is we can only know through its so far acting in us as to enable us, however partially and interruptedly, to have knowledge of a world or an intelligent experience" (Green 1883: 53; see also EW1: 154, where the passage is quoted extensively). Green's distinction between the *that* and the *what* of consciousness was absolutely unacceptable for Dewey not only because its acceptance would have entailed a relapse into that kind of pre-critical dualism that neo-Hegelians, and especially Caird, had so convincingly criticized, but also because it represented a betrayal of the psychological standpoint that Green himself had the merit of discovering and putting at the center of the philosophical debate of the time.

have generated a lively discussion in idealistic circles. The provocative statement that opens *Psychology as Philosophic Method* – according to which, psychology, when adequately conceived, shows a “substantial identity with the presuppositions and results of the ‘transcendental’ movement” (EW1: 145) – was evidently directed against neo-Hegelians (Good 2006: 135). Indeed, as has been repeatedly noted above, even though British idealists were not suspicious of psychology as a natural science, it is true that they firmly believed that the psychological study of mind has nothing to do with the philosophical inquiry into the conditions of possibility of an experience. Moreover, amongst British idealists, Green was probably the one who most vehemently criticized the dangerous conflation between psychology and philosophy. Consequently, Dewey’s argument that Green’s teaching should be used as a springboard to jump to the conclusion that empiricists and transcendentalists agree in accepting the psychological standpoint could not help from being perceived as extremely controversial by his interlocutors. Indeed, neo-Hegelians were convinced that the analysis and criticism of categories was the best way of preserving Green’s insight that psychological and epistemological or metaphysical (in Green’s sense) inquiries into the nature of mind, meaning, and objectivity have to be kept separate (see in particular Ritchie 1893: 15-16, see above p. 50 fn.). Obviously, Dewey well aware that Green had not developed a positive theory in which empiricism and idealism are combined together. His attempt to separate Green’s philosophy from the interpretations of his thought advanced by neo-Hegelians aimed precisely at making room for a different conception of the method and proper goal of philosophical reflection – a conception that could not be found in Green’s works, but was formulated by Dewey himself in the 1886 articles on *Mind*.

Dewey’s terminological shift from ‘category’ to ‘relation’ and his heterodox evaluation of Green’s place in the history of English philosophy were therefore complementary steps towards the formulation of an alternative philosophical proposal that could theoretically counteract neo-Hegelian unilateral reduction of Kant’s transcendent philosophy to Hegel’s absolute logic. Dewey’s dissatisfaction with neo-Hegelians’ assumption that theory of knowledge resolves itself into an immanent criticism of categories was motivated by his desire to understand the concrete process of thinking through which a meaningful experience is

constituted³⁶. Dewey expressly acknowledged the need to go back to Kant as a possible way out from the shortcomings that tainted neo-Hegelianism in a central passage of *Psychology as Philosophic Method*. In this article, relying upon the Kantian distinction between thinking and knowing, Dewey charged neo-

³⁶ Dewey's reservations paralleled Seth's critical remark according to which "to speak of thought as self-existent, without any conscious being whose the thought is, conveys no meaning to our minds" (Seth 1887: 73). The point that Seth wanted to stress was that "thought *exists* only as the thought of a thinker": when taken in its abstraction, indeed, thought is devoid of any causal power, and becomes a mere play of concepts in which reality has gone lost (Seth 1887: 73; see also Seth 1894b: 5). Like Seth, Dewey was in quest for concreteness: consequently, he was firmly in rejecting the neo-Hegelian thesis of the identity of logic and metaphysics. Both Dewey and Seth realized the philosophical importance of Hegel's idealistic revision of Kantian transcendental philosophy. Both agreed that Hegel's greatest merit consists in avoiding "the arbitrary distinction which Kant has drawn between certain categories as objectively valid and others as merely regulative ideas" (Seth 1887: 88; see also EW1: 153). Therefore, no distinction is made between the simplest categories of mechanism and the highly refined categories of teleology and organism. Accordingly, every type of experience is entitled to claim the same theoretical dignity usually acknowledged to the experience of physical world. In other words, far from having a purely physical and mechanical significance, objects become meaningful from a moral, aesthetic, and religious point of view (Seth 1887: 88ff.; see also Haldane: 586). However, Dewey and Seth could not accept the view that philosophical reflection has to be boiled down to a mere criticism of categories, since they held that reality cannot be reduced to the logical dimension of thought. In any case, all these similarities notwithstanding, the agreement between Seth and Dewey was far from being complete. In particular, contrary to Seth, Dewey was not convinced by Trendelenburg's well-known critique of Hegel's logical method. As is well known, Trendelenburg charged Hegel with suppressing any reference to experience, thus presenting the dialectical development of thought as a wholly *a priori* process of deduction, which proceeds "without presuppositions" (Harris 1890: 134). Hegel's dialectical method necessarily presupposes the reality from which it abstracts because the contradiction that Hegel identified as the motor force of the process of logical deduction of categories is a real contradiction. In Trendelenburg's words, Hegel's method "is simply the act by which we undo or retrace our original abstraction" (Trendelenburg 1840: Vol. 1, 95, translated in Seth 1887: 93; see also Trendelenburg 1871; see also Morris 1874). Seth approvingly quoted Trendelenburg's passage because he believed that Hegel's fundamental error was that of neglecting the reality of self-conscious experience. By saying that "a standing characteristic of Hegel's thought" consists in the fact that "the order of exposition always reverses the real order of thought by which the results were arrived at", Seth intended to call attention to the concrete individuals that perform the concrete act of *thinking*, and, by doing so, make possible the logical development of the categories of *thought* (Seth 1887: 95). Even though Dewey acknowledged the validity of Trendelenburg's criticism of any form of purely *a priori* deduction of categories of thought, he was not seduced by the attempts made by Seth and Trendelenburg to question the validity of absolute idealism. He was not interested in emphasizing the particularity to the detriment of universality, as Seth did. Least of all, he was interested in rejecting idealism in favor of a form of realism indebted to both Kant and Aristotle, as Trendelenburg suggested. As Good has pointed out, Dewey's philosophical proposal, as was formulated in *Psychology as Philosophic Method*, can also be read as an effort to "save idealism from the Trendelenburgian critique" (Good 2006: 138; but on the relationship between Dewey and Trendelenburg, see Rosenstock 1964). Dewey's aim was that of grounding absolute idealism on more solid bases than those on which it had been grounded by neo-Hegelians.

Hegelians with reducing the actuality of the latter to the abstractness of the former, thus betraying the original constructivist insight that Kant had developed with so many difficulties. Indeed, according to Dewey, it has too often been overlooked that Kant looked for an account of the construction of *experience*. It is true that Kant fell short of achieving his goal because he did not realize that self-consciousness is not a function of synthesis, but rather a *fact of experience* (EW1: 151). Unfortunately, he was led by “logical presumptions” – that is, presumptions that were at the basis of his theory of knowledge – to conclude that while perception and conception are “matters of experience”, self-consciousness falls necessarily beyond the scope of possible experience (EW1: 152). In so doing, he precluded the possibility of getting rid of the dogmatic biases that prevented him from formulating a consistent form of absolute idealism. However, Kant was guided in his analysis by a genuine *psychological method*: this represents – at least, in Dewey’s eyes – his most important theoretical contribution, and the aspect of his philosophy that deserves to be preserved. To follow the psychological method means that every act of consciousness (perception, imagination, thought, and self-consciousness) has to be accounted for not by referring it to “its logical conditions”, but to the facts of experience that makes it real (EW1: 151). Psychological method assures the needed proximity to experience that logical method necessarily cannot provide.

It is at this level that Dewey identified the point of divergence between Kantian transcendental project and Hegel’s absolute idealism. As has been remarked above, Dewey was well aware that Hegel’s insistence on “the organic notion, or Begriff” constitutes a successful correction of Kant’s erroneous logical method and standard (EW1: 153). For this reason, he was not interested in questioning the validity of Hegel’s logic. Rather, his point was that, to use Dewey’s own words, even though “Hegel accomplished this work [the correction of Kant’s logical method] successfully and thoroughly”, nonetheless “it seems equally clear that the work of Kant is in need of another complement, *following more closely his own conception and method and of philosophy*, which shall consist in showing self-consciousness as a fact of experience” (EW1: 153; italics added). Consequently, the object of Dewey’s criticism was not Hegel’s logic, which he considered a wholly legitimate philosophical attempt, but the interpretation of it advanced by neo-Hegelians. “No contradiction results as soon as logic is given its proper place *within* system”, Dewey argued (EW1: 164). What is illegitimate is only the unnecessary assumption that logic is the method of philosophy, and,

consequently, the concomitant conviction that logic can grasp the nature of reality. Such an unwarranted extension of logical method is only adumbrated in Hegel's work, but is made explicit in neo-Hegelians' texts. It lies at the root of the charge of panlogism directed by many critics of idealism against Hegel and his followers³⁷.

The intrinsic limit of the neo-Hegelian conception of philosophy as a criticism of categories is that it is impossible to pass from the definition of the logical necessity to the description of reality. Reality cannot be logically deduced since it is the ultimate, irreducible *fact* whose reality is always presupposed by every thought as its *actual* condition of possibility. "If we start from reason alone", Dewey concisely remarked, "we shall never reach fact" (EW1: 161). On the contrary, if one starts from the fact, it becomes possible to account for the different *acts of abstraction* that constitute, on the one hand, the subject-matter of the various sciences of nature (including psychology as a natural science), and, on the other hand, the subject-matter of logic. Psychology – conceived as the science of experience as a whole, or, to use Dewey's own words, as the science of the organic system of self-consciousness – makes it explicit the "necessary implication" of every system of philosophy, that is, its dependence on the whole fact that lies at its basis (EW1: 163). On principle, psychology as philosophic method refuses any form of abstraction: it assumes the concrete movement of experience as the starting point and the subject-matter of its analysis. In so doing, it approaches the issue of providing an adequate explanation of reality in the right way. Psychology as philosophic method is nothing but the self-conscious realization that only the living actual fact, that is, *individual* experience, "can preserve within its unity that organic system of differences in virtue of which it lives and moves and has its being" (EW1: 166).

What is important to remark is that Dewey saw the substitution of logic with psychology as a change of perspective necessary to provide a sound foundation to his absolute idealism. According to the standard Neo-Hegelian reading, Kant

³⁷ "The legitimate inference from this view of the relation of the intelligence to the intelligible world would seem to be, that the partial separation of thought from its object, and its imperfect correspondence with it, are characteristic of our first empirical consciousness of things, and of the stage in which we are advancing from that consciousness to science, but that in completed science the division ceases. The *esse* of things is not their *percipi*, but their *intelligi*" (Caird 1883/1892: 486-487). Please compare it with Dewey's well known statement that "the real *esse* of things is neither their *percipi*, nor their *intelligi* alone; it is their *experiri*" (EW1: 161; for a discussion of this point, see Shook 2000: 60ff.).

did not manage to achieve a consistent idealism because of his dogmatic commitment to the empiricist principle that meaning and objectivity depend upon the material given by sense. Consequently, transcendental philosophy is in need of revision for what its logical standard is concerned. As has been repeatedly remarked, neo-Hegelians argued that it was Hegel who showed how to complete Kant's critical project. In order to achieve this goal, reason should be conceived as both analytic and synthetic – or, stated in other terms, as a whole in which *a posteriori* and *a priori* knowledge are reconciled. Nonetheless, neo-Hegelians went too far, and fell back into the rationalist temptation of believing that reason alone could reveal the nature of reality. Dewey's appeal to psychology as philosophic method was part of a complex strategy aiming at freeing absolute idealism from the threat of rationalism that was latently active in Hegel's *Logic*.

It is for this reason that the solution outlined by Dewey is so finely articulated. A consistent form of absolute idealism, Dewey argued, is possible if and only if Kant and Hegel are brought together into a higher synthesis. Therefore, absolute idealism can be achieved as a result of a double correction. First of all, it is necessary to rectify Kant's inconsistencies. Following the neo-Hegelian criticism of Kant, Dewey believed that such a revision had been satisfactorily accomplished by Hegel along the lines described above. But Trendelenburg had shown that Hegel's logic does not represent a reliable starting point for philosophical reflection. Consequently, Dewey realized that it was necessary to go back to Kant in order to "rediscovery" the concreteness of experience as the ultimate condition of possibility of the activity of thinking and, *a fortiori*, of logic as the science of thought. This double movement from Kant to Hegel and back again is the way in which Dewey interpreted the widespread need of a return to Kant. To go back to Kant meant for Dewey, first and foremost, to go back to the very idea of absolute idealism that Hegel foresaw, but did not manage to develop in a consistent way.

Dewey was convinced that his psychological idealism could bring the German idealistic tradition to its natural completion. However, he was aware that his idiosyncratic philosophical proposal could not be considered as a theoretically viable option until the traditional reservations advanced by neo-Hegelians against the assimilation of philosophy and psychology were definitely dispelled. The issue that Dewey had to tackle, therefore, was that of explaining the relation between universal and particular consciousness in a way that could

avoid the classical neo-Hegelian objections without relapsing into a form of “transcendent” realism – in which reality is identified with the things-in-themselves – or into a form of subjective idealism – in which reality is boiled down to the private psychical states of an individual (EW1: 135). Dewey’s psychological analysis of the relation between universal and particular consciousness – to the discussion of which the next section will be devoted – is the second great point of disagreement with the neo-Hegelian movement. Undoubtedly, it represents Dewey’s major theoretical contribution to the Anglo-American debate over the tenability of the idealistic point of view.

2.3. *Esse is Experiri: Psychology as the Science of the Absolute*

2.3.1. *The Structure of Meaning: The Relation between Individual and Universal Consciousness*

Dewey’s insistence on the primacy of psychology over logic should be read as a powerful assertion of the primacy of experienced meaning over the many possible abstractions that can be obtained by severing and isolating some parts from the whole that gives them their distinctive significance. In open contrast to neo-Hegelians, who maintained that the process through which meaning develops and reveals itself is distinctively logical, Dewey argued that meaning is a *fact* of experience. In other words, Dewey was not primarily interested in the process through which meaning is logically deduced from its premises. Rather, he was concerned with defining the essential features of the concrete process – a process that he called ‘psychological’ – through which actual experience is embodied with meanings³⁸.

³⁸ Unfortunately, in the couple of articles published on *Mind* in 1886 in which this approach is outlined Dewey continued to exploit the standard idealistic terminology. Consequently, one may be led to interpret Dewey’s discussion of the relation between universal and individual consciousness as an attempt to tackle the theological problem of the relation between God and the individual soul (on the confusions stemming from Dewey’s language, see Shook 2000: 51ff.). In reality, nothing could be further from Dewey’s intentions than to try to conflate transcendental analysis and metaphysical suggestions. As Green before him, Dewey looked for the conditions of

When seen from this perspective point, Dewey's psychological philosophy reveals itself as an ambitious effort to continue and refine the work of analysis and explanation of concepts initiated by neo-Hegelians. Both the empiricists and the idealists do not account for *all* the concepts they employed. On the one hand, empiricists assume that the distinction between mind and world is a basic fact that cannot be further analyzed. On the other hand, idealists hold that an unbridgeable distinction has to be drawn between two different aspects of human nature: according to the first one, man is "an object of experience and the subject of psychology"; according to the second one, man is a self-conscious being and "the universal condition and unity of all experience" (EW1: 147). In both cases, Dewey remarked, an implicit dualism is surreptitiously introduced in philosophical reflection which impedes the formulation of a satisfactory account of experience.

In order to overcome these limitations, Dewey suggested that a *psychological standpoint* has to be adopted³⁹. Dewey argued that the fundamental advantage of this approach over every other method of inquiry is that since nothing in principle can be accepted that does not reveal itself in experience, there is no risk of transcending the scope of human knowledge. In so doing, any temptation is avoided to subtract parts of our conceptual scheme and, consequently, of reality from the net of relations that only constitutes its meaning. The theoretical significance of every possible concept and object has to be evaluated in the light of what experience tells us about it. In the last analysis, every concept has to be traced back to concrete experience in order to highlight the theoretical needs that it was originally designed to satisfy. It is the 'language of experience', therefore, that the transcendental and the empirical traditions have in common: consequently, it is at this level that Dewey thought that they should be reconciled.

possibility of meaningful experience, but moving within a revised idealistic framework that prevents from drawing Kant's distinction between form and matter of experience.

³⁹ As Shook has correctly pointed out, Dewey took the expression "psychological standpoint" from Ward's extremely influential article *Psychological Principles I: The Standpoint of Psychology* and from (Ward 1883; 153; Ward 1886/1892: 38; see also Shook 2000: 45). However, Ward's 'proto-phenomenological' psychology revolved around the assumption that the standpoint of psychology is "individualistic". So, Ward wrote: "[t]he standpoint of psychology, then, is individualistic; by whatever methods, from whatever sources its facts are ascertained, they must — to have a psychological import — be regarded as having place in, or as being part of, some one's consciousness" (Ward 1886/1892: 38). As will be shown in the next pages, this assertion Dewey was not disposed to endorse. His theory of experience is 'absolute' rather than 'individualistic', the individual being only one of its factors.

Dewey's argument is grounded in the following line of reasoning: since psychology is the science of experience; and since psychology takes "the whole of conscious experience for its scope"; psychology is the absolute science insofar as it is the science of the Absolute (EW1: 136). This means that every possible content is real if and only if it can be realized in an individual experience (EW1: 152). Indeed, a content separated from its actualization in experience results in a dead abstraction. This conclusion is particularly important because it enabled Dewey to outline a reliable methodology of philosophical analysis that could support his contention that a consistent form of absolute idealism can be reached by adopting a psychological standpoint. As Hodgson so neatly remarked in his critical response to Dewey's couple of articles under discussion here, Dewey's argument leads to the conclusion that "Absolute Idealism is not only a truth of experience but one attained directly by the method of experiential psychology" (Hodgson 1886: 478).

In the light of these methodological acquisitions, Dewey felt confident that a different solution to the issue concerning the theoretical validity of the distinction between individual and universal consciousness could eventually be provided. Universal and individual consciousness are not two different levels of reality, as Caird seemed to believe. Neither they are two different aspects of human nature or two different "ways of looking at the same material", that is, the activity of realization of the universe in the individual (EW1: 156). In reality, universal and individual consciousness are two *moments* in the ongoing process of knowledge through which the subject comes to know its object. Any attempt of hypostatizing the different moments of a concrete experience constitutes therefore an illegitimate ontologization of a distinction that has only a psychological validity (EW1: 150). Universal consciousness is nothing but the wholly developed system of relations in which an object is constituted as an object of knowledge. On the other hand, individual consciousness is nothing but the particular knower in which, and through which, the "nature of the eternal and the universal within himself" becomes part of an actual experience (EW1: 152). Both are wholly legitimate abstractions once they are recognized as different ways of handling the whole of reality. What is ultimately real is only the fact that universal consciousness *has* realized itself in individual consciousness (EW1: 157).

Green's terminology was partially modified by Dewey in order to make room for a consistent idealistic theory of self as activity in which the distinction

between universal and individual consciousness could find its proper place and meaning. The classical idealistic doctrine that the self is essentially activity was developed in an original way, emphasizing the power of the self of directly determining its material. Even though only in a rather rudimentary form, indeed, in his 1886 articles Dewey tried to formulate an account of meaning that centered around the idea of embodiment of an universal content in an individual element. In particular, Dewey laid stress on the fact that universal consciousness “is the realization and manifestation of itself”, thus insisting on its power of becoming the very structure of reality (EW1: 157). This assumption obviously entailed a radical redefinition of the traditional idealistic conceptual framework.

Well aware of the neo-Hegelian lesson, Dewey assigned an outstanding importance to the notion of self-consciousness, conceived of not as the highest logical category, but as the highest and most concrete fact of experience. Self-consciousness is that stage of experience in which a comprehensive understanding of the relations that constitute objectivity and meaning is reached. In self-consciousness, relations are brought to consciousness so that the form and the content of experience or consciousness “are exactly equal to each other” (EW1: 163). By being brought to self-consciousness, relations reveal their dependence on the whole that lies at their basis. Consequently, psychology, as the science of conscious experience in its wholeness, is the process through which consciousness becomes self-conscious.

Self-consciousness consists in the “systematic account and comprehension of the nature of conscious experience”, in which the results achieved by the natural sciences are pieced together in a coherent whole (EW1: 159). The abstraction of some section of experience from the whole is an *act* of “psychologic experience” through which reality is analyzed in its constitutive parts (EW: 159). In this sense, it is the “analytic aspect” of the activity of the self, “whereby it deepens and renders explicit, realizes its own nature” (EW1: 160). The analytic moment is followed by a synthetic moment that connects the elements previously discovered by applying the method of abstraction. The self-developing activity in its entirety is psychology, “which shows itself as the organic unity of both synthetic and analytic movements, and thus the condition of their possibility and the ground of their validity” (EW1: 160). But to say that it is only in the system of science in its entirety that self-consciousness is realized means that it is only in psychology that universal consciousness can be said to exist. Dewey expressed this fundamental point by saying that universal consciousness “has no existence

except as absolutely realized in an individual, i.e., except as self-consciousness” (EW1: 160). That universal consciousness, that is, the eternal system of relations, exists only in the very process of its realization is the fundamental tenet of Dewey’s psychological idealism.

Dewey’s position, as expounded in *Psychology as Philosophic Method*, can be therefore summarized as follows: a) self-consciousness is the absolute fact of experience; b) the reality of self-consciousness is its very activity; c) psychology is the science whose subject-matter coincides with the whole experience, and d) psychology is the genetic account of the various concepts and categories that are used to analyze experience into its constituent elements and to synthesize the latter into a consistent whole. Even though Dewey’s argument is rather elliptic, some very important conclusions about his view of the relation between universal and individual consciousness and his extremely original conception of psychology can be drawn from it. The responses that the young Dewey gave to these issues are worthy of particular attention not only because they shed further light on his distance from neo-Hegelian tradition, but also because they help to highlight some tensions that characterize Dewey’s first attempt to confront with the most urgent theoretical problems of his time.

First of all, the thesis that self-consciousness is nothing but the coming to consciousness of the process through which universal consciousness *has* realized itself in individual consciousness prevents from conceiving their relation in *phenomenological* terms (EW1: 156). Dewey was very careful to rule out this option because he was aware that a phenomenological interpretation does not truly resolve the problem, but only takes it to a different level. Indeed, if universal consciousness is conceived of as being complete in itself before its manifestation in individual experience, absolute reality is treated as being given independently from the activity that realizes it. Consequently, the distinction between universal and individual consciousness is taken as having an absolute rather than a relative validity, and the psychological standpoint is definitively abandoned. Since absolute idealism is a direct consequence of the adoption of the psychological standpoint as the proper method of philosophical reflection, the conviction that that distinction does not need to be psychologically justified amounts to a relapse into a form of pre-critical dogmatism.

Dewey had therefore to explore other ways to account for it, which had to be compatible with his distinctive thesis that there is nothing before and outside activity. Now, the psychological standpoint states that the ultimate reason of the

distinction between universal and individual consciousness is to be found in a necessity internal to the fact of experience. Thence, it suggests how to correctly pose the problem in terms that make it possible to formulate a plausible solution. According to the methodological criteria defined by Dewey, to psychologically account for the distinction between universal and individual consciousness amounts to answering the question of its origin and relative validity.

In order to approach these issues in the appropriate manner, it may be useful to translate Dewey's argument in a more intuitive language. For present purposes, the distinction between universal and individual consciousness can be taken as substantially equivalent to the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity (see, for instance, EW1: 139). Consequently, Dewey's problem can be traced back to the standard problem of explaining whether or not objectivity is coextensive with subjectivity. As has been remarked above, neither objectivity nor subjectivity are primary, but both are abstraction from the concrete activity of self-realization. Self-realization is the general process through which the universal content becomes embodied in an individual element, thus bringing about, on the one side, the 'objectivation' of the subject and, on the other side, the 'subjectivation' of the object. The universal content may be a moral law - in this case, self-realization acquires a distinctively ethical character. Or it may be a general theoretical principle, in whose case self-realization is an instance of knowledge acquisition. In both cases, however, the two elements are originally bound together, and only in a second moment are the two separated and made into two distinct aspects or levels of reality.

For what concerns the theoretical side, with which we are concerned here, Dewey argued that the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity originates whenever the question is raised about the possibility of explaining the acquisition of knowledge. This is an extremely general issue that has numerous ramifications and applications. Dewey was particularly interested in defusing the evolutionary objections to the theoretical viability of the idealistic theory of knowledge and reality. As is well known, evolutionists maintained that theory of evolution could provide a satisfactory account of the process of acquisition of knowledge, which they identified with the very fact of the coming into being of consciousness within a purely physical world. Dewey replied to this kind of argument by remarking that in every possible explanation of the origin of consciousness both subject and object are presupposed as already formed. So, for instance, when a psychologist tries to provide a natural history of a child's developing

consciousness, he is implicitly assuming meaningful experience as the theoretical horizon in which only it is possible to account for the fact of the acquisition of knowledge. "An infant", Dewey remarked, "is [...] a known object existing in the world of experience; and his nervous organism and the objects which affect it, these too [...] are known objects which exist for consciousness" (EW1: 128). Every genetic explanation presupposes an individual consciousness in which the universal consciousness *has* already realized itself. It is only when the fact of the actual possess of knowledge is retrospectively considered that it becomes possible to distinguish between the objective reality – conceived as a world of meaningful objects – and the subjective experience of the knower.

In laying stress upon the fact that consciousness is the all-encompassing horizon of meaning and objectivity, Dewey was obviously relying upon the traditional neo-Hegelian view that what is inferior has necessary to be explained by what is superior. But Dewey's theoretical proposal is not reducible to the neo-Hegelian standard position because of its insistence on the 'temporal dimension' that characterizes the process of self-realization. Dewey put great emphasis on the fact that the manifestation of universal consciousness in an individual consciousness is an activity that has already come to an end. Referring to Green's dualistic assumption of the impossibility of knowing *what* universal consciousness is in itself, Dewey explicitly remarked that Green's fundamental error has been that of neglecting the temporal priority of the unity of universal and individual consciousness. "Had [Green] shown as matter of fact that this universal consciousness *had* realized itself [...] in us", Dewey wrote, "he certainly would have been able to make very positive statements regarding it, and would also have furnished a basis in fact for his logical method" (EW1: 154). What is always presupposed in every analysis or genetic explanation of experience is therefore the already constituted embodiment of universal content in an individual element that makes it possible to have a meaningful world in view. As Dewey remarked, it is in the light of the definition of the co-appartenance of subject and object, universal and individual consciousness, in 'temporal' terms that he managed to ground his absolute idealism on positive bases. Indeed, even though his reference to the temporal dimension was extremely schematic and, in the last analysis, not wholly satisfactory, the recognition of this fundamental aspect paved the way for a different solution to neo-Hegelian problem of how to conceive the identity of knowledge and reality.

Dewey was very attentive to highlight the temporal priority of the unity of universal and individual consciousness since he believed that this was the ultimate condition of possibility of meaningful experience and of philosophical reflection, the latter being nothing but the scientific inquiry into the structure of the former. Indeed, if the universal consciousness were in principle separated from individual consciousness, it would be impossible to account for the possibility of achieving objective knowledge. It was Caird who made the greatest effort to understand how an individual can overcome his finitude, how he can come to look at things "*in ordine ad universon* and not *in ordine ad individuum*" (Caird 1883/1892: 473). Caird had maintained that such a standpoint can be reached if and only if an individual is able to "discount the influences of his immediate position and circumstances, even of his personal wishes and feelings" (Caird 1883: 151). Dewey wholly agreed with Caird on this point; however, he also argued that Caird did not manage to consistently develop this fundamental insight because of his unfortunate commitment to dualistic assumptions. Explicitly referring to Caird's position, Dewey remarked in *Psychology as Philosophic Method* that "it would be fatal to the existence of philosophy as well as of psychology" to make a distinction between universal and individual consciousness (EW1: 148). Indeed, "were not the universe realized in the individual, it would be impossible for the individual to rise to a universal point of view", and, therefore, both the fact of experience and the act of philosophizing would be utterly impossible (EW1: 149). If the individual were essentially shut off from reality, he could not reach the universal point of view that only can ensure the acquisition of objective knowledge. Consequently, his knowledge would be of a purely negative sort since reality and truth would necessarily lie beyond the scope of his experience. In other words, if a perfect coincidence of individual and universal consciousness is not assumed as a fact of experience, if knowledge and reality are not conceived as originally unified in an act of self-realization, the idealistic thesis that knowledge and reality *convertuntur* has to be definitely abandoned. The infinite circle of knowledge and reality is substituted with a specious infinity in which the unification of the two elements is a goal that can never be attained.

Again, Dewey's criticism of neo-Hegelianism brought him very close to Hegel's views. It was Hegel, indeed, who stressed the fact that the transcendental project was an unsatisfactory philosophical standpoint precisely because it limited human knowledge to the sphere of phenomena, that is, to the realm of

what is by definition unreal and untrue. In the *Encyclopaedia Logic* – translated in English by William Wallace in 1874 under the title *The Logic of Hegel* – Hegel noticed that “Critical Philosophy assumes that experience affords the one sole foundation for cognitions; which however it does not allow to rank as truths, but only as knowledge of phenomena” (Hegel 1874: 82). Dewey believed that the very same objection could be raised against neo-Hegelians. Even though they were persuaded of the contrary, by keeping universal and individual consciousness apart they were repeating the very same error made by Kant. Therefore, Dewey argued that neo-Hegelian philosophies, insofar as they continued to accept the separation between universal and individual consciousness, could not be viewed as consistent forms of absolute idealism.

The latter remark is very useful to shed some light on a point that in recent times has stimulated an important debate in Dewey scholarship, and which has a direct relevance for the issue under discussion here. It has been argued by many interpreters – and in particular by Good in his *A Search for Unity in Diversity* and in his *Rereading Dewey’s “Permanent Hegelian Deposit”* – that Dewey’s insistence, in the *Psychology*, on the idea of a perfect personality should be taken as a clear evidence of his incapacity to overcome the errors and shortcomings of neo-Hegelianism (Good 2010: 59; for a comprehensive discussion of Good’s reading, see Gronda 2011). On Good’s reading, in 1887 *Psychology* Dewey equated perfect personality with God “as a way to ground philosophy”: in so doing, “Dewey made the same sort of Kantian move as the British neo-Hegelians” since he surreptitiously introduced a concept in philosophical reflection that cannot be accounted for in purely psychological terms (Good 2010: 58). Evidently, this position is in open contradiction with the methodological convictions that Dewey himself had developed. Good has therefore been led to conclude that while in the *Mind* articles Dewey came out with a clear rejection of any form of dogmatism, in his *Psychology* he did not manage to meet these methodological constraints. It is for this reason – so Good’s argument goes on – that after the publication of his *Psychology* Dewey attempted to return to the original Hegelian insight that he had formulated in *The Psychological Standpoint* and in *Psychology as Philosophic Method*⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Good’s interpretative proposal has many strong points in its favor. In particular, it has the merit of highlighting the fact that, contrary to what has been often argued, Dewey’s early philosophy cannot be boiled down to an orthodox form of neo-Hegelianism. By paying due attention to Dewey’s dissatisfaction with the standard available solutions to the problem of the nature of

It is not intended here to deny the theoretical and historiographical fruitfulness of Good's interpretation. However, in the light of what has been said above, a different consideration of the notion of perfect personality seems possible, which lays greater stress on the continuity of Dewey's philosophical development, and suggests a different evaluation of the relationship between his methodological prescriptions and his systematic account of meaning, at least as expounded in *Psychology*. The analysis of this particular aspect is undoubtedly the most controversial point in Good's otherwise convincing argument. Good has assumed that Dewey did not manage to live up to the standard that he had put forth in his 1886 articles. Luckily enough, however, "the neo-Hegelian concept contemporary Deweyans would find most objectionable in the *Psychology*, 'the perfect Personality or Will', is utterly unessential to the theories presented in the book" (Good 2006: 144). For this reason, it is possible to separate what is living and what is dead in Dewey's early idealism – respectively, his Hegelian method and his unfortunate exploitation of the neo-Hegelian concept of perfect personality – without being compelled to conclude that Dewey's *Psychology* in its wholeness is a distinctively neo-Hegelian enterprise aiming at clarifying the nature of mental activity.

Its ingenuity notwithstanding, this solution seems too artificial to be completely satisfactory. Obviously, the possibility that Dewey actually made a mistake cannot be ruled out *a priori*, especially if one takes into consideration the numerous difficulties that Dewey encountered when he tried to express his philosophical views in the standard idealistic language. However, it does not seem necessary in the present case to have recourse to such a radical interpretative hypothesis as that of assuming that Dewey's use of the notion of perfect personality amounts to an erroneous relapse into neo-Hegelianism. Indeed, contrary to what Good has argued, the idea of perfect personality does

meaning and objectivity, Good has shown that Dewey was in search for a different theoretical option that could provide a reliable basis for his psychological version of absolute idealism. One of the points of strength of Good's interpretation of Dewey's early philosophy is that it succeeds in pointing out the numerous tensions and inconsistencies that characterize Dewey's psychological idealism. In so doing, it paves the way for a more accurate reading of his whole philosophical development. Indeed, once it is acknowledged that the starting point was potentially inconsistent, it is no more necessary to assume an external influence as the cause of his decision to abandon it. Consequently, the plausibility of the traditional account, according to which Dewey's rejection of idealism was due to his reading of William James's *Principles of Psychology*, is seriously undermined. This point will be discussed at length in chapter 2, where an attempt will be made to explain how Dewey tried to merge together Hegelian idealism and James's naturalistic view of mind.

not necessarily imply a neo-Hegelian conceptual framework. Even though the twin ideas of perfect personality and intuition of God represent the ultimate warrant of, respectively, moral and theoretical activities, it does not follow that such ultimate warrants have to be hypostatized into a transcendent entity beyond the scope of human experience. Rather the contrary, Dewey maintained that perfect personality – as well as intuition of God, on the theoretical side – is nothing but the coming to consciousness of the original unity of universal and individual consciousness. Insofar, his appeal to the notion of perfect personality should be read as being part of a complex theoretical strategy aiming at correcting not only the explicit dualism of neo-Kantians like Green, but also the implicit and even denied dualism of his fellow neo-Hegelians. Perfect personality Dewey defined as “the motive, source, and the realization of the life of the individual” (EW 2: 361). Far from being an illegitimate hypostatization, perfect will is the absolute standpoint an agent has to endorse to avoid inconsistencies caused by the Kantian unwillingness to discard the dogmatic assumption that human reason and will are limited by the existence of a thing-in-itself. That this was Dewey’s aim is confirmed by the following remark: when the perfect will is recognized by an agent as the motive of his action, he wrote, “the source of his concrete actions is no longer the will that the ideal and the actual ought to be one [...], but it is the will that they are one; and this specific case [...] is the manifestation of this unity” (EW 2: 361). Similarly, what Dewey referred to with the unfortunate expression ‘the intuition of God’ is nothing but the absolute standpoint a knower has to endorse in order to stop conceiving his theoretical apparatus as a purely subjective conceptual scheme that is projected upon an independent material. Since absolute idealism is the thesis that knowledge shows the very structure of objective reality, the process of knowing cannot stop before the apprehension of the highest whole in which the world and the knowing self find their definitive conciliation. As Dewey observed, “[t]he true self-related must be the organic unity of the self and the world, of the ideal and the real, and this is what we know as God” (EW2: 212). In both cases, therefore, the analysis of the conditions of possibility of a certain activity – no matter whether moral or theoretical – ends with the realization that the goal of philosophical reflection is not to bring about the unity of previously independent and unrelated elements, but rather to recognize and bring to consciousness what is present in that activity from the very *beginning*, that is, the original co-appartenance of universal and individual content, reality and knowledge.

2.3.2. Dewey's 'Psychology' in its Context

When seen from this perspective, Dewey's *Psychology* stands out as the natural extension of the remarks put forth in *The Psychological Standpoint* and in *Psychology as Philosophic Method*. Consequently, there is no need to introduce a distinction between his methodological assumptions and the conclusions he reached about the nature of mentality and meaning because the latter are in continuity with the former. Obviously, this is not to deny that the terminology and the set of concepts that Dewey used in his *Psychology* are different in many respects from the ones that he had employed in his previous articles. In reality, there is textual evidence that Dewey subjected his philosophical lexicon to a major revision in the last months of 1886. This terminological revision dramatically enhanced the explanatory power of his idealistic account of the issues of meaning and objectivity. The process of conceptual change that Dewey undertook evolved along two different lines. On the one hand, as a consequence of his reading of Bradley's *Principles of Logic*, Dewey realized that the conceptual couple existence/meaning formulated by Bradley in the first chapter of the book was much more clear and unproblematic than the distinction drawn by British idealists between individual and universal consciousness. On the other hand, Dewey started deepening the psychological dimension of his idealism.

Probably in order to mark with greater precision the point of disagreement with British neo-Hegelians, Dewey decided to systematically exploit the notion of idealization. Idealization (or idealisation) is a term introduced into the philosophical lexicon by Lewes. In his widely influential *Problems of Mind* Lewes used 'idealisation' to refer to those processes through which perceptions are transformed into conceptions (Lewes 1879: 265ff.; see also Tjoa 1977: 126ff.). Ideal constructions of science, Lewes argued, enable the mind to *see* in the present data of sense an universal law. So, for instance, when a general law of motion is established, all the particularities of the individual case in question are set aside, and "[f]rom the Pisgah of *what is*, the mind sees what *will be*, or what *would be*, if all conflicting movements were allowed to neutralize each other" (Lewes 1879: 268). In other words, the connections established amongst the different elements of the particular case exhaust their entire meaning: indeed, it is the universal law that provides the rule according to which the deliverances of sense have to be connected. To use Lewes's own words, this means that "[p]erception gives the naked fact of Sense, isolated, unconnected, merely juxtaposed with other facts,

and without far reaching significance" (Lewes 1879: 272). It is only when "the artifice of Construction" is added by an act of mind to "the brute simplicity of Sensation" that mind idealizes its material, and thus eventually comes to understand its significance⁴¹ (Lewes 1879: 272).

The young Dewey embraced the notion of idealization without endorsing the naturalistic and evolutionist framework in which it had been originally defined by Lewes. This because he believed that a sound theory of idealization could not be possible except on the basis of an idealistic theory of mental activity. Indeed, it is only the latter that can support a constructivist theory of meaning. Consequently, Dewey's *Psychology* – at least for what regards its theoretical side, with which we are concerned here – was intended to be a thoroughly idealistic account of the acts of mind through which an objective meaning comes to be embodied in a particular existence. Emphasizing the idealistic and constructivist aspects of Lewes's views, Dewey conceived idealization as the intellectual movement through which the meaning implicitly present at the level perception is brought out and progressively refined. Perception, memory, imagination, thought, and intuition are the different stages of the continuous process of idealization of material which constitutes the intellectual life of an individual self. Taken together, they represent the successive steps – psychological and not logical, as neo-Hegelians had held – through which the original unity of thought

⁴¹ Lewes was aware that there was something seemingly paradoxical from an empiricist perspective in the view that a particular is known only when attention is paid to its universal traits (Lewes 1879: 272). British empiricists had argued for the thesis that what is real is what is directly perceptible, what impresses from without. They insisted on the particularity of sense-impressions to the detriment of the universality of the law. However, an account along these lines makes it impossible to explain the process of enrichment of meaning that "the naked fact of sense" undergoes when the general laws that describe its behavior are discovered (Lewes 1879: 272). It is in the very essence of meaning and cognition to be concerned with the universal rather than the with particular element. So, even though Lewes was heir of the empiricist tradition, he was compelled to recognize the theoretical advantages of the idealistic approach to the issue of meaning (on this point, see Tjoa 1977: 124). To better clarify this point, Lewes made an interesting comparison between the linguistic and the 'experiential' composition of meaning that was subsequently repeated with slight changes by Green in his *Prolegomena*. Using language as the touchstone, Lewes remarked that "[f]acts are mere letters which have their meaning only in the words they form; and these words again have their meaning, not in themselves alone, but in their positions in the sentence" (Lewes 1879: 272; Green 1883: 75-76; see also Anger 2005: 94). It is only through the "manifold ideal constructions of the Possible", Lewes concluded, that it is possible to appreciate and understand the meaning of the Actual (Lewes 1879: 272).

and reality, universal and individual consciousness, meaning and existence, is brought to self-consciousness and made an actual content of experience⁴².

As is evident, the results reached in *Psychology* confirmed and integrated the general conclusions that Dewey had obtained in his previous articles. In order to achieve this goal, however, he had to open his thought to additional influences that gave greater consistency and solidity to his psychological standpoint. Indeed, while the terminological shift from 'universal/individual consciousness' to 'meaning/existence' entailed a significant reorganization of the conceptual framework that Dewey adopted in his early works, his exploitation of the concept of idealization brought to the fore the issue of the theoretical compatibility of scientific psychology and idealistic psychology. It is at the level of the concrete explanation of mental activity, therefore, that one has to look in order to understand which position Dewey defended in the Anglo-American philosophical and psychological debate of the time. It is at this level, indeed, that Dewey confronted himself with the problem of explaining whether, and to what extent, it was possible to employ the most recent psychological discoveries to defend his extremely original version of psychological idealism.

⁴² The last remarks are particularly interesting for our purposes because they show why it would be a mistake to argue for a strong discontinuity in Dewey's philosophical development. Indeed, even though the conceptual changes that Dewey's thought underwent in the short span of time that elapsed between the publication of the *Mind* articles and the composition of his *Psychology* are much more relevant than has usually been recognized by Deweyan scholars, there is an underlying unity of both themes and problems that closely connects the two phases. Such a continuity of Dewey's early thought can be best described as an attempt to gain a more concrete level of analysis of experience. In *Psychology as Philosophy Method* Dewey focused his attention mainly on the general conditions of possibility of experience. Indeed, his main aim was to challenge the neo-Hegelian thesis that experience needs something outside itself in order to be organized into a meaningful whole. Dewey realized that the idealistic hypostatization of universal consciousness – a metaphysical and theological reading that not even an attentive reader of Hegel like Caird was able to avoid – amounted to a sheer repetition of the rationalist indictment against the power of experience to provide a reliable standpoint for philosophical reflection. His insistence on the *fact* of self-consciousness – which was part of a complex strategy aiming at defending the idea that experience is wholly self-sufficient – was undoubtedly functional to outlining the main features of an idealistic psychology. Dewey was clear in stating that his philosophical analysis of the activity of self-consciousness should be viewed as a psychological inquiry into the conditions of possibility of a meaningful experience. Nonetheless, in that article Dewey did not attempt to explain how, in concrete, the stage of self-consciousness can be reached. He limited himself to remark that it is the outcome of an effort to bring to light what is from the very beginning present in every experience. Dewey's account of experience lacked therefore of explanatory power. This was probably a consequence of his desire to establish a method and a standpoint before proceeding to analyze the constructive activity of the self.

It was Wundt who provided Dewey with the theoretical instrumentation necessary to successfully tackle that problem. Shook has correctly underlined the profound similarities between Wundt and Dewey (Shook 2000: 73). In particular, he has called attention to the fact that Dewey's organicist conception of mind is greatly indebted to Wundt's treatment of the subject. Wundt was an experimental psychologist who held that mind is an activity or a process rather than a substance, and who believed that "mind was an interrelated whole", whose proper essence was will (Shook 2000: 78). His conclusions were therefore similar to the ones that Dewey reached as a result of his work of revision of the neo-Hegelian tradition. Consequently, Dewey found in Wundt's *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie* an important confirmation of his psychological idealism (Shook 2000: 72ff.).

These interpretative elements have now become common knowledge in Dewey scholarship; consequently, it is not necessary to dwell further on them. What I think it is important to remark here is that what Dewey drew from Wundt – and, more in general, from German psychologists – was not only and not so much a general philosophical perspective, but first and foremost the theoretical tools that enabled him to translate his post-Kantian constructivism in psychophysiological terms. In particular, Wundt's and (especially) Helmholtz's psychological works showed Dewey how to formulate a consistent idealistic analysis of perception. In the first section of the present chapter it has been discussed at length the reasons why this issue was so important for philosophers and psychologists of the second half of 19th century. Since perception was universally conceived as the simplest act of constitution of objectivity, the possibility of accounting for it in purely natural terms – that is, in terms of associations occurring in the brain without the intervention of a meta-empirical principle of synthesis – would have entailed the complete bankruptcy of idealism. Dewey was well aware of this problem: in his *Psychology* he struggled to accommodate the two approaches – which he considered both valid and legitimate within their respective limits – into a single framework. In order to achieve this goal Dewey exploited and refined two concepts elaborated by German psychologists: the notion of apperception and the idea of unconscious inference. The final section of the present chapter will be therefore devoted to the analysis of these two concepts with the aim to highlight the most relevant features of Dewey's account of their nature and their role in the process of construction of meaningful experience. Before that, however, a brief discussion

will be given of the philosophical significance of Dewey's assimilation of Bradley's terminology.

3. Idealization and the Life of Meaning

3.1. Explaining Experience: Psychological Inquiries and Metaphysical Constraints

3.1.1. The Search for a Terminology: Dewey Reader of Bradley

Around 1886 Dewey started studying Bradley's *Principles of Logic*. At that time Bradley's was undoubtedly the most advanced and most original work on logic written in English. It is not surprising therefore that Dewey could be deeply impressed and influenced by the way in which Bradley articulated his idealistic philosophy of logic. However, contrary to what one may be inclined to believe, what attracted Dewey's attention – at least in a first moment – was not Bradley's treatment of specific logical questions like the notion of validity or the structure of judgment. At that time, Dewey was not particularly concerned with developing a theory of logic as an independent field of research. Rather, his interest in logic was motivated by a desire of formulating a psychological account of the process of reasoning. Consequently, his attention was attracted by the 'psychological' assumptions that were at the basis of Bradley's work – that is, the implicit theory of mind on which Bradley relied in order to formulate a logical, objective, and anti-psychologist account of thought. It is to the first chapter of the *Principles of Logic* – in which the logical status of the basic elements of judgment is discussed – that one has to turn in order to understand the intellectual debts that Dewey contracted with Bradley.

In 1887 Dewey published in *Mind* an article entitled *Knowledge as Idealization* in which the main results reached in his great textbook on psychology, appeared at the very beginning of the year, were summed up. It is very likely that Dewey believed that the form of the article would have been more effective than the

much longer and richer form of the book in highlighting the hierarchy of problems that he deemed worthy of discussion. However, at a first glance *Knowledge as Idealization* does not seem a text that deserves great attention. The article is devoted to a seemingly uninteresting discussion about the philosophical use of the word 'idea', and then it concludes with a long and rather scattered exposition of the different positions taken by psychologists on the issue concerning the relation between sensations and meaning. In reality, the establishment of a new terminology represented a major event in Dewey's intellectual development. Indeed, it represented the way in which he managed to reconstruct the heated debate between scientific psychologists and idealists on the nature of human experience, and to organize it around a single well-defined issue. The problem of contemporary psychology and philosophy became in Dewey's hand that of explaining the relationship between existence and meaning: philosophy has to discover the mental activities that transform the brute fact of sensation into a meaningful whole and to clarify the theoretical consequences of such transformation.

Relying on Bradley's distinction between two different senses of the word 'idea', Dewey maintained that the same term could refer either to the mere existence of a mental phenomenon – the fact that we have an idea in mind – or to its value and significance, that is, its objective content. Bradley had efficaciously synthesized this view in the following formula: "the idea, in the sense of mental image, is a sign of the idea in the sense of meaning" (Bradley 1883: 6). Bradley's argument runs as follows: judgment is not possible without ideas, but judgment is possible only when ideas are used as ideas, that is, when they are taken not as realities, but as signs of something different from what they are. When 'yellow' is predicated of a physical object as, for instance, gold, we are not saying that the idea of yellow is attached to the idea of gold. Rather, what one means by stating that gold is yellow is that the content of the idea 'yellow' is predicated of the content of the idea 'gold'. So, Bradley concluded, "[i]deas are not ideas until they are symbols, and, before we use symbols, we can not judge" (Bradley 1883: 2; for a further discussion of this point see chapter 3, 3.2.). This distinction vindicates the common-sensical insight that a true judgment grasps the 'essence of reality' – that is, how things objectively are – against the skeptical attacks of British empiricists. Bradley expressed his rejection of the empiricist way of ideas by saying that it was time to abandon the psychological attitude in which English thinkers had lived for too long. According to Bradley, the greatest error of both

classical and contemporary empiricism was that of not having understood the complexity of the logical notion of idea. It is of the nature of the sign to need something (a mental image, a drawing on the paper) as its material basis. However, its significance does not consist in the existence in which it is embodied, but in something else which the existence stands for. In more technical terms, Bradley maintained that in every thing it is possible to distinguish between existence and content, between the *that is* and the *what is*. As is evident, it is impossible to have existence without content because everything which exists possesses some qualities that make possible its identification: “[f]or a fact to exist [...] it must be something” (Bradley 1883: 3) A symbol differs from a fact because it has “an other and additional side” (Bradley 1883: 3). This third side is the reference to something, the capacity of the fact to stand for anything else. The term that Bradley chose to indicate this additional property is ‘meaning’: meaning he defined as “a part of the content (original or acquired) cut off, fixed by the mind, and considered apart from the existence of the sign” (Bradley 1883: 4).

Dewey agreed with Bradley on this very general point, even though he exploited the distinction between existence and meaning in a way that was undoubtedly far from what Bradley had in mind in drawing it. Leaving aside for a moment all the differences between the two approaches, it is not difficult to find clear echoes of Bradley’s definition of a sign in Dewey’s formulation of the problem of idealization. Psychologically speaking, Dewey remarked, every idea is “a unique, unshareable, irrecoverable experience” existing in relation with other psychical existences which make up our stream of consciousness (EW1: 176). In this sense, an idea is a fact that has purely physical qualities, but that does not possess semantic properties. It is only when it is considered from a logical point of view that the idea reveals itself to be an universal endowed with objective meaning. Explicitly referring to Bradley’s *Principles of Logic*, Dewey wrote that in order to understand “the aspect of meaning or significance” one has to turn his attention to the “content of the idea as opposed to its existence” (EW1: 177). The content of a certain existence is “objective, permanent and universal”, while “the present existence” is unique and unrepeatable⁴³ (EW1: 176). As

⁴³ Similarly, Bradley had written that an idea is a “physical fact [...] with particular qualities and relations”, a “hard individual, so unique that it not only differs from all others but even from itself at subsequent moments” (Bradley 1883: 5-6). Take the idea of a horse: this is a fact in the psychical life of an individual, “existing in relation with the congeries of sensations and emotions and

Bosanquet remarked in the opening pages of *Logic or The Morphology of Knowledge*, one has to admit a world of meaning different to the world of fact in order to explain the possibility of a world in which “mutual understanding between rational being is made possible”⁴⁴ (Bosanquet 1888: 4).

Bosanquet’s remark deserves particular attention because it sheds light on the real import of the idealistic distinction between meaning and existence. To draw that distinction was considered functional to the vindication of the objectivity of thought against the empiricist assumption that meanings should be boiled down to the psychological facts that represents the material in which they are embodied. That distinction was not intended to provide an universal account of the relation between existence and meaning. It is precisely its rather trivial and limited character that explains why it could be accepted without hesitation by almost all the idealists of the time. Far from being what it may seem at first glance, that is, a general theory of meaning, it was taken to be a rather uncontroversial explanation of the objective nature of thought which left

feelings, which make [his] momentary state” (Bradley 1883: 6). But for logic the case is different: the idea “has here become an universal, since everything else is subordinate to the meaning” (Bradley 1883: 6). The conclusion to which Bradley came was therefore that “the idea *is* the meaning, for existence and unessential content are wholly discarded” (Bradley 1883: 6). It is worth remembering that Dewey was not the only one to be deeply influenced by Bradley. Indeed, it is probably not exaggerated to say that the *Principles of Logic* represented one of the most important and influential books in the history of nineteenth century English philosophy. That Bradley’s distinction between meaning and existence was ‘common knowledge’ in the philosophical community of that period is clear from the following passage drawn from Bosanquet’s *Morphology of Knowledge*, in which the author clearly assumes the Bradleyan distinction as uncontroversial: “I now return to some further characteristics of the logical meaning of names, and shall follow Mr. Bradley in using ‘idea’ for a fixed content or logical meaning, not for the psychical images which pass through the mind and never recur for the signification, so to speak, of the signal flags, not for the particular flags themselves, whose meaning is not affected if different bits of cloth are used on every occasion” (Bosanquet 1888: 44).

⁴⁴ “We never assert the fact in our heads, but something else which that fact stands for. And if an idea were treated as a psychical reality, if it were taken by itself as an actual phenomenon, then it would not represent either truth or falsehood” (Bradley 1883: 3). Even clearer is the following passage: “[w]e have ideas of redness, of a foul smell, of a horse, and of death; and, as we call them up more or less distinctly, there is a kind of redness, a sort of offensiveness, some image of a horse, and some appearance of mortality, which rises before us. And should we be asked, Are roses red? Has coal gas a foul smell? Is that white beast a horse? Is it true that he is dead? we should answer. Yes, our ideas are all true, and are attributed to the reality. But the idea of redness may have been that of a lobster, of a smell that of castor-oil, the imaged horse may have been a black horse, and death perhaps a withered flower. And these ideas are not true, nor did we apply them. What we really applied was that part of their content which our minds had fixed as the general meaning” (Bradley 1883: 9; on this point, see Ferreira 1999: 34ff.; Allard 2005: 53ff.; Hylton 1993: 60ff.).

completely unanswered the question of the nature of the psychical facts on which thought is grounded.

This remark highlights the main point of disagreement between Dewey and Bradley. The conclusion that can be drawn from previous considerations can be summarized as follows: the idealistic theory of meaning expounded by Bradley is correct yet partial since it relies on the assumption that the images or ideas on which meaning supervenes are already formed in mind before they are used as signs of something else. It is evident that once you have in mind an image of, say, a flag, that image can be employed as a sign of danger or as a symbol of the general concept of flag (Bosanquet 1888: 44). It is also true that by becoming a sign of another object, a mental image gets a further meaning that is superadded to its content – the fact of being the image of a flag rather than of an horse. But from this perspective, how it is possible to have well-formed images in mind remains completely without explanation.

This was not particularly problematic from Bradley's point of view since he believed that the proper task of psychology was precisely to account for the constitution of mental images. Obviously, Dewey could not adopt Bradley's conclusion as his own. Not only because he wished to avoid any separation between psychology and philosophy, but also because he believed that the starting point of Bradley's argument was too simplistic. Indeed, a flag is initially experienced as a particular object actually existing in the external world. It is only after having been perceived that it can be recalled to mind by an act of memory or imagination and used as a sign of something else (EW1: 172-173). This means that the formation of a concept (meaning) out of a mental image is the last step of a highly complex process of constitution of objectivity. Therefore, the main task of a philosophy aiming at providing a full-fledged account of meaning should be the search for an explanation of the fact that human beings live in a meaningful world in which they make experience of meaningful objects. This is the problem that Dewey intended to deal with in his *Psychology* – a problem that Bradley was not even interested in formulating. So, while Dewey endorsed Bradley's theory of meaning and shared with him the idealistic conviction that the objectivity of reality depends upon the objectivity of thought, nevertheless his intentions were very different from the ones that led Bradley to draw the distinction between existence and meaning in the first nine paragraphs of the *Principles of Logic*. The terminological similarity should not conceal the underlying theoretical divergence. While Bradley dealt with the conditions of possibility of judgment,

pointing out that a judgment cannot be true or false unless the ideas that make it up are taken as signs of the meanings which they stand for, Dewey was concerned with an overall account of the meaningfulness and objectivity of our experience. Accordingly, the problem to which Dewey devoted himself was much more fundamental than the one discussed by Bradley. And it was more fundamental precisely because the latter was conceived of as a particular case of the former.

3.1.2. *Avoiding the Menace of Transcendentalism: The Epistemological Status of Psychological Concepts*

Dewey's effort to reckon with Bradley terminological innovation ended up in a radical redefinition of the theoretical apparatus developed by British neo-Hegelians, as well as in a substantial revision of the hierarchy of problems that contemporary philosophy should tackle. By focusing attention on the fact that ideas have an intrinsic meaning rather than on the fact that they can be used as signs of other things, Dewey identified the issue of explaining why human beings experience an ordered world of meanings instead of a chaotic flux of sensations as the fundamental problem of philosophy and psychology. Paradoxically as it may seem, this way of formulating Bradley's account of meaning – which, taken in itself, amounted to a simplification of the latter's views since Dewey recognized a distinction between existence and meaning, while Bradley held that there were the aspects to be taken into consideration (existence, content, and meaning) – greatly complicated the problem. Indeed, even though Dewey did not intend to deny that it was still possible, for certain purposes, to distinguish *in experience* the existential (or factual) and the semantic aspect – Bradley would have said 'to distinguish existence from content' –, he nonetheless insisted that *in that case* the relationship between existence and meaning was much more intimate. Indeed, Dewey argued, it is not possible to say that in experience meanings are superadded to an already-formed existence since meaning is the very structure of the sensuous material. In the act of perceiving a flag, for instance, the property of being a flag – that is, the meaning of the sensuous material of that particular experience – is what is concretely perceived. A certain object is a flag just because its sensuous material has these particular qualities and not others. Therefore, a real distinction between existence

and meaning in experience turns out to be untenable. Bradley had seen the point, but had not paid great attention to its consequences. On the contrary, Dewey referred to this very simple remark to conclude that it is constitutively impossible to isolate meaning from existence. Indeed, when meaning is stripped off from the qualitative character of an experience, experience fades away in pure indeterminateness: “[t]ake away the meaning”, Dewey wrote, “and consciousness vanishes” (EW1: 179). This because “a sensation is psychical; it is a consciousness; it not only exists, but it exists for the self” (EW2: 34). Experience achieves a minimal degree of objectivity only when some properties are predicated of its objects.

What is important to stress here is the identity that Dewey established between existence and sensuous material or sensation (the difference between these two terms will be discussed at length in the following pages). On Dewey’s reading, existence is not the *that is* of a *what is*, or content. The paradigmatic example of existence that Dewey gave is the psychical idea in its wholeness, “a clustering of sensations, visual, muscular and tactile, due to the immediate stimulation of my nervous system” (EW1: 176). Existence is the physiological or psychological material – Dewey is not always clear on this point, and oscillates between two alternative solutions – out of which meaningful experience is formed. It goes without saying that this terminological and conceptual shift had remarkable consequences. Firstly, it enabled Dewey to identify existence with the psychological and physiological elements that scientific psychology postulates in order to explain experience. Secondly, it allowed him to redefine meaning as the interpretation – not simply the content – of existence, the mediation of actual existence with other existences remembered, imagined or conceived (EW1: 180). Thirdly, it made it possible to draw a strong distinction between existence and meaning as a consequence of which the problem of harmonizing the idealistic emphasis upon the primacy of experience with the attention to the results of scientific investigations was brought to the fore. These three consequences can be summarized in a single thesis: experience is a creative interpretation of sensations. These constructs have properties – semantic properties – that are entirely new and irreducible to the physical properties of its elements⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ The latter remark is worthy of particular consideration. Taken in itself, the thesis that experience is not reducible to its constituents is not particularly original. As is well known, John Stuart Mill rejected his father’s associationist account of experience precisely because he was dissatisfied with the mechanical conception of association that James Mill had developed. Dewey agreed with John

This is particularly evident when the relationship between perception and sensation is taken into account. As Dewey remarked, perception cannot be boiled down to a mere piling of sensation upon sensation because “what is perceived is *not* a clustering of feelings of any sort”⁴⁶ (EW1: 178). Perception is not a clustering of feelings because the object of perception is a meaningful object, a thing with various properties. Perceiving is interpreting, Dewey argued: “the amount of perception one has, whether as a babe or adult, as layman, or as a chemist, is precisely the meaning that one finds signified by one’s sensations: the *sensations*, as such, may be precisely alike in four cases” (EW1: 178). In other words, perception is not a sum of different psychological states. Similarly, it is not a purely physiological event: perception does not coincide with the operations

Stuart Mill on this point, but he held that the English philosopher was wrong in believing that, if adequately modified, the associationist paradigm could yield a reliable account of perception. John Stuart Mill had tried to modify the standard associationist explanation of perception by calling attention to “cases of mental chemistry, in which it is proper to say that the simple ideas generate, rather than they compose, the complex ones” (Mill 1843/1974: 854). In some particular cases, when impressions have been very often experienced in conjunction, it happens that ideas “melt and coalesce into one another” (Mill 1843/1974: 853). The product of this type of association – which is stronger than the normal process of association that connects ideas in a whole – is a new idea that results from its elements, but is not composed of them. In order to better clarify this point, Mill gave an example. Take, for instance, the idea of an orange. It *consists of* the simple ideas of a certain color, a certain form, a certain taste and smell. This because, according to Mill, when we perceive an orange, we perceive “all these elements in the idea” (Mill 1843/1974: 854; see also EW2: 80). On the contrary, when we perceive the idea of extension we do not perceive the “elementary ideas of resistance” that psychological investigations have discovered to be the elements in which that idea originates (Mill 1843/1974: 854). The idea of extension is therefore a complex idea that is composed of simpler ideas and which possesses entirely new properties. The insistence on the creative character of association allowed Mill to avoid the rigid mechanism of the standard version of associationism without being compelled to abandon the explanatory ambitions of the original formulation. As Mill, Dewey too looked for an ‘emergentist’ theory of mind and consciousness (for a discussion of Dewey’s ‘emergentism’ see Chapter 2, 2.1.2.). But contrary to Mill, Dewey was not willing to accept the materialistic consequences that follow from the adoption of an associationist approach to the study of mind. In particular, he could not accept the thesis of the existence of elements from whose combination (either chemical or mechanical) experience, consciousness, and mind arise. Evidently, this would have entailed the bankruptcy of the idealistic conception of experience.

⁴⁶ Dewey felt justified in holding this belief on the basis of the simple consideration that it took long time and much experimental work to ascertain that sensations are involved in any perception. “It has taken centuries of scientific psychological observation”, he wrote, “even to ascertain that sensations of these kinds are involved at all” (EW1: 178). Human beings do not pay attention to sensations as existences but to the meaning that is conveyed by them. So, for instance, even though “every experience of tone is complex”, we are unconscious of its complexity (EW1: 180). This because “this complexity is taken solely as a sign of the instrument to which the tone is referred” (EW1: 180). According to Dewey, the recognition of the fact that human beings neglect sensation in behalf of meaning is one of the greatest merits of physiological psychology because of its capacity of opening new lines of psychological research.

happening in the brain⁴⁷. By criticizing these two alternative explanatory models, Dewey aimed at ruling out the possibility that an associationist account of perception could be a viable option. But this means that in order to account for perception – where perception is conceived of as the most basic level of meaning and objectivity – one is compelled to introduce the notion of a mind that interprets the material as a necessary hypothesis. On this reading, perception is the simplest act of interpretation performed by a mind that, through its interpretative activity, synthesizes and mediates the material, thus creating connections and relations. As is evident, this is a move that Dewey was willing to make.

In *Knowledge as Idealization* and in his *Psychology* Dewey embraced a judgmental or inferential account of perception. According to this view – which found its most clear and persuasive exposition in the § 26 of the second edition of

⁴⁷ As a physiological fact”, Dewey wrote, “the occurrence of nerve tremors of some sort may be the important thing”; however, “as a fact of human experience, the important thing is that the experience has significance” (EW1: 178). As has already been noticed, Dewey encountered serious difficulties in defining the theoretical status of sensations: it is not clear at all whether he believed sensations to be psychical or physiological entities. This ambiguity is undoubtedly due to Dewey’s incapacity of distinguishing sensation as a refined product of psychological investigation from sensation as the sensuous material of experience, the material quality of our experience. As a consequence of this conflation, Dewey was led to treat sensation as qualitatively similar to the sensuous material of experience. The appeal to the notion of feeling – a notion that Dewey probably took from Green’s *Prolegomena to Ethics* (on this point, see above 2.1.2.) – is a clear evidence of this theoretical impasse. With the aim of clarifying the nature of the material, Dewey remarked: “[i]f we ask what is psychically present, by way of immediate existence, we shall find that it is only a group of sensuous feelings some strong, some faint. If we inquire further, we find that the stronger ones are due to a direct stimulation of some organ of sense, while the fainter are due to the indirect stimulation of some central organ” (EW1: 177). However, Dewey could not rest satisfied with such conclusion since what is psychically present is already qualitative determined. “It is true enough that without the idea as existence there would be no experience; the sensuous clustering is a condition sine qua non of all, even the highest spiritual, consciousness. But it is none the less true that if we could strip any psychical existence of all its qualities except bare existence, there would be nothing left, not even existence, for our intelligence. Even the fact that there *is* an experience, aside from *what* it is, is not the sensation itself; it is the interpretation of the sensation. It is part of the meaning” (EW1: 178). Consequently, he sometimes leaned towards a physiological description of what a sensation is. The quotation at the beginning of the present footnote is an evidence of this second use of the concept. In the last analysis, Dewey’s confusion stems from an unsatisfactory theory of mind which, in turn, derives from a lax and metaphorical use of the distinction between existence and meaning, physical and psychical. See, for instance, Dewey’s rather perplexing argument according to which since “[a]n idiot has as many ideas, *qua* existences, as Shakespeare”, one is entitled to conclude that “psychical facts have existence, but the existence does not constitute their express value in human experience” (EW1: 179). All these difficulties were eventually overcome when Dewey realized that the key to understand the nature of sensation was to focus attention on its function rather than on its structural properties.

Helmholtz's masterpiece, the *Handbuch der Physiologischen Optik* (1866), a work that Dewey knew very well, having read it in the French translation – perception is a case of unconscious reasoning and inference (for a general discussion of this point, as well as for a clarification of the difference between associational and judgmental conceptions of the mental, see Hatfield 1990: 6). Explicitly referring to Helmholtz, Dewey stated in *Knowledge as Idealization* that perception “is well defined as unconscious reasoning” (EW1: 180). In the context of a discussion of the difference between physiological and psychological approaches to the study of mental phenomena, Helmholtz had stated that the study of perception belongs to psychology since perceptions cannot be produced otherwise than by mental activity (*intervention de l'ame/ Seelenthätigkeiten*). In the case of visual perception – to the study of which Helmholtz devoted many years of his life and his most important book – mental activities interpret the sensations produced by the action of light on our nervous system (Helmholtz 1866/1867: 562). The results of these unconscious acts of mind are structurally identical to the conclusions reached by an inductive process of reasoning (Helmholtz 1866/1867: 564). In both cases, indeed, the activity of interpretation of data consists in an attempt to find a general rule in the light of which the material acquires a plausible meaning.

Dewey's account of perception as a process of unconscious inference was not so refined as that of Helmholtz. For instance, Dewey did not pay attention to the logical nature of the unconscious inferences that are at the basis of our perceptions of external objects. This is undoubtedly a consequence of Dewey's profound distrust of logic. But it is also a sign that his problem was far more general (and generic) than that of the one that animated the great German psychologist. While the latter was interested in discovering the physical and physiological conditions that make possible the formation of a perception, Dewey's main concern was that of providing a scientific support for his idealistic theory of meaning. Consequently, Dewey used Helmholtz's analyses of vision only insofar as, and to the extent that, the latter enabled him to explain perception in constructivist terms (see, for instance, Dewey's unoriginal exposition of the theory of local signs in the chapter of the *Psychology* dedicated to the study of perception; EW2: 142ff.).

As a consequence of the adoption of a judgmental theory of perception, Dewey managed to outline an unified account of rationality and objectivity revolving around the thesis that meaning is the process of interpretation through which a mind projects its knowledge on the material given by sense, thus

creating a relation between what is actually present and what has been experienced in the past. Following the traditional use of the word, Dewey named this process 'apperception'⁴⁸ (EW2: 78; Wundt 1880: Vol. 2, chapter 15 and 16). Dewey defined apperception as the "*reaction of mind by means of its organized structure upon the sensuous material presented to it*" (EW2: 78; see also EW2: 81). Apperception is the process that "organizes the world of knowledge by bringing the self to bear upon it", while the converse process – through which the apperceived content reacts upon "the organized structure of the mind" – "organizes the self by bringing the things known to bear upon it" (EW2: 78). Apperception and retention – this is the name of the second process – are the two directions of the movement through which the self and the world are created out of the material of sense. This is a point that Dewey insisted upon, and that deserves great attention since it represents the distinctive trait of his psychological idealism. The construction of the world and the construction of the self are two moments or aspects of the very same constructive act of interpretation. Therefore, it is wrong to say that self constructs the world because self and world are correlative notions stemming from a common source. Responding to some objections to the theoretical consistency of his psychological idealism formulated by Hodgson, Dewey put great emphasis on the importance of understanding the identity – which is, in the last analysis, an identity of meaning – between self and world. In the context of a criticism of the Cartesian biases of Hodgson's approach to the study of mind, Dewey remarked: "[t]he process by which the individual comes to connect certain experience with himself as being continuous in times, and to separate them from others which he refers to existences in space, is one of the problems of psychology" (EW1: 172). And then he argued that "we have no ready-made distinction between the individual agent and the world of experience over against him, but that each is built up out of a

⁴⁸ "In order that a sensation may arise, there is, as a rule, a fusion or union of its content with similar ideas and feelings. With the assistance of the latter, the sensation is held in consciousness, elevated into greater clearness, properly related to the remaining fields of thought, and so truly assimilated. We call this [...] act, in distinction from that of simple perception or the reception of a sensation, APPERCEPTION, or mental assimilation. This is a psychical process which has a validity beyond mere subjective perception, and is of the greatest significance for all knowledge, yes, even for our whole spiritual life" (Lange 1894: 5). See also the entry 'apperception' in the Baldwin Dictionary, written by Baldwin himself and Stout. Apperception is here defined as "[t]he process of attention in so far as it involves interaction between the presentation of the object attended to, on the one hand, and the total preceding conscious content, together with preformed mental dispositions, on the other hand" (Baldwin and Stout 1901-05: 61).

common material by contemporaneous processes" (EW1: 172). There is nothing outside and before the creative activity of the mind interpreting the material of sense: the meaning of a mental state – which is said to be 'in' the individual mind or, in more Deweyan terms, to be part of the private life of a self – is identical to the meaning of the external object to which that mental state refers. "A correct psychology would teach Mr. Hodgson", Dewey concluded, "not only that the *ordo ad individuum* and the *ordo ad universum* are built out of a common stock, but that the process is a reciprocal one, so that our ideas of ourselves as individuals, nay ourselves as individuals, are made up out of our experiences of the world, and *viceversa*" (EW1: 172-173).

Apperception as an active process of connection and combination of sensations is the key-notion of Dewey's idealistic psychology. Its adoption enabled him to express in a simple way the constructivist insight at the basis of his idealistic theory of meaningful experience. Apperception is a creative and spontaneous process of the mind that synthesizes existence (sensations) in a meaningful whole. Trying to define in psychological terms the conditions of possibility of objectivity, Dewey wrote: "[i]f we inquire under what circumstances any object or event enters into our intellectual life as significant, we find that it is when it is connected in a orderly way with the rest of our experience [...] To have meaning, the fact or event must be related to some other fact or event" (EW2:78). Knowledge is the fact that different elements are related and connected together: "[t]o be significant is to be a sign; that is, to point to something beyond its own existence to which it is related. Whatever has its meaning exhausted in itself, and consequently has no connection with anything beyond itself, has no meaning" (EW2: 79). Consequently, Dewey was confirmed in his conviction that mediation and relation are the definitory properties of meaning and objectivity. He explicitly stated that "[r]elationship is the essence of meaning" (EW2: 79). However, the terminology used to express that concept was sensibly different from the one he had adopted in his previous works. The notions of apperception and unconscious inference, the psychological interpretation of Bradley's distinction between existence and meaning, the idea that meaning is the result of an apperceptive process that connects sensations, the emphasis on the concept of sign; all these new theoretical resources allowed Dewey to better articulate the constructivist option, and to better explain the structure and the essential operations through which the mind constructs our meaningful reality. As has been remarked above, Dewey felt the need of

enriching the conceptual apparatus elaborated by British idealists. The categories, the method and the language of physiological psychology met this need.

However, this enrichment of the theoretical framework was far from being free from difficulties. As has been pointed out above, the 'discovery' of the notion of apperception enabled Dewey to answer in a clear and simple way the question of how to pass from existence to meaning. But the thesis that meaning is the result of an act of synthesis of a manifold of sensations seems to rely on the very dualistic presumptions that Dewey had criticized in his previous articles. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the impression of a strong similarity between the empiricist program of explanation of experience and the idea that mind exerts its apperceptive activity on a previously unrelated material that only as a consequence of such an act of connection becomes part of a whole and acquires meaning. Consequently, Dewey's ambitious project of grounding his idealistic constructivism on scientific basis seems to lead to a contradiction which in the last analysis undermines his whole philosophy from within. If this were true, the outcome of this attempt to merge together psychology and philosophy would eventuate in a form of Kantianism that assumes subject and object as two independent entities, and explains the whole within which subject and object are related as the result of a process of synthesis.

Dewey was aware of these difficulties, and tried to avoid them by insisting on the theoretical status of the concepts employed in psychological investigations. The distinction that one has to pay attention to is that between mind and self (but Dewey is not always consistent in his use of the terms). As has been pointed out above, the self is constructed in the same moment and by the very same act in which the external world is constructed. On the contrary, mind is that function or activity that constructs self and world as meaningful reality. In a certain sense, therefore, mind acts 'behind the scenes' of experience, relating and connecting sensations that do not appear in experience as its constituent parts. This is a point that Dewey stressed with great emphasis. In *Knowledge as Idealization*, he remarked: "[o]ur fundamental position is that sensation, as existence, and the process, as psychical occurrence, by which sensations are connected, never enter into knowledge. Knowledge is both the sensation and the process in their significant or sign-bearing quality"⁴⁹ (EW1: 182). So, what is real

⁴⁹ Referring to the much debated question about the origin of space perception, Dewey noticed: "I may remark incidentally that a large number of the psychologists who have occupied themselves with the problem of space-perception do not seem to have realised the elements of the problem.

is the whole in which sensations and processes are related and reciprocally co-determined. What is real is the result of the process of mediation through which the sensuous quality of experience becomes a meaningful part of a whole by being “associated, composed, identified, or discriminated with other experiences” (EW1: 183). Process and sensation as existences are simply theoretical abstractions created by psychologists in order to account for the subject-matter of psychology, that is, the concrete meaningful experience in which human beings have a world in view⁵⁰.

They first talk as if the problem were: How to get space-relations out of sensations, as existences? and secondly, as if the problem were: Given isolated sensations as equivalent to isolated points in space, to tell how these come to be connected with each other in complex space-forms? But the problem in the first place is: How do we interpret sensations into spatial meanings? And secondly: How do we interpret some sensations as isolated points and others as connected bodies? We do not start with separate points which are to be combined through the medium of motion, or in any other way. The separate point is as much an inference, an interpretation of the sensation, as the connected line, surface, or solid. Our experience of one is built up along with that of the other. Sensations, as existences, in spatial perceptions as in all perceptions, are naught; sensations, in their symbolic quality, as inference is put into them and they become meaning, are all” (EW1: 181-182).

⁵⁰ In his long review to Ladd’s *Elements of Physiological Psychology* (1887) Dewey clearly expressed his views about the theoretical status of psychological concepts. The general issue at stake was that of clarifying the relation between experience and the concepts introduced by physiological psychology to explain it. This was an extremely problematic point since it coincided with the issue of the relation between mind and body. Dewey criticized Ladd for not understanding that the adoption of an experimental method in psychology was not directed toward the discovery of the laws that explain the relation between mind and body. Two are the possible ways in which physiological psychology can be conceived of, Dewey argued. The first one – which is older and less refined from a methodological point of view – is precisely to hold that physiological psychology is “the science of the relations of mind and body; of the correlations of the psychical and the physical” (EW1: 200). According to this view, a third science is needed in order to bridge the gap between the purely introspective study of consciousness (psychology) and the study of the nerve processes that are at the basis of conscious states (physiology). This third science is physiological psychology. However, since this conception has proven to be theoretically untenable, another way of conceiving the proper task of physiological psychology has been advanced. Thanks to Wundt – and Dewey had in mind here the opening pages of the *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie* (1880) – psychologists have realized that physiological psychology is a *method*, and that its end is “the investigation of *consciousness* itself by physical methods” (EW1: 201). Physiological psychology is not an inquiry into the parallelism between the brain and consciousness, but is – more modestly – a way of enlarging our knowledge of meaningful experience. It is a set of physical methods and instruments that can be profitably used to study mind. By insisting on its being a method of psychological investigation rather than a distinct field of research, Dewey wanted to emphasize the fact that it is theoretically illegitimate to assume the existence of something outside experience. What is meaningful – and the occurrence of a physical event is undoubtedly a meaningful notion – is part of our experience: it is something that can be concretely experienced (see, for instance, EW2: 16). This difference of approach Ladd did not manage to appreciate. Consequently, Dewey charged Ladd with oscillating between these two conceptions without being able to see that the traditional view was in open contradiction with his general psychological project which aimed at arguing for a form of idealism strongly influenced by German thought – in

Material and process, Dewey wrote in the methodological section of his *Psychology*, are fictions whose validity depends upon their explanatory effectiveness. In treating the cognitive aspect of experience – which in turn is an abstraction from the concrete reality of experience (EW2: 25ff.) – it is useful to distinguish processes and material, and to consider them as the elements from which an act of knowledge is brought about. Dewey was aware that psychology is a science, and that the goal of a science is not to faithfully represent its subject-matter, but rather to create concepts that simplify the complexity of the object of inquiry, thus making it possible to discover regularities among the elements that are created by an act of analysis. Analysis is the word Dewey employed to define the act of constitution of scientific entities (EW2: 26; for a discussion of this point, see Shook 2000: 89ff.). As Dewey remarked, “the object of the science of psychology is to take the concrete manifestations of mind, to analyze them and to explain them by connecting them with each other” (EW2: 26). In order to explain experience, psychologists have to “regard the existing states as the result of the action of certain processes upon a certain material” (EW2: 26). But processes and material do not correspond to anything which has “separate independent existence” since the actual existence is only what is regarded as the result of their combination (EW2: 26). As explanatory notions, their validity is limited to the context of their application. This means that when it is said that “out of the stuff of sensations, upon them as data, are built both the world as known and the self as existing” one is not compelled to conclude – as the upholders of a naturalistic and reductionist psychology maintained – that there is something out of experience from which experience originates (EW2: lxvii). The mechanism and dualism implicit in the practice of psychological investigation are theoretical devices. It is wholly illegitimate to derive from them metaphysical conclusions on the nature of experience and reality⁵¹.

particular Lotze and Helmholtz. “The inevitable outcome of the ‘correlation’ theory”, Dewey remarked, “is a continuation, under modified form, of the Cartesian dualism” (EW1: 201-202). But Cartesian dualism – and Kantian transcendentalism, insofar as the latter was a continuation, under modified and refined form, of the former – cannot be harmonized within a consistent idealistic framework. Among the other things, this statement is therefore a clear evidence that he was well aware of the difficulties related with the attempt to bring together idealism and physiological psychology.

⁵¹ This kind of solution is highly interesting because it testifies of Dewey’s awareness of the importance of not blurring the distinction between reality and the scientific objects that aim at explaining it. As will be pointed out in chapter 3, the idea of a relative autonomy of science is an insight that Dewey tried to develop in a consistent way in his instrumentalist works. Moreover, Dewey’s attempt to defuse the menace of dualism and transcendentalism by treating the

3.2. From Perception to Intuition: How Meaning Comes to Self-Consciousness

The question that remains to be answered concerns the way in which Dewey tried to account for the nature of perception, and to explain the process through which the meanings encountered in perception are idealized and further refined. This amounts to asking why the process of idealization of meaning is needed: why human beings cannot rest satisfied with the simplest level of meaning that characterizes perception?

The answer to this question can be found in the very definition of perception as unconscious inference. By stressing the similarities between the unconscious processes through which perception is brought about and the conclusions of logical reasoning Helmholtz tried to account not only for the fact that perception is meaningful, but also for the possibility of errors and illusions. Meaning is mediation: it is the inference from a particular case to the general law that explains its behavior (Helmholtz 1866/1867: 565). The difference between conscious and unconscious judgments relies in the fact that the latter are not controlled. Take for instance an astronomer who tries to calculate the position of a star in the sky. His astronomical deductions are grounded on a conscious knowledge of the laws of optics. On the contrary, in the ordinary acts of vision this knowledge is lacking. Indeed, even though perceptual habits can be modified through a process of learning – this is a point that Helmholtz stressed with the greatest emphasis since he was fiercely opposed to every form of nativism (on this point, see Hatfield 1990: chapter 5) –, however the nature of unconscious inferences is that of being uncontrolled. It is because of this distinctive quality that the conclusion of an unconscious inference is irresistible (Helmholtz 1866/1867: 565). We cannot change the content of perception at will or as a consequence of an act of reflection upon it (Helmholtz 1866/1867: 565). We know that it is the earth that revolves around the sun, but we see the sun

psychological notions of sensations and apperception as theoretical concepts that do not correspond to concrete existences highlights some important features of his constructivism. A psychological account of experience – and, in particular, of perception as the grounding level of meaning – in constructivist terms is dualistic not only because it assumes the existence of material and processes, but also because it holds that the result of their synthesis is a private mental state. Psychological constructivism usually eventuates in a strong distinction between internal and external that is remindful of Kantian distinction between phenomena and things-in-themselves. Helmholtz's *Zeichentheorie* is a clear evidence of this refined way of reading Kant, a conclusion that Dewey was obviously willing to avoid (Calcaterra 2011: 31; see also Friedman 1997).

revolving around the earth every day. When seen from this point of view, illusions are particularly remarkable psychical events because they are the best evidence of the unconsciousness and uncontrolledness of the reasoning that brings about perception. They show that perception is not always reliable, and explain why human beings have developed accurate methods of reasoning and refined practices of scientific investigation. Perception is to be corrected by science, that is, by a controlled analysis of the validity of the connection between a particular case and a general law established by an unconscious act of inference.

This is the point from which Dewey started his reflections on the nature of idealization. Critically referring to Lewes's account he wrote: "Lewes frequently noted that science is a process of idealisation, but he seems never to have realised either the true import of idealisation, or the fact that all knowledge, perception included, requires the ideal element" (EW1: 185-186). In particular, what Lewes had failed to note was that "[i]dealisation is not a process of departure from the material presented in perception" but rather an enhancement of its semantic value (EW1: 186). It is wrong to hold that science represents a radical break from perceptual knowledge – at least for what concerns their structure – since that assumption would entail the rejection of the unified theory of meaning that has the merit of explaining why experience is significant through and through. The material presented in perception, Dewey argued, "is itself ideal": the content of a perception is the net of relations through which that particular sensations are interpreted in the light of previous experiences (EW1: 186). The universal factor of mediation is ideal because "it is not present by way of immediate psychical occurrence, but as meaning" (EW1: 186). Lewes was too empiricist and naturalist to admit the essential similarities between the unconscious processes that lead to perception and the conscious processes that constitute the essence of scientific method. However, the key to understand the possibility of science is precisely to pay attention to the fact that any act of idealization is simply a "further development" of the ideal element imperfectly formulated in perception (EW1: 186).

Trying to understand in what such a development of meaning consists and what are the steps in which it is articulated, Dewey defined idealization as the "rendering explicit and definite the meaning, the idea, already contained in perception" (EW1: 186). Now, the relational account of meaning that Dewey had sketched in his *Mind* articles enabled him to state in clear terms the relationship

between perception and the other more refined processes of knowledge. Since meaning is relation, the process of idealization of the material of perception is a process of enrichment of the relations that make that group of sensations meaningful (EW2: 137-138). This enrichment is both quantitative and qualitative: it is quantitative because in the higher stages of knowledge a larger number of relations is introduced; it is qualitative because the new relations are more general and abstract than the previous ones. Well aware of the shortcomings of Green's theory of the relationship between universal and individual consciousness, Dewey maintained that these relations are already present in the lower stages of idealization even though we are not conscious of them. "In the act of perception", Dewey remarked, "we do not realise anything like the whole meaning of what the sensation conveys" (EW1: 186). This is the greatest point of originality in Dewey's treatment of these ideas. Dewey did not limit himself to stress the fact that in perception the interpretation of the material is "fragmentary and inadequate"; he also held that the material is already connected with the rest of experience (EW1: 186). Consequently, even if Dewey sometimes referred to psychology as "the science of the reproduction of some universal content or existence [...] in the form of individual, unsharable consciousness", his account of the process of idealization is distinctly expressivist: to idealize a content means to bring to light what is only implicitly there (EW2: 11). Idealization is not a creative process; it does not create new meaning. Through an act of idealization we come to see what is implied in our simplest knowledge of the world. The philosophical consequences that derive from these considerations are extremely relevant. Indeed, by saying that the whole system of meanings that science discovers and brings to light – what Dewey sometimes called the universal element of knowledge (see, for instance, the opening pages of the *Psychology*, EW2: 10) – is present in an undeveloped form in every act of perception, Dewey managed to avoid the dualism implicit in the standard idealistic theories of meaning that hinged upon the twofold assumption that universal and individual consciousness are originally separated, and that the process of development of meaning is an attempt to overcome such a separateness.

Idealization is therefore the translation in psychological terms of the fundamental insight of Dewey's absolute idealism. Experience is an activity whose final goal is that of reaching a stage of self-consciousness, self-consciousness being the moment in which a knower recognizes that "the ideal element *is* involved in all knowledge" (EW1: 186). The process of idealization is

the mechanism through which that stage is achieved. To become conscious of himself as the ultimate source of meaning, the knower has to pass various stages, and in every stage the relations used to interpret the material become more and more numerous and more and more general. These stages or moments are – moving from the lower to the higher – perception, memory, imagination, thinking, and intuition or self-consciousness.

In *Psychology* perception is defined as the “knowledge of actually present particular things or events” (EW2: 139). The world of perceived objects is “made up of *particular* separate things and events [...] *existing in the space*” and essentially different from the self that perceives them (EW2: 139). Perception is therefore characterized by a preeminence of “discrimination or differentiation” over “identification or unification” (EW2: 151). The world of perception is a world of dualism: between self and world, between this and that, between what is actually present and what is past – as Dewey pointed out, “the world of strict perception has no past nor future” (EW2: 154). The result of this activity of discrimination is a “complete self-externalization”, the “opposition of self to not-self in perception” being “one of the stages in which *relation*, constituting the essence of all knowledge, appears” (EW2: 151).

In memory, the relations that connect objects “with each other in a series, and with the self as permanent” are brought to light and explicitly recognized (EW2: 152). Memory, Dewey wrote, “is a process of construction” which involves “more of constructive activity than perception” (EW1: 155). But to say that memory is more complex than perception means that it is freer and more independent from the deliverances of sense. The world of memory is a world of particular past objects that a knower *can* freely call to mind. So, the irresistibility of perception is definitely overcome. However, even though the objects of memory are ideal, and even though memory brings to light the temporal element that is implicit in every act of perception, memory cannot be the final stage of idealization since it cannot overcome the discreteness of time. In memory, the self is in time, and time as a whole is “external to, and unconnected with, the self” (EW2: 166).

The next stage of the process of idealization has therefore to be one in which time is suppressed. This is possible if and only if the corresponding object is universal: if an object is universal, it cannot be located in time. But universality is the distinctive feature of the objects of thought. Consequently, the next stage of idealization has to participate to the nature of thinking. However, it has to be an

operation in which the particularity proper of perception and memory is preserved. Imagination is that intellectual activity of the self that is characterized by an unresolved tension between particularity and universality (EW2: 175). Rather classically Dewey defined imagination as *“that operation of intellect which embodies an idea in a particular form of image”* (EW2: 168). An image is a distinct existence that is used to represent an idea. Following Kant – and in particular, the so-called subjective deduction of the categories read through the spectacles made available by contemporary scientific psychology – Dewey argued that imagination has to be recognized as being involved in perception. In every perception of an object what is present is only a small group of sensation; “[a]ll the rest of the perception is supplied by the mind” (EW2: 168). This means that the mind intervenes and through an act of imagination “supplies sensations coming from other senses behind those in use” (EW2: 168). In the case of an act of perception, the image does not receive an independent existence since it is used to refer to a particular object existing in time and space. Imagination is the psychological stage in which the creative activity of mind is set free and is allowed to create new objects “purely from motives of the mind itself” (EW2: 168). As Dewey remarked, “the imagination represents that stage in the development of knowledge where the self and its interests are freed from slavery to the results of the action of mechanical association [...] and are made an end in themselves” (EW2: 173). The world of imagination is a world modeled upon the interests of the self: in this world the knower is free because he can find himself in the objects that he has created.

Imagination passes into thinking. Dewey defined thinking as the knowledge of relations: thinking is concerned with the universal element of knowledge, that is, with the ideal element contained in every meaningful experience. In so doing, by stressing the identity of meaning and relation, it was easy for him to show that thinking is implicitly present in perception. The goal of thinking is to understand the meaning of the particular objects that are perceived as forming our world: universal meaning is what every object of a certain kind has in common with all the other objects of the same type. “Thinking is possible”, Dewey wrote, “because there exists in things thought an ideal, universal element” (EW2: 178). The universal meaning that is made object of thinking is the very same meaning that is grasped – even though only in an inadequate form – in an act of perception. Conception, judgment and reasoning are the three stages through which this

ideal content is brought out and made explicit (on this point, see Garrison 2006: 4-19).

Contrary to his fellow idealists, however, Dewey did not conceive of thinking as the most perfect form of knowledge. An inference relates premises and conclusion in a whole; in so doing, their initial difference is definitely overcome. But the whole that results from an act of reasoning is abstract: scientific knowledge is a knowledge of general laws not of the concrete cases to which these laws refer. To be real, knowledge has to be applied to understand the particular objects that constitute the world of perception. Making use of the Hegelian distinction among universal, particular and individual – and this is a remarkable trait of novelty since the language that Dewey had employed in his *Mind* articles was by no means Hegelian although it was largely inspired by Hegel – he showed that thinking is not the whole of experience, but only one of the processes through which the individual is recognized, the individual being the experience as a whole (EW2: 205). The point that Dewey wanted to formulate is the reciprocal belonging of universality and particularity, thinking and perception. The very same process through which the material of perception is universalized is also a process through which the universal meaning is particularized. “As matter of actual psychological fact”, Dewey remarked, “there is no separation of ascending and descending movement, but every concrete act of mind is an act both of perception and reasoning, and each because of and through the other” (EW2: 204). Intuition is the explicit recognition of the reciprocal belonging of the knowledge of the self and the knowledge of the world; it is the realization that every possible dichotomy between self and world, material and ideal, belongs to an inadequate and fragmentary stage of development of meaning. The self is free in the world because the world is its construction: in the construction of its world the self finds the realization of its interests. Obviously, in intuition differences are preserved: meaning would not be possible if relations were suppressed. But these relations do not refer to something outside the material: in intuition the relations are “reflected back into the object” (EW2: 206). The proper objects of an act of intuition are therefore what Dewey called “ultimate wholes”, that is, those encompassing wholes in which the self discovers itself as coinciding with the world (EW2: 206; for a discussion of this point, see above 2.3.1.).

Dewey’s belief that the process of idealization ends in an immediate and post-logical apprehension of reality is a distinctive trait of his early idealism. In

the last analysis, the thesis that intuition is the most refined form of knowledge is substantially identical to Dewey's provocative statement that "the real *esse* of things is neither their *percipi*, nor their *intelligi* alone; it is their *experiri*" (EW1: 161; see above 2.2.). However, the view of idealization as the movement of meaning from a stage of unconsciousness to a stage of self-consciousness throws some doubts on the theoretical consistency of Dewey's constructivism. Dewey's account of meaning is rather effective in explaining the conscious activity of construction of objectivity. Memory, imagination, thinking, and intuition: in all these cases it is easy to see the concrete conscious self as the source of the relations that connect together different parts of experience. Indeed, the material upon which they operate is already meaningful; they limit themselves to create or bring to light new relations as a consequence of which the meaning of the material is enhanced. They do not create meaning out of nothing. On the contrary, perception cannot be accounted in the same way. As has been pointed out above, Dewey maintained that the material and the processes from which perception originates could not be treated as conscious elements of experience since this assumption would mean a relapse into a form of pre-critical dualism. Rather, they are theoretical concepts created by psychologists in order to account for experience. In so doing, by laying stress on the fictional status of these psychological notions, Dewey tried to combine a strong form of constructivism with an idealistic theory of meaning and relations.

In the light of what has been said until now it is difficult to deny that the result of this effort to mediate between different perspectives was far from being satisfactory. The main problem with Dewey's solution is that the expressivist conception of idealization that he proposed required a strong form of constructivism that he was not able to provide. According to Dewey, it is true that perception can be explained in constructivism terms, but this is a *psychological* theory: it is a useful explanation of an extremely complex phenomenon, but it does not correspond to its actual constitution. Now, the fact that Dewey did not have a satisfactory account of the grounding level of meaning was not problematic in itself. Undoubtedly, it shows that he had not yet understood what is the nature of scientific thought and the role it plays in experience, but this does not immediately entail a contradiction. It became problematic only because a constructivist treatment of perception was the ultimate ground of Dewey's theory of idealization. Idealization is the process through which the mind discovers its constructive activity in all the objects of

experience. So, it does not seem sufficient to say that the constructivist approach to perception is an explanatory hypothesis. It seems necessary to admit that perception is a constructive act through which mind synthesizes sensations in a meaningful whole.

When seen from this perspective, Dewey's continuous shift from a conception of sensation as meaning and a treatment of sensation (and process) as a theoretical element – what Dewey called existence – is not simply a sign of a lack of terminological accuracy. More radically, it is a sign of a deep conceptual confusion which, in turn, is an evidence of an acute philosophical embarrassment. According to his idealistic theory of meaning, Dewey could not accept the strong version of constructivism since the latter opened the door to a reductionist account of experience. According to his expressivist conception of idealization, however, he was compelled to defend the thesis that perception is construction. Dewey soon realized the internal inconsistency of this position. He devoted more than ten years to elaborate an alternative view that could preserve a constructivist account of meaning and continue to reject the mechanism proper of psychological associationism. The naturalization of mind and experience and the functionalization of thought are the two lines along which Dewey proceeded to achieve that goal.

Chapter 2

Habitual Meaning:

The Discovery of Immediate Experience

1. From Idealism to Naturalism

1.1. Dewey's Reception of 'The Principles of Psychology'

From the date of his return to Michigan (1888), after one year spent teaching at the University of Minnesota, Dewey plunged himself into careful study of contemporary biology and psychology. For the next ten years, Dewey devoted his greatest efforts to improving his psychological and biological expertise with the aim to develop a reliable explanation of the role of mind in the process of constitution of meaning. Thanks to the help of his colleagues G. H. Mead, A. Lloyd, and J. Tufts, and as a consequence of his daily collaboration with scientists – a collaboration started at the University of Michigan and strongly intensified during his Chicago years (1894-1904) –, Dewey not only became more and more acquainted with scientific methodologies and results, but also became more confident about the possibility of giving a strictly naturalistic account of meaning and experience.

Dewey's abiding interest for the effects of scientific research on philosophical reflection is a trait of his thought that has been unfortunately overlooked by the interpreters. In recent years, Dalton has devoted many pages to highlighting the

importance of scientific training for the development of Dewey's philosophical views. By focusing the attention to this rather neglected aspect of Dewey's intellectual formation, Dalton has succeeded in providing a convincing description of Dewey's drifting away from idealism which a) does not exclusively revolve around his confrontation with the numerous philosophical positions with which he entered into debate in the last decade of 19th century; b) highlights the plurality of sources (both philosophical and scientific) that Dewey attempted to bring into fruitful agreement; and c) brings to light the difficulties involved in his effort to reach such a goal¹ (see Dalton 2002: chapter 3). Consequently, in contrast to the idea that Dewey underwent a sudden conversion to naturalism, Dalton has shown that it took many years before Dewey eventually managed to give birth to a satisfactory naturalistic view of human activity, and – which is even more important to remark upon – that this long process of theoretical refinement coincided in large part with a substantial revision of his previous positions.

Dalton's suggestions are extremely interesting because they shed light on some important aspects of Dewey's tortuous process of intellectual growth, thus paving the way for a different interpretation of the influence exerted by James's *The Principles of Psychology* on Dewey's thought, as well as of the reasons that led

¹ In his important book *Becoming John Dewey* Dalton has provided a provocative reconstruction of Dewey's philosophical development, whose self-avowed aim is that of criticizing Rorty's depreciation of the importance of science in favor of a radical humanistic and historicist reading of Dewey's philosophy. According to Dalton, "Dewey vigorously opposed setting culture apart from nature, but he was unable to prevent his pragmatism from taking first a positivist, scientific turn at the hands of Dewey's own contemporaries, and then veering in a linguistic direction under the leadership of philosopher Richard Rorty" (Dalton 2002: 17). Unfortunately, Dewey scholarship has followed Rorty in assuming that "Dewey's views about science and his conceptions of mind and nature do not merit serious consideration and reexamination" (Dalton 2002: 18; see Rorty 1997: 290ff.). Dalton has therefore attempted to correct Rorty's inaccurate interpretation by calling attention to the profound transformations that Dewey's thought underwent as a consequence of his coming into contact with the most advanced scientific knowledge of the time. The result of this shift of perspective is an extremely original account of Dewey's philosophy, in which many figures who have been traditionally considered of outstanding relevance for the development of his thought – as, for instance, James Peirce, and Santayana – are put in the background and replaced by less known interlocutors – as, for instance, Chicago scientists C.L Herrick and C.J. Herrick, A. Barnes, F. M. Alexander, and M. McGraw. It is worth remarking, however, that Dalton's idiosyncratic approach to the analysis of Dewey's thought has led in some cases to extremely controversial conclusions. This point has been remarked by Garrison in his review of Dalton's book, where he has convincingly criticized Dalton's thesis of a radical discontinuity between Dewey's theory of logic as formulated in his *Studies in Logical Theory* and the mature view that he expounded in his *Logic* (Garrison 2003a). Consequently, the recognition of the interpretative fertility of Dalton's approach should not be conceived of as an unreserved acceptance of his interpretation.

the latter to drift away from his previous idealism. In particular, Dalton is right in emphasizing the importance of Dewey's effort to assimilate the most recent scientific results into an idealistic framework. He is also right in stressing that Dewey believed anti-reductionist naturalism to be free from the difficulties and shortcomings of his early psychological idealism. Dalton's interpretation has the merit of highlighting the tension existing in Dewey's thought between the general philosophical standpoint – the idealistic thesis that experience is the absolute in which every conceptual distinction arises and in whose light only it becomes possible to account for the meaningfulness of things – and the technical explanations of the processes through which meanings gets embodied in existence or sensations. Moreover, it concretely indicates where to look to find traces of the path followed by Dewey in his process of emancipation from his early idealism. It suggests to focus the attention on those texts in which Dewey deals with specific psychological problems rather than on his explicit professions of philosophical faith, in the conviction that the motor force of Dewey's intellectual development should be traced back to his desire to ground his early idealistic insight of the ontological and methodological primacy of experience on solid scientific bases.

Accordingly, particular attention has to be paid to the third revised edition of the *Psychology* (1891). Indeed, Dewey became quickly dissatisfied with the provisional account of mental activity that he had put forth in his early writings. Therefore, he undertook a major effort to change the idealistic theory of mind that he had advanced only four years before (EW2: 5). This dissatisfaction with his early position eventuated, amongst the other things, in an extensive rewrite of the section of *Psychology* devoted to discussing the notion of sensation. As Dewey explicitly acknowledged in a letter written in 1893 to Angell, he conceived of the account of sensation, especially for what concerns its qualitative traits, as the "sticking point to a successful statement of idealism" (CJD Vol. I: 1893.05.10; J. Dewey to J. R. Angell). Evidently, the impossibility of explaining the simplest level of experience in idealistic terms amounts to a failure of the theory in its wholeness. By 1891, Dewey realized that he had not yet managed to formulate a consistent treatment of sensation, and that he was still in need of a satisfactory account of mind and meaning.

In particular, Dewey was annoyed by an unfortunate misunderstanding that accompanied the reception of his *Psychology*, the best example of which can be found in the chapter 17 of James's *The Principles of Psychology*. As has been

pointed out in the previous chapter, it is not difficult to maintain that in the 1887 *Psychology* Dewey embraces a form of 'psychological Kantianism'. Following the approach to psychical phenomena that was commonly accepted by contemporary psychologists, in that text he had argued that the concrete manifestations of mind – that is, perception, memory, imagination, thinking, intuition – should be accounted for by analyzing a) the fundamental properties of the basic elements of experience; and b) the apperceptive operations through which mind collects and synthesizes these elements into a unified and meaningful whole (EW2: 26). Consequently, Dewey's view was dangerously similar to the one espoused in the very same period by transcendentalists. It is not by accident, therefore, that in the analysis of sensation contained in the chapter 17 of *The Principles of Psychology* James misleadingly ranked Dewey among the representatives of the idealistic tradition. James was convinced that Dewey was an orthodox idealist, and that his main aim was to undervalue the importance of sensation for knowledge. He believed, in other words, that Dewey's insistence on the activity of thought as the ultimate source of relations ended in a holistic and monistic theory of experience in which meaning disappears in a net of relations with nothing to relate (James 1890: Vol. II, 4, 11).

Dewey protested that the charge that James had directed against idealistic movement *in its entirety* – that is, of not paying due attention to the particular element of experience – missed the mark. In a letter to James, dated May 05, 1891, he concisely replied to his interlocutor that his criticism of 'Hegelianism' was far from being well-founded (CJD Vol. I: 1891.05.06; J. Dewey to W. James). James had failed to appreciate the difference between the Kantian and the Hegelian approaches to the issue of the constitution of experience. This point is extremely important in the economy of Dewey's thought since it represents the theoretical horizon of his early reflections. So, it is not surprising that his attention was attracted by the critical discussion of this problem that James put forth in chapter 10 of *The Principles of Psychology*. In this chapter, significantly entitled *The Consciousness of Self*, James dismissed the idea that the notion of a transcendental Ego is needed to explain the fact of consciousness. On James's reading, all the members of the British idealistic school subscribed the thesis that "no connected consciousness of anything without that of *Self* as its presupposition and 'transcendental' condition" (James 1890: Vol. I, 360ff.). In his eyes, this was confirmed by the fact that British idealists accepted the empiricist conception of reality as a manifold of sensations only in order to supplant it with a conception

of knowledge in which objectivity and meaning are entirely ascribed to the activity of the self (James 1890: Vol. I, 277-278). Now James believed that Ego or the transcendental self – “as ineffectual and windy an abortion as Philosophy can show” (James 1890: Vol. I, 365) – was a mythological entity that should definitely be abandoned in favor of scientific concepts elaborated in psychology. This is a natural science whose subject-matter are the “particularly finite streams of thought, coexisting and succeeding in time” (James 1890: Vol. I, 367). When the standpoint of the individual is adopted, and finite experience is conceived of as a stream of thought whose organization is given independently from any synthetic act of mind, it is easy to see the theoretical untenability of the absorption of finite experience into an absolute experience. To say that finite streams of thought are irreducible to an eternal consciousness is just another way to stress the fundamental tenet that sensations cannot be boiled down to the system of relations which – at least, from the idealistic perspective that James was interested in undermining – constitutes their meaning.

It is important to remark that Dewey did not intend to question the premises of James’s argument. He agreed with James that many post-Kantian idealists were unable to free themselves from the empiricist assumption of a thought operating on detached data of sense. Neither he was primarily interested in rejecting James’s charge that British idealists had overemphasized the synthetic power of self-consciousness. Dewey’s aim was simply to show that James’s overall condemnation of ‘Hegelianism’ did not follow from the premises of his argument. While Dewey was well-disposed to “surrender Green to [James’s] tender mercies”, he also maintained that Hegel and Caird did not attempt to identify the self with a transcendental agent that makes experience possible. More precisely, Dewey could not accept James’s view of idealism as a philosophical theory of meaning and experience hinging upon the idea that the connecting activity of the self yields a unity “in which the object’s distinctness is in some way overcome” (James 1890: Vol. I, 369). In Dewey’s eyes, that kind of monism disrespectful to the particularity and concreteness of experience was not the fundamental lesson of idealism. “The unity of Hegel’s self (& what Caird is driving it)”, Dewey wrote in the already quoted letter to James, “is not a unity in a stream as such, but of the function of this stream”: in Hegelian philosophy the self is coextensive with the “unity of the world” rather than with one of its parts (CJD Vol. I: 1891.05.06; J. Dewey to W. James). According to Dewey, Hegel’s and Caird’s versions of idealism are not infected by the kind of subjectivism that

James found unacceptable in post-Kantian idealism. Both Hegel and Caird openly argued for the anti-subjectivist and anti-transcendentalist thesis that the activity of self coincides with the growth of whole reality. As Dewey concisely expressed the point, "Hegel's agent (or Self) is simply the universe doing business on its own account" (CJD Vol. I: 1891.05.06; J. Dewey to W. James).

Behind these seemingly dispassionate remarks there was Dewey's desire to better clarify his position, and to distance himself from the traditional forms of Kantianism. I think that by defending Caird and Hegel against James's objections Dewey was also and especially concerned with defending his own views. Dewey was aware that his psychological version of idealism was not affected by the objections that were traditionally directed against Hegelianism since his was a refined form of neo-Hegelianism purified from the dualistic remnants that condemned not only Green's Kantian philosophy, but also Caird's idealistic Absolutism to failure. However, Dewey came to understand the importance of distancing his position from other views with which it may have been confounded. His answer to James was motivated by this theoretical concern.

There is some evidence that supports this reading. In a footnote to the chapter 17 of *The Principles of Psychology*, entitled *Sensation*, James had quoted a sentence from Dewey's *Psychology* in order to show that the latter agreed with traditional idealists in holding that the existence of sensations is only "supposed", and that the reason why sensations have to be admitted as a working hypothesis is that, without them, it would be impossible to "account for the complex phenomena which are directly present in consciousness" (EW2: lxiv; James 1890: Vol. II, 4; for an equilibrate discussion of this point, see Shook 2000: 90; but see also Tiles 1990: 30ff.). The quotation from Dewey's *Psychology* is literally correct. However, the interpretation that James gave of it is wrong because he did not pay attention to the limited validity that Dewey attributed to the recourse to the language of sensation. We saw in the previous chapter that even though it is true that Dewey contended that sensations are refined abstractions whose theoretical validity is dependent upon their effectiveness in accounting for the fact of meaningful experience; he nonetheless never meant to defend the view that sensations are nothing. To say that sensations are 'postulated entities' does not imply that experience consists of nothing but relations. Far from privileging relations over related elements, Dewey held that sensations and relations are

created in the same moment by the very same productive act of mind, and in so doing, he avoided to give to one element the priority over the other².

By highlighting the difference between Kantianism and Hegelianism Dewey wanted to achieve two different yet interdependent goals. The first one has already been referred to. Dewey wanted to emphasize the difference between his psychological idealism and the standard form of Kantianism that James had in mind. It is important to remark that contrary to what James seemed to believe, Dewey never questioned the fundamental Kantian tenet that sensations and concepts are both necessary to the constitution of meaning (Johnston 2008: 521). His main concern was rather to understand their connection in a way that ruled out the possibility of relapsing into a pre-critical conception of the relationship between form and matter within experience. The second goal was more ambitious but less theoretically relevant. I think that Dewey wanted to convince James of the necessity of reconsidering with more attention the conclusions reached by the idealist tradition from Hegel to Caird. It is not by chance that Dewey wrote to James that the latter's theory of consciousness is "a much better statement of the real core of Hegel than what you criticize later on as Hegelianism" (CJD Vol. I: 1891.05.06; J. Dewey to W. James). Dewey's assertion that James's notion of 'sciousness' can be consistently read as a sound psychological translation of Hegelianism is undoubtedly surprising, and it is very likely that James was not convinced by Dewey's argument³. However,

² James's confusion is partially excusable. In great part, it is due to the inaccurate use that Dewey made of the term 'sensation' to refer both to the sensuous quality of an experience and to the refined theoretical entity introduced by psychologists to account for that quality. As a consequence of Dewey's incapacity to keep the two senses of the term separate, James was led to consider Dewey an orthodox idealist aiming at discrediting the material element of experience. But another conclusion can be drawn from these remarks. Indeed, leaving aside all the ambiguities deriving from Dewey's terminological choices, James's confusion testifies the difficulty encountered by psychologists and philosophers of that time in handling and understanding the subject matter of their investigations. In this sense, the statement of the so-called psychologist's fallacy represented an important step toward the conceptual clarification of the basic concepts of psychology. James's standard formulation of the psychologist's fallacy can be found in (James 1890: Vol. I, 196). As Shook has pointed out, however, Dewey arrived at this methodological notion independently from the reading of *The Principles of Psychology*. One of Shook's greatest merit is that of having shown the idealistic roots of Dewey's criticism of the illegitimate conflation of the language of the theory with the subject matter that the theory is to explain. On this point, see Shook 2000: 48-49.

³ Dewey wrote: "[t]he whole book greatly deepened my indebtedness. || I am not going to burden you with my reflections or criticisms, but I cannot ^suppress^ [w. caret] [illeg.] my own secret longing that you had at least worked out the suggestion you throw out on Page 304 of vol I. If I understand at all what Hegel is driving at, that is a much better statement of the real core of Hegel than what you criticize later on as Hegelianism. Take out your "postulated" 'matter' & 'thinker,' let 'matter' (i.e. the physical world) be the organization of the content of sciousness up to a certain

Dewey believed not only that the rejection of James's criticism proved the validity of absolute idealism, but also that James unconsciously adopted the absolute standpoint that idealists had the merit of discovering and articulating. In the last analysis, his was an ambitious theoretical move aiming at showing to

point, & the thinker be a still further unified organization ([not a unify-ing organ as per Green] and that is good enough Hegel for me. And if this point of view had been worked out, would you have needed any 'special' activity of attention, or any 'special' act of will? || The fundamental fact would then be the tendency towards a maximum content of sciousness, and within this growing organization of sciousness effort &c could find their place" (CJD Vol. I: 1891.05.06; J. Dewey to W. James). James had introduced the important notion of sciousness in the context of his discussion of the consciousness of the self contained in chapter 10 of *The Principles of Psychology*. Trying to argue against the idea that an act of consciousness must necessarily accompanies a mental content, James remarked: "Instead, then, of the stream of thought being one of *con*-sciousness, 'thinking its own existence along with whatever else it thinks,' (as Ferrier says) it might be better called a stream of *Sciousness* pure and simple, thinking objects of some of which it makes what it calls a 'Me,' and only aware of its 'pure' Self in an abstract, hypothetic or conceptual way. Each 'section' of the stream would then be a bit of sciousness or knowledge of this sort, including and contemplating its 'me' and its 'not-me' as objects which work out their drama together, but not yet including or contemplating its own subjective being. The sciousness in question would be the *Thinker*, and the existence of this thinker would be given to us rather as a logical postulate than as that direct inner perception of spiritual activity which we naturally believe ourselves to have. 'Matter,' as something behind physical phenomena, is a postulate of this sort. Between the postulated Matter and the postulated Thinker, the sheet of phenomena would then swing, some of them (the 'realities') pertaining more to the matter, others (the fictions, opinions, and errors) pertaining more to the Thinker. But *who* the Thinker would be, or how many distinct Thinkers we ought to suppose in the universe, would all be subjects for an ulterior metaphysical inquiry." (James 1890: Vol. I, 304; see Shook 2000: 105-105; see also Good 2006: 146). These remarks are important because they help us shed light on a controversial issue of Deweyan scholarship, that is, the influence exerted by James on Dewey. In his article *Dewey and the Reflex Arc*, Backe has correctly emphasized the Hegelian roots of Dewey's concept of reflex arc, thus indicating a line of interpretation that will be exploited in the following pages. However, the conclusion that he draws from this premise are too rash. In particular, Backe has argued that the fact that in his letter to James Dewey was concerned with discussing and criticizing James's treatment of Hegel is an evidence that "as of mid- 1891 Dewey still was very much preoccupied with Hegel's unique characterization of the self and with Hegel's emphasis on unity and organization in the world" (Backe 1999: 317). So, he concludes that Dewey did not find anything of interest in James's masterpiece: "[o]ut of James's two volume *Principles*, the only reflections Dewey shares with James concern Hegel's ideas. Dewey clarifies Hegel's views and defends them as 'intensely modern'. Nowhere in the letter, however, does Dewey make comments about James's naturalistic approach to psychology or about the reflex arc. If Dewey had been struck by James's views, it is very unlikely that he would have defended Hegel's ideas and ignored those of James" (Backe 1999: 317). In the light of the reading advanced here, however, it is possible to formulate a different interpretation of the very same fact that has led Backe to his reductive account of James's influence on Dewey. In reality, Dewey called James's attention to the similarity between his theory of consciousness and Hegel's concept of self not because he was convinced that nothing important about the naturalization of mind and, consequently, of psychology was contained in *The Principles of Psychology*, but rather because he was concerned to reject the charges of dualism and formalism that James had directed against him in that work.

James that their respective theories of self were much more similar than James had realized.

Nonetheless, even though it has to be admitted that Dewey had many good reasons to think that James's objections were misplaced and that no serious flaw could be detected in his heterodox version of absolute idealism, it cannot be denied that James's criticism was very influential in convincing him that an alteration of standpoint was needed in order to provide a more successful treatment of sensation⁴ (EW2: 5; see also Good 2006: 145). In the third edition of the *Psychology* these changes come clearly to the fore. In this text, indeed, Dewey started employing in a systematic way the concept of psycho-physiological organism, which is almost absent in the first edition. He also began to exploit – in a vague and rather confused way – the idea of co-ordination that was to become the cornerstone of his mature account of mental activity. Furthermore, he referred to psychological activities – as, for instance, seeing and touching – as the material out of which concrete meanings arise. He tried for the first time to take into serious account the philosophical consequences that follow from the application of the theory of evolution to the study of mental events. Finally, he attempted to outline a natural history of sensations hardly compatible with the conception of sensations as theoretical devices whose criterion of reality consists in their explanatory power to explain meaningful experience (EW2: 30ff.). Even if only in an embryonic form, therefore, Dewey's naturalistic revision of *Psychology* represented an effort to work out a set of basic concepts that were later to become pivotal factors of what a recent interpreter has called Dewey's anthropo-biological framework (Frega 2006: chapter 1; for a historical reconstruction of some of the main themes of Dewey's naturalism, see Gardner 2007: 25ff.).

⁴ In the *Preface* to the third edition of the *Psychology*, Dewey referred to James, Ward, and Watson as the three major influences – the first two from the empiricist side, the third from the idealistic side – that prompted him to change his “standpoint” in “the general treatment of sensation” (EW2: 5).

1.2. Dewey and the Naturalization of Mind: A Criticism of Traditional Interpretations

1.2.1. *Between Continuity and Discontinuity: The Search for a Middle Way*

Dewey's realization of the theoretical fertility of biological and physiological language for the explanation of sensations paved the way for a more comprehensive reconsideration of the methodological assumptions necessary to account for the presence of meaning in experience. As has been pointed out in the first chapter, the young Dewey maintained that the fact of meaning should be explained in terms of the creative activity of a non-empirical mind. In the last analysis, this was the real significance of Dewey's metaphysical theory of consciousness: the belief that consciousness is an independent order of reality led him to conclude that its manifestations cannot be reduced to the series of events that took place at a physical level. Dewey's appeal to a meta-empirical principle of explanation of meaning and objectivity stands out even more clearly if the technical account of the process of apperception is taken into consideration. Indeed, within the context of a scientific analysis of experience – within which Dewey believed that a distinction between process and raw material was wholly legitimate – mind has to be presupposed in order to understand the very possibility of the connections that constitute the meaning of an object. As has been remarked above, according to the traditional interpretation of Dewey's intellectual development it was James who showed Dewey the theoretical viability of a naturalistic account of conscious experience. In *The Principles of Psychology* James elaborated an extremely complex theory of consciousness that can be read as an attempt to defend the thesis that our meaningful experience of things has to be explained by making reference to operations happening in the brain. James's 'cerebralism', his reductionist theory of emotion – to which Dewey devoted the greatest attention –, and his acceptance of the idea that *No psychosis without neurosis* lie at the basis of the view that psychical events have to be accounted for in strictly physiological terms (James 1890: Vol. I, 129; for a discussion of this point see in particular Bird 1986: 129 and especially Gale 1999: 14). Many interpreters have argued that Dewey came to abandon his psychological idealism in favor of a physiological (even though not strictly

reductionist) form of naturalism as a consequence of his reading of *The Principles of Psychology*, and that his functionalism represents a radical departure from his previous idealistic theory of mind. In so doing, a sharp break has been introduced in Dewey's philosophical development. As is well known, the foundational moment of the functionalist school of psychology and the instrumentalist version of pragmatism has been identified in the breakthrough article *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (1896), in which Dewey's mature naturalistic theory of mind, meaning, and experience is firstly expounded in a clear, simple, and direct manner.

In recent times, the traditional interpretation of Dewey's philosophical development has been subjected to severe criticism. Interpreters like Shook, Backe, and Good – to name only the most influential ones – have argued that the assumption of a radical break between Dewey's early idealistic account of meaning and his subsequent functionalist view is unwarranted. Consistently, they have been led to question the place that Deweyan scholars have traditionally assigned to *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology*. They have maintained that it does not represent “an important marker in Dewey's move away from Hegel” since the argument that Dewey put forth is itself “a Hegelian critique of reflex arc” (Good 2006: 186). On this reading, in that article Dewey does not attempt to distance himself from his early idealism, but rather tries to use the idealistic conclusions reached in his previous works to criticize the standard notion of reflex arc. Therefore, there is a much greater continuity in Dewey's intellectual development than has been usually acknowledged: no sharp line of demarcation between the different phases of his philosophy should be drawn⁵.

⁵ The relevance and novelty of *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* cannot be underestimated. Even those who have been more inclined to endorse a strongly continuist reading of Dewey's philosophy have been compelled to admit the importance of this article. Indeed, there are too many evidences in support of the standard interpretation. It is enough to remember that Dewey's colleague and friend George Herbert Mead, who was as intimate with the Dewey's work and intellectual development as nobody else amongst his contemporaries, usually referred to *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* as the first public expression of Dewey's groundbreaking account of sensation in rigorous biological and functional terms. In so doing, he implicitly assigned to that article the outstanding place in Dewey's philosophical production that has been usually attributed to it by all the interpreters (Mead 1900: 1; see also Mead 1903: 98; see also Manicas 2008: 22). For this reason, it would be meaningless to question the standard view according to which the 1896 paper on reflex arc represents a turning point in Dewey's philosophical growth. It would be useless because no problem will arise from its selection as the most convenient standpoint from which to evaluate the significance, direction, and theoretical originality of Dewey's intellectual development. On the contrary, it should be accepted precisely because of its heuristic usefulness. The concepts of break,

As a consequence of this change of perspective, the intellectual relationship between Dewey and James has received renewed attention by scholars, to the extent that now it is probably the most challenging issue that any historical reconstruction of Deweyan philosophy has to face. Indeed, while no one has ever tried to deny that James played some role in prompting Dewey to change his account of sensation – and, a fortiori, his whole theory of experience – there has been growing reluctance to accept the stronger thesis that Dewey’s realization of the explanatory fecundity of a strictly biological approach to mind is a consequence of his enthusiastic reading of James’s *The Principles of Psychology*. Four are the main reasons why the standard view has progressively appeared a more and more unsatisfactory historiographical hypothesis. First of all, the assumption of a radical break in Dewey’s intellectual development due to the influence exerted on him by James leads to an undesirable underestimation of the difficulties that Dewey met in order to develop a consistent theory of meaning. Secondly, it does not explain why Dewey relied upon the anti-dualistic stance that he had sketched in his early works – especially in his *Psychology*. Thirdly, it does not explain why Dewey raised so many objections against James’s biological psychology. Finally, it does not shed any light on the theoretical motives that brought him to choose naturalism as the conceptual framework in which to formulate his account of experience and mind.

continuity, and discontinuity, are historiographical notions. It follows therefore that the central place acknowledged to *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* in Dewey’s intellectual development is, strictly speaking, a ‘historiographical artifact’ whose adoption is motivated by its heuristic uberty and its explanatory clarity (for a partial acknowledgment of this point, see Shook 2000: 108ff. and Tiles 1990: 36). This means that its methodological validity – which consists of its power to clarify a certain number of conceptual questions – should not be taken as and evidence of a dramatic change in Dewey’s view, thus blurring the distinction between the order of facts and the plain of reconstructive explanations. Indeed, the adoption of that methodological stance is guided by pragmatic reasons whose justification cannot be provided in terms of adherence to facts, but rather in the light of their effectiveness in bringing to light intelligible lines of development. Counterintuitive as it may seem, this reading has several advantages. Amongst the others, it allows to preserve the possibility of appealing to the interpretative relevance of *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* without being compelled to endorse the controversial thesis that a radical transition actually took place in Dewey’s philosophy at the time he wrote that article. Consequently, by divorcing – at least in a preliminary phase – methodological from historical considerations, it frees historiographical analyses from all the strictures and pitfalls that follow from the adoption of a discontinuist account of Dewey’s philosophical development. At the very same time, it avoids the risk of unconsciously projecting categories that are valid only on an argumentative level into the concrete flux of events, thus assuming that their acceptance should be subordinated to a *strictly* empirical verification. Nothing prevents from recognizing the latter as being characterized by a strong degree of continuity, even though such a continuity is momentarily bracketed out for expository reasons.

Shook has devoted many pages of his *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality* to explaining why the discontinuist interpretation of Dewey's philosophical development is wrong. Referring to the debate between Reck and Buxton about the issue of the influence exerted by James on Dewey, he correctly sides with Buxton in order to point out that it is too forced and artificial to locate "in one philosopher and one book could be the decisive psychological turning point of Dewey's career" (Shook 2000: 119; see also Phillips 1971, Reck 1984 and Buxton 1984). Considerations of this kind have led Shook to look for possible anticipations of instrumentalist and functionalist themes in Dewey's early texts⁶. Emphasizing the traits of Dewey's thought that are compatible with his mature views of experience to the detriment of those that, on the contrary, support a metaphysical conception of soul, the conclusion has been advanced that Dewey's functionalism is to be conceived as the outgrowth and theoretical refinement of his early position. A remarkable example of this approach is Shook's statement that "[i]n the 'Reflex Arc Concept' all the promises portended by the insights of the 'Soul and Body' has come to fruition" (Shook 2000: 113).

The contention that Dewey did not have to wait for the appearance of James's *The Principles of Psychology* in order to understand the importance of biology and physiology for a sound philosophical theory of mind is undoubtedly correct. However, the legitimate desire to highlight the continuity of Dewey's intellectual development should not be exaggerated to the extent of overshadowing the novelties involved in Dewey's rethinking of his psychological

⁶ In many of his early texts – and in particular in *Soul and Body* (1886) – Dewey tried to combine idealism and Wundtian psychology along a line similar to the one that he subsequently followed in the article on the reflex arc theory. In *Soul and Body* Dewey discussed with some length the mind-body problem, arguing that the very fact of teleology – that is, the fact that the behavior of human beings and animals cannot be explained except on the basis of teleological categories – involves the rejection of the distinction between mind and body, and the acknowledgment that mind is nothing but the form of body. Referring to Pflüger's experiments with decapitated frogs, Dewey maintained that the most recent scientific discoveries had shown that the teleological character of animal behavior is objectively manifested as the proper nature of nervous activity. Thus, since "there is a fundamental mode of nervous activity" in which "the psychical is immanent", Dewey was led to conclude that "the psychical is immanent in the physical as directing it toward a given end" (EW1: 98). This means that if one tries to account for human actions – starting from nervous activity, which represents the grounding level of activity, and ending with the refined forms of human behavior – in purely mechanical terms, the category of cause and effect reveals itself to be inadequate principle of explanation of the relation between the physical and the psychical. Such an inexplicability amounts to "a positive condemnation of the method and principles which have led to it" (EW1: 105). All these theses are *formally* identical to the ones Dewey expounded in his mature works, but differ from the latter because of their indeterminateness and vagueness in relation to the kind of 'naturalism' that they presuppose.

idealism. The main defect of the interpretation advanced by Shook seems to be precisely that of privileging continuity rather than discontinuity on a *general* level, without looking to the *specific* aspects that may support one or the other of the two historiographical hypotheses. Accordingly, the continuist interpretation of the evolution of Dewey's philosophy does not prove itself completely satisfactory, even though it has the merit of bringing to the fore the persistence of the problems with which Dewey dealt throughout his whole philosophical career. Indeed, rather than choosing between absolute continuity and absolute discontinuity, one would like to say something like this: it is indisputably true that Dewey's reading of *The Principles of Psychology* did not cause a conceptual revolution in his thought; nonetheless, it would equally be wrong to argue that James did not have a significant influence on Dewey. This 'ecumenical' solution attempts to sketch a moderately continuist interpretation that aims at not underestimating the elements of originality that Dewey was able to elaborate in the texts he wrote during the 90's. This not only and not so much because a strong continuist interpretation explicitly contradicts Dewey's repeated acknowledgments of James's influence. But especially because it does not explain why at a certain point Dewey realized that his previous position was in need of a thorough revision, and that such a revision should be directed toward the elaboration of a naturalistic conceptual framework articulated in psychological terms.

At the very same time, the moderately continuist solution presented here differs markedly also from the traditional discontinuist account. Two are the main points of disagreement with the latter. First of all, a moderately continuist interpretation does not underwrite the thesis that James's influence dramatically changed the overall nature of Dewey's philosophy, if this is intended to imply that Dewey uncritically accepted James's biological psychology in its wholeness as a substitute of his early idealistic psychology. Indeed, Dewey was strongly selective in his reading of *The Principles of Psychology*. This point deserves more attention than has usually been given to it (but for a clear statement of it, see Westbrook 1991: 66). Dewey acknowledged the theoretical contribution of James's approach to the issues of meaning, mind, and natural teleology, but he was not satisfied with merely relying upon the ready made solutions proposed in *The Principles of Psychology*. Dewey had a problem in mind, that of explaining the conditions of possibility of meaningful experience. He had already formulated a provisional proposal revolving around the ideas a) that meaning is synthesis or

relation – a general thesis espoused by James himself in the *Principles of Psychology*, even though in a rather different form –, and b) that synthesis is the product of a meta-empirical factor of unification. Dewey's idealism was properly qualified, thus differing substantially from the standard Kantian version of idealism endorsed by Green. His early psychological idealism oscillated between a form of transcendentalism centered upon the notion of the constructive activity of apperception – an approach that Dewey profoundly exploited in his analysis of the processes and materials of experience – and a more consistent form of absolute idealism, in which attention is focused less on perception and sensation as the grounding levels of meaning than on the refined ways of apprehending the significance reality. Dewey attempted to merge the two perspectives together in order to deal with the issue of perception in an anti-dualistic fashion. In his mind, the notion of unconscious inference was the key to correct the shortcomings of transcendental method. Nonetheless, he progressively came to realize that the two approaches did not combine together as easily as he had previously thought.

In this context, James's naturalistic psychology struck Dewey as particularly relevant since it provided a physiological explanation of meaning and experience that did not make recourse to meta-empirical entities as explanatory principles. Dewey understood that a physiological account of the simplest level of experience – that is, of that level of experience which he started referring to as 'immediate' or 'primary' experience⁷ – was the way out from the difficulties

⁷ Dewey started using the expression 'primary experience' from around 1895. The first occurrence of this expression that I have been able to find is in a series of lectures that Dewey delivered at the university of Chicago in the Autumn of 1895 (LoE 1895: 441). For what concerns the expression 'immediate experience' – which Dewey used in many articles written in the first decade of 20th century – it seems possible to say that it was first employed in a systematic manner in his course on the theory of logic (1899-1900). It is highly plausible that Dewey took this expression from Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (1893), a work that he knew well and studied with carefulness (on this point, see chapter 3, 1.1. fn. 3). In the context of a discussion of the concept of immediacy, Bradley wrote: "The 'this' and the 'mine' are names which stand for the immediacy of feeling, and each serves to call attention to one side of that fact. There is no 'mine' which is not 'this', nor any 'this' which fails, in a sense, to be 'mine'. The immediate fact must always come as something felt in an experience, and an experience always must be particular, and, in a sense, must be 'unique' [...] We are to assume that there does exist an indefinite number of 'this-mines'; of immediate experiences of the felt". (Bradley 1893: 224; on the relationship between Bradley and the pragmatist tradition see Bradley 1914: chapters 4-5-6; for a masterful discussion of this topic, see Forster 1996). But it is important to note that the same expression was used in a similar sense – even though with a different goal in mind – by Wundt in his *Outlines of Psychology* (1896, translated in English in 1897). Trying to define the proper subject-matter of psychology, Wundt remarked that the objects of psychological investigations are not different from the objects of outer experience. The terms 'inner' and 'outer' do not indicate two different kinds of objects, but two "different points of view from which we start in the consideration and scientific treatment of a unitary experience" (Wundt 1897:

characterizing his previous work. Indeed, it not only allowed him to retain the idea that experience is the absolute standpoint of philosophy, as well as the concomitant view that meaning has to reveal itself in experience in order to be real, but also strongly reinforced his convictions that such an approach was the only appropriate method to account for the embodiment of meaning in existence. Simplifying the issue, it can be said that the substitution of 'transcendental analysis' (in the sense specified above) with physiological explanations paved the way for a definite rejection of any form of dualism. This rejection not only does not affect, but also secure the validity of Dewey's idealistic conception of experience as the all-encompassing horizon of meaning. Dewey's adoption of physiological and biological conceptual framework can be therefore viewed as the first step toward the formulation of a sound anti-intellectualist theory of experience. Its distinctive thesis is that meaning is apprehended before and independently from any conscious act of thought.

This does not mean that Dewey's allegiance to scientific naturalism is uncritical. Rather the contrary, Dewey carried on a powerful work of revision of its fundamental assumptions. The emphasis on this aspect is the point in which the moderately continuist interpretation defended here and what has been called the traditional discontinuist interpretation depart. Dewey was aware that in order to provide a sound account of human activity he had to rely on the results reached by the most recent psychological research. Nonetheless, his interest in psychology did not lead him to an uncritical acceptance of the concepts and methods developed within the scientific community. In fact, far from being satisfied with the psychological theories defended by his contemporaries, Dewey sought for a new theoretical framework to interpret the findings. In particular, he realized that the traditional conceptual apparatus lying at the basis of contemporary psychology was radically flawed since it was still committed to a refined form of dualism. What is important to note is that his work of revision

2). The standpoint of psychology Wundt named 'immediate experience': in so doing, he wanted to stress the fact that psychology does not abstract from "the subjective factor present in all actual experience" (Wundt 1897: 3; for a discussion of the similarities and differences between James's and Wundt's conception of immediate experience, see Judd 1905; for a more general and more theoretically engaged discussion of this issue, see Mead 1903). This has been said with the aim to call the attention on the complexity of the notion of immediate experience, as well as on its internal articulateness. But this has also been said with the aim to argue that it is wrong to maintain that Dewey's concept of immediate experience derives from James's notion of pure experience, thus arguing for a strong continuity between the two approaches. For an interesting discussion of these issues, see Alexander 1877: 75-76 and Ryan 1994: 29ff. For a general discussion of the concept of immediate experience, see Mack 1968.

did not spare James's philosophical psychology. In many different occasions, indeed, Dewey accepted James's conclusions only with many reservations, and not before having subjected them to radical conceptual and terminological changes. These changes were due to Dewey's willingness to bring the explanatory categories adopted by biologists and psychologists in accordance with his general conception of experience. In other words, Dewey's philosophical analysis of meaningful experience 'retroacts' upon the scientific explanations of this fact – now conceived as a wholly natural event, which has to be explained in purely naturalistic terms –, thus yielding a fruitful interaction between philosophy and psychology in which matter (the results of psychology) and form (the conceptual scheme elaborated by philosophical reflection) are mutually controlled and reciprocally enriched⁸.

The latter remark calls attention to Dewey's conception of the relationship between psychology and philosophy. The second point of divergence between

⁸ The theoretical implications of this new paradigm of research were momentous since they involved a profound transformation of Dewey's conception of the relationship between psychology and philosophy. As a consequence of this redefinition of the roles and scopes of the two disciplines, Dewey was led to adopt a more interdisciplinary approach to philosophical problems that eventuated in a radical redefinition of his general philosophical perspective. This is a point which would deserve more attention than it can receive here. It is true that Dewey never doubted of the possibility of combining a general (idealistic) standpoint with a specific psychological account of mental activity. His early quest for a psychological standpoint is an evidence of this attempt to work out the theoretical consequences of the continuity and complementarity of the two approaches. But the progressive autonomization of psychology from philosophy – which went hand in hand with its professionalization as a discipline – prompted Dewey to reconsider the issue of their relation. Dewey came then to realize the untenability of the thesis of the identity of psychology and philosophy. Consequently, he was led to adopt a more articulated position: psychology and philosophy are two different disciplines which share the same subject-matter – they both deal with the functions that constitute meaningful experience –, but do not adopt the same methods of inquiry. As is well known, this complex process of rethinking found its most mature expression in the opening pages of *Logic: Theory of Inquiry*, where it is stated that the "generic relation" of psychology to logic is similar to that of physics or biology (LW12: 29). In so doing, the later Dewey attempted to define the space of philosophical reflection, and to argue for its relative independence from 'special sciences'. However, the first formulation of this view can be read in a less known article entitled *Psychology and Social Practice* (1900), in which Dewey stated that "psychological science" is "the study of mechanism" (MW1: 132). In any case, it is important to note that the relationship between psychology and philosophy was a much-debated issue not only in the American intellectual community, but also within the group of researchers with Dewey worked at the University of Chicago. Besides Mead, who dedicated his most famous article to the definition of the psychical and, consequently, of the possibility of psychology as a science, it is important to remind the names of Angell, Moore, and especially, Lloyd and his *Dynamic Idealism* (Mead 1903 and Mead 1900; Angell 1903; Lloyd 1898; for a general discussion of the Chicago school of functionalism, Backe 2001; Manicas 2008: chapter 2, and in particular 42-47; Carleton 1982; Feffer 1993: 148ff.).

our moderately continuist view and the traditional discontinuist reading of Dewey's philosophical development concerns precisely the different interpretation of his place within the philosophical and psychological debates of the time. The issue of the influence exerted by James on Dewey has unfortunately catalyzed the interest of Deweyan scholars. No attention has therefore been paid to the overall intellectual context that formed the background of Dewey's confrontation with James: the influence of the intellectual milieu on Dewey's reception of James's *The Principles of Psychology* has consequently been dramatically undervalued. In so doing, an excessively narrow perspective has been adopted which has prevented from seeing the reason why James's thought is so important for Dewey. This is due to the outstanding role played by James in the process of constitution of psychology as a natural science. As a way out from the one-sidedness of the standard approach, it is therefore useful to lay stress on the most relevant aspects of the American psychological debate in the last decade of 19th century.

1.2.2. James, Ladd, and the Birth of Scientific Psychology

James's *The Principles of Psychology* represents a watershed in the history of American psychology. Its importance is a consequence of its effectiveness in setting a new agenda for psychological research. As is well known, James is usually considered the father of American psychology. Strictly speaking, this is false since there were many psychologists in America even before the appearance of James's masterpiece. John Dewey was one of those. What is true is that before James had the merit of developing a new paradigm of psychological research that showed itself to be extremely promising in experimental applications.

The discussion between James himself and Ladd, carried on in the pages of *The Philosophical Review*, is probably the best evidence of what was at stake in the controversy over the possibility of psychology as a natural science. In his critical review of *The Principles of Psychology*, provocatively entitled *Psychology as So-Called "Natural Science"*, Ladd objected to James that his conception of psychology led to "a most astonishing abbreviation of the rights of psychologists": what Ladd could not accept is James's rejection of both introspection and physiological investigations as legitimate methods of psychological research (Ladd 1892: 28-30). According to Ladd, James's reduction

of psychology to 'cerebrum psychology' ended in an undesirable limitation of its explanatory powers. This limitation was a sign of a wholly untenable conception of the scope and aims of psychology as a science. "The conception is such, and so narrow", he wrote, "that a consistent adherence to it compels us to admit the utter impossibility of establishing psychology as a natural science" (Ladd 1892: 38). Indeed, if psychological inquiry is limited to the ascertainment of those processes in the brain that can explain the existence of thought and feeling, it becomes impossible for psychologists to account for the higher "forms or factors of thought and feeling" since it is impossible to localize them in cerebral centres (Ladd 1892: 35).

Ladd contrasted James's methodological reductionist approach with the 'metaphysical' conception of mind that he had formulated in his *Elements of Physiological Psychology* (1887)⁹. The point at stake concerned the explanation of the perception of external things. According to Ladd, perception "is the result of an extremely complex activity of the psychical subject, Mind" (Ladd 1887: 467). Every act of perception "involves the synthesis of a number of sense-data according to laws that are not deducible from the nature of the external objects, or of the physiological action of the end-organs and central organs of sense" (Ladd 1887: 467). Only if a meta-empirical entity like soul or mind is introduced, therefore, it becomes possible to discover the causes that reliably account for the proper characters of mental events. On the contrary, James believed that perception was amenable to scientific approach. On Ladd's reading, James held that psychology should look for "'blank unmediated correspondences' between brain-processes and intuitions and conceptions of space-qualities and space-relations": it is the discovery of these correspondence that guarantees the scientificity of the discipline, which James equated with the absence of any "inclination to metaphysics" (Ladd 1892: 49).

Ladd could not help from emphasizing that the presupposition of an unmediated correspondence between cerebral events and psychical phenomena is as metaphysical an assumption as those that James so vehemently criticized in the other psychological works of the time. So, it is not for this reason that Ladd was led to reject James's program. The reason of his dissatisfaction with James's naturalistic approach had to do with the heuristic and explanatory uselessness of the latter's belief in the existence of a correspondence between two

⁹ For the qualification of Ladd's psychology as 'metaphysical', see Ladd's preface of his *Philosophy of Mind. An Essay in the Metaphysics of Psychology* (Ladd 1895: vii).

fundamentally different types of objects. Indeed, Ladd believed that differently from other kinds of metaphysical entities – whose introduction as postulated elements of a theory entailed an increase of its explanatory power – James’s metaphysical presumptions blocked rather than promoted psychological research. It is this form of ‘intellectual hypocrisy’, combined with the realization of the theoretical disadvantages that follow from the adoption of that approach, that Ladd stressed like the most unacceptable aspect of James’s argument (see, for instance, Ladd 1892: 48-49)¹⁰.

Interestingly enough, James did not reply to Ladd’s criticism. He simply remarked that by narrowing down the scope and aim of psychology to the search for relations of correspondence between mental states and cerebral processes, his goal was that of fostering the constitution of psychology as a natural science rather than ratifying its existence. James was right on this point. Ladd implicitly assumed that James intended to describe the actual conditions of psychological research. Consequently, it was not difficult to show that James’s methodological proposal was not supported by facts. However, when the ‘prophetic’ nature of James’s work is realized, Ladd’s objections immediately lose their force. “I wished, by treating Psychology *like* a natural science”, James remarked, “to help her to become one” (James 1892: 146). The naturalization of psychology – which consisted, in the last analysis, in the rejection of any attempt to say something about the nature of soul or transcendental self – was the essential core of its process of transformation in a truly scientific discipline. James wanted a psychology that could provide practical predictions and practical rules with the aim of helping educators, jail-wardens, doctors, clergymen, etc., to intelligently conduct their activities. When seen from this perspective, the restriction of the subject-matter of psychology to the search for correlations between mental events and their physical causes acquires a more definite significance. James believed the possibility of detecting ‘blank unmediated correlations’ to be preliminary to

¹⁰ Ladd emphatically concluded his review of James’s *The Principles of Psychology* with a clear statement of belief, which best expressed the difference between the two points of view: “[a]s to the explanatory value of the metaphysical postulate of a mind, or soul, I feel obliged to differ greatly from Professor James. That the postulate should not be intruded into the science of psychology, to warp its facts and prejudice its legitimate inductions, I readily admit. Nevertheless, it is a postulate which not only stands as a great light at the end of our path-way, but which also illumines, by interpreting, the significance of every step [...] The development of Mind can only be regarded as the progressive manifestation in consciousness of the life of a real being, which, although taking its start and direction from the action of the physical elements of the body, proceeds to unfold powers that are sui generis, according to laws of its own” (Ladd 1892: 52-53). It should not pass unnoticed the similarity between Ladd’s views on the nature of mind and Dewey’s early position.

the formulation of a *practical* psychology, where the formulation of a practical psychology he held as the most urgent need of the time. He therefore suggested that instead of wasting time in trying to find solutions to questions impossible to solve, it would have been better to define a common basis in which psychologists, philosophers, and biologists could agree. In so doing, James emphatically concluded, “peace might long reign, and an enormous booty of natural laws be harvested in with comparatively no time or energy lost in recrimination and dispute about first principles” (James 1892: 151).

In the last analysis, at the basis of the controversy between James and Ladd there is a different conception of what psychology should *do*. Contrary to Ladd, who insisted that psychology could not reach a scientific status except under the assumption of the existence of a non-empirical mind, James adopted a more pragmatic conception of the tasks that psychology as a natural science should carry out. The two fundamental criteria of scientificity to which James adhered are a) the capacity of a discipline to produce an intersubjective agreement amongst the members of a scientific community, and b) the practical (rather than strictly theoretical) fecundity of its conclusions. The first criterion is justified by its being a necessary condition of the second. Indeed, cooperation of scientists is essential to the development of new and more effective methods for tackling concrete problems of associated life. Thence, it was a pragmatic consideration of the practical advantages that were expected to derive from the naturalization of psychology that prompted James to propose to treat mental states as “a practically admitted sort of objects whose habits of coexistence and succession and relations with organic conditions form an entirely definite subject of research” (James 1892: 150-151). Consequently, his refusal of dealing with the issues raised by Ladd was not a manifestation of disdain for rational discussion. On the contrary, it reflected his deep-seated conviction that psychology was at a turning point of its history, and that its future was dependent less on philosophical considerations than on an optimistic bet on its practical potentialities, which could be made it actual once psychology was freed from its metaphysical burden.

Now, even though ‘cerebralism’ was a highly controversial paradigm of inquiry, James’s ambitious program of studying mind as a wholly natural phenomenon received an enthusiastic reception from many of the youngest students of psychology who were growing dissatisfied with the state of the discipline. James’s fundamental insight – the importance of sharply separating

psychology from philosophy – was accepted and profoundly exploited by those who were working to professionalize American psychology in the last decade of 19th century¹¹. This is, in my opinion, the key to understand James’s influence on Dewey’s thought. The reason why Dewey was so positively impressed by James’s psychological proposal cannot be explained solely in terms of its scientific soundness. Any attempt to account for James’s influence on Dewey cannot prescind from an accurate consideration of the ‘performative function’ carried out by James psychological project, which eventuated in the creation of a scientific community characterized by a widespread agreement on the methods that should be applied and the problems that should be tackled.

Dewey published his *Psychology* in the very same year in which Ladd’s *Elements of Physiological Psychology* appeared. At that time, the theoretical status of psychology was still a matter of dispute, and the spiritualist account of mind that both Ladd and Dewey formulated was perceived as a controversial, yet respectable psychological option. In less than five years, the situation dramatically changed. It would be exaggerated to say that the naturalization of mind – with the concomitant naturalization of psychology – proved the falsity of the traditional idealistic and spiritualist account of it developed by Wundt and Lotze, and refined by Ladd and Dewey. Nonetheless, from a certain moment on, that methodological and theoretical option started to appear highly implausible: consequently it was dropped out by experimental psychologists as a wholly unnecessary hypothesis of work. There is textual evidence – which will be discussed at length in the next paragraphs – that Dewey put his early position under revision because he realized that the naturalization of mind was the only way to carry on his early project of grounding idealism on scientific bases. More precisely, he realized that the rapid development of psychological science

¹¹ As has been already remarked above, the attractiveness of James’s psychology was due to the fact that it opened new lines of research that had an immediate effect on everyday life and, consequently, were easily testable as scientific hypotheses. It is important to note, however, that the success of James’s project of naturalizing psychology went hand in hand with that process of professionalization of the discipline that radically changed both the concrete practices of psychological research and the institutional contexts in which psychological inquiries were carried out. As Evans has correctly pointed out referring to the rise of scientific psychology in the United States, “the emergence of psychology as an independent discipline is closely linked to the development of the American academic scene” (Evans 1984: 18). And even though James soon became totally disinterested in furthering the processes (both theoretical and ‘academic’) aiming at constituting psychology as a natural science – as he was increasingly attracted by the study of paranormal and mystical experiences – it cannot be denied that his work “though not necessarily an experimental psychology, was sufficient, if not ideal, to make him the symbol for the new experimental psychology in America” (Evans 2005: 26; see also, Bjork 1983).

compelled him to change the conceptual framework in which he had thought possible to account for meaningful experience. Otherwise, his ambitious project of providing a not-reductionist conception of experience that could live up to the most recent scientific discoveries and integrate them in a coherent whole would have to be definitely abandoned. The new language and methods of psychological research made him aware that the many inconsistencies that he had previously tolerated in his theory of meaning as undesired, yet unavoidable side-effects of the attempt to explain in causal terms the fact of meaningful experience were in reality signs of the inadequacy of the methodological criteria adopted.

It should be clearer now why it has been maintained that it would be too simplistic to defend the view that it was the reading of James's *The Principles of Psychology* that prompted Dewey to abandon his early idealism. It would be too simplistic not simply because Dewey never abandoned idealism, but rather modified its fundamental theses in order to match the legitimate demands of a scientific naturalism, but especially because the publication of *The Principles of Psychology* were far from being a self-enclosed event with no remarkable repercussions on the intellectual milieu to which both Dewey and James implicitly referred. Dewey did not change his mind as a consequence of his reading a single book. As Shook has rightly contended, the "magic bullet" theory according to which Dewey suddenly converted to naturalism is wholly untenable. Rather, Dewey changed his mind because the American psychological debate in its entirety took a new direction.

1.3. *Outlines of a Moderately Continuist Interpretation*

The moderately continuist account of Dewey's intellectual development aims at preserving and combining together the valuable insights of the two rivalry interpretations. The result of this combination is a description of the evolution of Dewey's thought that centers around the problems that Dewey tried to solve throughout his whole philosophical career. The motor force of Dewey's drift away from his early idealistic account of meaning is traced back to his desire to ground idealism on solid scientific bases. In this reading, the continuity of Dewey's thought is due to his abiding commitment to the idea that experience

provides the absolute standpoint of philosophy, while the discontinuity is due to the rapid transformation that psychological science underwent in the last decade of the 19th century.

After having clarified its similarities and differences with the other available interpretative options, it is now possible to outline the fundamental traits of the moderately continuist interpretation. Its starting point is the thesis that the psychological idealism formulated in the *Psychology* is an inconsistent philosophical position. Dewey soon realized that many aspects of his early idealistic account of meaning and mind were not satisfactory. Consequently, he progressively got dissatisfied with that solution, and looked for a new scientific foundation of his psychological idealism. This process of growing dissatisfaction was caused both by his coming into contact with a new intellectual environment – and, in particular, by his daily frequentation with scientists and psychologists firstly at the University of Michigan and then at the University of Chicago – and by his reading of James's *The Principles of Psychology*. James's *The Principles of Psychology* introduced him into the contemporary psychological debate. From that moment on, Dewey took part to discussions with the most important American psychologists of the time.

However, at the very same time in which he realized the theoretical viability of a psycho-biological account of mind and meaning, Dewey came to understand that the naturalization of mind did not represent a betrayal of his early idealistic outlook, but that, on the contrary, it was the most straightforward completion of his original project of giving a constructivist explanation of the meaningfulness of human experience¹². Naturalization of mind means that the processes of constitution of meaning are performed by the brain and, more in general, by the whole organism of which brain is a part. In so doing, the quasi-transcendentalist machinery of the *Psychology* was supplanted by a more consistent theory of biological activity that made it possible for Dewey not only to preserve the

¹² In the context of an assessment of both his philosophical achievements and further possible lines of research, he stated that “[w]hile I continue to get more and more out of Hegel, I get less and less out of the Hegelians so-called”. This because “[t]hey seem to be to be [sic] largely repeating phrases when they ought to analyzing the subject matter”, thus not realizing that “[m]etaphysics has had its day, and if the truths which Hegel saw cannot be stated as direct, practical truths, they are not true” (CJD Vol. I: 1893.05.10; J. Dewey to J. R. Angell). Hegelian philosophy is verified only insofar as it can be translated in practical and biological terms, and employed as a concrete program of investigation and action. The bet that Dewey made was that such a translation was not only possible, but also required by the concrete problems at stake. As is will be pointed out in this and in the following chapter, Dewey's efforts of naturalizing mind and thought were strictly dependent upon the progressive refinement of his knowledge of Hegelian philosophy.

pivotal idealistic tenet that experience is the 'absolute' in which things reveal themselves as meaningful, but also to provide a further confirmation of its validity. Indeed, as a consequence of the adoption of a thoroughly naturalistic account of mind it became no more necessary to use the dualistic language of process and material that Dewey had adopted in his *Psychology*. It follows that any risk of surreptitiously introducing the notion of a transcendental self was definitely abandoned, as well as it was avoided the temptation of reducing experience to its constituents. The direct consequence of this conceptual shift was a highly original form of anti-intellectualism hinging upon the thesis that immediate experience is not primarily a cognitive affair¹³. But this went hand in hand with a redefinition of the constructivist paradigm of explanation of meaning. According to Dewey's constructivism, meaning is the connection of an act with its consequences. But there is a difference between meanings immediately and pre-reflectively experienced and meanings consciously constructed in an act of reflection or inquiry. Such a difference was blurred by Dewey's adoption of an idealistic account of 'primary experience'. The idea that the very same operations were at the basis of both reflectively and non-reflectively experienced meanings – from which Dewey's expressivist theory of thought follows as a natural conclusion – prevented him from seeing that the construction of immediate experience could not be described by using the language adopted in the analysis of reflective thought¹⁴. The rejection of this

¹³ According to present reading, therefore, the postulate of immediate empiricism – that is, Dewey's self-conscious methodological acknowledgment of this feature of experience – should be read as the natural outgrowth of the process of naturalization of mind, which in turn coincides with Dewey's theoretical effort to submit his early idealism to a radical revision. Moreover, since the postulate of immediate experience has been usually considered as the fundamental tenet from which Dewey never departed in his mature works, it is easy to see why and under which conditions his whole philosophy of experience can be said to be grounded on the anthro-biological paradigm of explanation of meaning and mind which supplanted his early idealistic theory of self (for a similar reading, see Alexander 1987: 74ff.).

¹⁴ Dewey's early idealism hinged upon the assumption that the very same activity that structures meaning at the perceptual level was responsible for the conceptual development of meaning carried on in the process of reasoning. Accordingly, there was no space left for drawing a sharp distinction between the level of immediate experience and the level of conscious reasoning. The relation between perception and conception was conceived in terms of the coming to consciousness of the former through and in the latter, so that what is known only in an implicit manner in perception becomes known in an explicit and complete form as a result of its being conceptually articulated through analysis and inference. Dewey's insistence on the idea of unconscious inference as the single theoretical device that allows to account for the direct apprehension of the significance of objects in perceptual experience stands out as the keystone of his *unified* conception of meaning. In this case, 'unified' was taken by Dewey to mean that the same theoretical apparatus that explains the refined forms of thought activity (*intelligi*) also explains the simplest forms of apprehension of

idealistic and intellectualistic assumption brought to the fore the issue of understanding the differences existing between the two strains of constructivism.

The thesis of the non-cognitive character of immediate experience was understood by Dewey in two different senses, depending on whether he wanted to stress its difference from the conscious activity of reflection or whether he was interested in highlighting the continuity between experience and life-processes that lie at its basis and makes it possible. In the first sense, by saying that immediate experience is primarily a non-cognitive affair Dewey intended to maintain that it could not be assimilated to the intentional activity of thinking aiming at solving those problems that arise from daily or scientific transactions within the environment. In this case, the appeal to an anti-intellectualist conception of immediate experience was functional to defend the view that the distinctions which reflection introduces in its material in order to more easily handle the issues that have called up thought – as, for instance, the distinction between sensations and ideas, facts and values, things and meanings – do not hold at that basic level. But through the insistence on the non-cognitive nature of immediate experience Dewey also tried to defend the view that meaningful experience should be accounted for as a natural event. In this sense, the recognition of the non-cognitive character of primary experience paved the way for the possibility of arguing for the theoretical availability of a straightforward naturalism as a reliable standpoint for philosophical reflection against those who maintained that a meta-empirical principle was needed to explain the possibility of relations and meaning. Naturalization of mind was taken by Dewey to mean that immediate experience has a structure different and wholly independent from that of reflective thinking. Such an independence was traced back to the fact that while relations drawn amongst ideas and facts in inquiry are produced and controlled by a conscious act of mind, and are therefore describable in strictly logical terms, the relations that give its proper sense or significance to immediate experience are the product of a natural agent, whose ‘categories’ are completely distorted if expressed in the language of logic. This means that the direct apprehension of the meaning of things is to be accounted for as the result of a natural activity performed by the organism – similar to the act of breathing or digesting.

meaning (*percipi*). Dewey expressed this point by saying that *intelligi* and *percipi* were both necessary conditions of *experiri*, and that they could not be separated unless one is willing to abandon the proper standpoint of philosophical reflection in favor of some kind of dogmatic approach to experience (for a further discussion of this point, see below fn. 15).

As has been remarked in the first chapter, Dewey's assumption that meaning and existence are essentially interwoven constitutes his point of contact with the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition. Now, it emerges that it was precisely his unreserved adhesion to that powerful Kantian thesis that prevented him from seeing the importance of drawing the distinction between immediate and reflective experience. Indeed, the unity of perception and conception excluded any possibility of distinguishing between the level of immediate experience and the analysis of the general traits of intentional activity of reflection. Since perception and conception were conceived as abstractions from the reality of concrete experience, it was not only unnecessary, but even detrimental to attempt to provide a separate account of them. This seems to be a direct consequence of Dewey's fundamental thesis that idealization is the life of meaning. For the young Dewey, psychology is the absolute science as it deals with experience in its process of growth from an unconscious stage in which meaning is encountered as a natural property of external objects to a complete stage of self-consciousness and self-knowledge, where experienced meanings reveal themselves to consist in nothing but the set of relations that internally articulate a whole. The movement from unconsciousness to consciousness gave a distinctively intellectualist torsion to the explanation of the simplest levels of apprehension of meaning, which ended up in an undesired absorption of perception in conception.

Dewey continued to believe that this idea of a unified conception of meaning was correct. However, he realized that the relation between perception and conception should be reversed. Dewey's ambitious aim was to preserve the continuity between perception and conception – or, to use the terms employed by Dewey in his later works, between primary and secondary experience – without being compelled to accept the undesired conclusion that the former has to be swallowed up in the latter in order for meaning to be possible¹⁵. The point of divergence with his early position consists in the fact that, starting from the last

¹⁵ There are numerous evidence that Dewey never changed his mind about the importance of outlining a consistent unified theory of meaning and rationality. So, for instance, in his *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey was clearly referring to this project of providing a general account of meaning when he wrote that “there is no limit to the capacity of immediate sensuous experience to absorb into itself meanings and values that in and of themselves [...] would be designated ‘ideal’ and ‘spiritual’” (LW10: 36). The continuity of perception and conception was therefore explicitly reaffirmed, even though its affirmation in a very different context dramatically changed its overall significance. In any case, all these necessary qualifications notwithstanding, I think one is entitled to say that the possibility of immediate sensuous experience to embody general meanings was nothing but another way of expressing in functional and naturalistic terms the Kantian thesis that experience is made up of perception and conception.

decade of the 19th century, Dewey began to understand that the idea that unconscious inference was not a reliable philosophical notion, and that the idealistic assumption that the direct apprehension of the meaning of things should be explained by making reference to unconscious inferences was completely unsound¹⁶.

Dewey was not alone in believing that Kantian transcendental project had to be modified in a strictly biological sense¹⁷. What is typical of Dewey's position is his attempt to show that the most refined activities of thinking have to be traced back to their biological sources in order to be possible to explain how reflection can modify primary experience and increase the proper significance or 'sense' of things immediately experienced in the habitual transactions with the world. In other words, Dewey substituted the *over-intellectualization* of immediate experience with the *naturalization* of thought. As a consequence of such a paradigm shift, the function of conception and inference is no more that of bringing to light what is present only in an undeveloped form in perception,

¹⁶ A partial confirmation of the correctness of this reading can be found in *The Logic of Judgments of Practice*, originally appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Method* in 1915 and then republished with some revisions in the following year as the last chapter of the *Essays in Experimental Logic* (1916). In this text, Dewey explicitly faced the question concerning the theoretical soundness of the notion of unconscious inference. In particular, he insisted on the difference existing between his biological view of mediation and the idealistic account of it. It is highly plausible, Dewey argued, that perception involves some kind of inference, in the technical sense that the former affords an indication for inferring some possible consequences that are not given in the content actually experienced. However, one is not thence entitled to conclude that perception is in itself an inference, that is, a psychical act that is essentially similar to the conscious operation of deducing a conclusion from a set of premises. The "telescoping of a perceived object with the object inferred from it [...] is not a matter of present inference going on unconsciously, but is the result of an organic modification which has occurred in consequence of prior inferences" (MW8: 53). In this case, to say that an inference lies at the basis of meaningful experience is only an inaccurate way of expressing the rather different thesis that without neural changes happening in the brain meaning would be impossible. Evidently, Dewey was not interested in denying that certain qualities previously inferred have progressively become fused with those quality from which they were inferred. Rather the contrary, he was willing to emphasize this point since it was the very core of his constructivist account of meaning. He simply argued that "such fusion or consolidation is precisely *not inference*" because "[w]hat has really happened is that *brain* processes which formerly happened successively now happen simultaneously" (MW8: 53).

¹⁷ Santayana was probably the first who pointed out in a clear and consistent way that reason was a natural instinct rather than a faculty, and that "it is the actual plastic form in both mind and body, not any unchanging substance or agent, that is efficacious in perpetuating thought and gathering experience" (Santayana 1905: 71). Santayana reached conclusions similar to those reached by Dewey about the theoretical viability of Kant's transcendental philosophy. See, for instance, his remark according to which "the whole skeleton and dialectical mould of experience came to figure, in Kant's mythology, as machinery behind the scenes, as a system of non-natural efficient forces, as a partner in a marriage the issue of which was human thought" (Santayana 1905: 102-103).

since reflection is not conceived of as an act through which the content of immediate experience is made explicit. Dewey came to view reflection as an act performed by an individual agent in a determinate situation in order to produce determinate effects in the external world. The idealistic view that the natural outcome of thinking activity is self-consciousness – that is, the realization that the meaning of things is, in the last analysis, the product of the constructive activity of mind – was therefore supplanted by the idea that a true comprehension of reality is achieved only as the final result of a series of modifications of the environment, whose satisfactoriness has to be evaluated in terms of their capacity to solve the problems that have originated the very act of thinking. It is this conceptual shift from an expressionist account of thinking to a transformative and functionalist account of it, combined with the concomitant move from intellectualism to naturalism, that define the path along which Dewey's slowly drifted away from his original form of idealism.

The recognition of the complexity of Dewey's process of emancipation from his early idealistic theory of meaning is a point that deserves great attention. One of the distinctive traits of the moderately continuist view advocated here is precisely that it does not attempt to account for Dewey's philosophical development by making reference to a single principle of explanation. It is intrinsically pluralistic in the sense that it assumes that different theoretical demands were in action in Dewey's early philosophy, and that different possibilities of evolution and combination were actually available. So, to give an example, it cannot be denied that Dewey's adherence to naturalism made more difficult to adopt the traditional idealistic and expressivist account of the relation between perception and conception. However, in many texts that Dewey wrote in the first couple of years of the 90's a naturalistic theory of experience coexists with a non-naturalistic conception of thought. The best example of such an unstable compromise between old and new can be found in Dewey's *Introduction to Philosophy* – a syllabus for a course delivered in February 1892 at the University of Michigan – where a biological account of human activity is framed into an expressivist view of philosophy. So, it is true that when immediate experience is seen as a natural event whose structures are entirely determined by psycho-biological processes that constitute the living being as such, it becomes more difficult to argue for the assimilation of the intrinsic 'rationality' of immediate experience with the articulated and self-conscious rationality that is displayed in reasoning. But to argue that the realization of the theoretical fertility of

naturalization of experience was the only guiding principle of Dewey's philosophical development would be an oversimplification of his effort to carve out a thorough naturalism from his psychological idealism.

In conclusion, the moderately continuist interpretation of Dewey's philosophical development argues that his drift away from his idealism is the resultant of two different forces at work in his thought, which respond to two rather independent theoretical demands: on the one hand, to provide a naturalistic and functionalist theory of reasoning; on the other hand, to provide a naturalistic theory of the unmediated apprehension of the meaning of things that characterizes the habitual way of dealing with environment. It is the latter that will be discussed in the present chapter. In the following pages, the attention will be focused on the role played by the anti-intellectualist conception of immediate experience in allowing Dewey to sketch his naturalistic theory of experience. The analysis of the main themes of Dewey's logical theory, both in their genetic and strictly theoretical aspects, will occupy us in the next chapter. Taken together, the two chapters outline Dewey's naturalistic conception of rationality and meaning, and shed light on the dynamic equilibrium that he eventually managed to introduce between these two main strains of his thought.

2. Dewey's Naturalistic Philosophy of Spirit

2.1. Which Naturalism? Dewey's Search for a Non-Reductive Naturalism

2.1.1. Emotions, Meaning, and the Concept of Corporisation

As has been pointed out in the first chapter, Dewey's idealistic theory of meaning and experience revolved around three fundamental tenets: a) the idea that experience is activity; b) the idea that apperception, conceived as the fundamental activity of the self through which the content of past experiences is projected upon present material, is the source of meaning; c) the idea that interest

is the selective factor that throws light upon, and gives significance to, those aspects of an experience that are deemed relevant at a given moment for a specific purposes.

Starting from 1891, Dewey began a life-long process of revision of his early idealism which coincided in the main with the process of naturalization of these three tenets. Dewey was now aware that his early account of experience was too formalistic. In particular, he realized that even though the idealistic conception of activity was substantially correct and worthy of being preserved as a general philosophical insight, it was nonetheless necessary to change the terminology in which that position was couched. The change was required by the theoretical transformations introduced by the rapid development of psychological science. And obviously, the terminological changes involved, and were involved by, a remarkable modification of the underlying conceptual apparatus. Therefore, it brought about a significant mutation of Dewey's philosophical views – even of those aspects that at a first glance were left untouched by the far-reaching process of revision.

The necessity of a redefinition of the fundamental categories of his thought was openly recognized by Dewey in the already quoted letter to Angell, dated the tenth of May 1893. Explaining to his interlocutor what kinds of investigations were carried on at Ann Arbor, he approvingly mentioned Lloyd's work, which was based on the idea that "from the standpoints of both of the best philosophy and modern physiological psychology the self cannot be conceived as limited by environment, precisely because the self is environment generalized or set free". This kind of continuity between self and environment was the distinctive trait of the new theoretical platform that Dewey put at the basis of his philosophical inquiry into the nature of mind and meaning. In particular, the project that Dewey himself and Mead were trying to explore was that of treating the immediate quality of a sensation – that is, what makes a quality *that* individual quality, not the refined abstraction introduced by psychologists for explanatory purposes – as "the condensation or precipitation of past organic activities, so that everything which is aesthetic now was once practical or teleological" (CJD Vol. I: 1893.05.10; J. Dewey to J. R. Angell)¹⁸. As has been noted above, Dewey conceived

¹⁸ In the very same year in which Dewey wrote this letter to Angell, Mead defined the main traits of his approach to philosophical and psychological issues in a letter to his in-laws. "For me in Physiological Psychology the especial problem is to recognize that our psychical life can all be read in the functions of our bodies – that is not the brain that thinks but our organs in so far as they act together in the processes of life [...]. This is quite a new standpoint for the science and has a good

sensation as “the sticking point to a successful statement of idealism”, but he also believed that Mead had developed the theoretical resources necessary to account for it without betraying the constructivist insight formulated by British idealists. Dewey’s solution is rather simple and yet extremely original: it consists in stressing the functional and temporal dependence of the qualitative aspect of sensation – what he called the ‘aesthetic’ – on the “past organic activities” that have led to a desired conclusion. In so doing, the results of previous course of actions are incorporated into the qualities of present experience: as a consequence of this process of embodiment, human experience becomes meaningful since sensations are read as signs of possible relations between actions and their consequences.

The distinction between aesthetic and teleological was probably drawn from Bosanquet’s *A History of Aesthetic* (1892), but the reference to the organic activities as the key of explanation of the passage from the latter to the former gave a distinctively biological turn to that idealistic assumption¹⁹. The fundamental idealistic thesis that the world is necessarily dependent upon a mind for its significance was reformulated in naturalistic terms, thus reversing the proper meaning of that dependence. Indeed, Dewey’s naturalization of idealism ended up with the recognition of self and environment as reciprocally interdependent

many important consequences” (quoted in Sleeper 2001: 20). Among these consequences, Sleeper has argued, there was Dewey’s *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (Sleeper 2001: 21). However, contrary to what Sleeper believes, precisely because Mead’s (and Dewey’s) attempt to naturalize sensation and mentality was conducted with the aim of grounding idealism on science it does not seem possible to conclude that that paper “marked Dewey’s final break with idealism” (Sleeper 2001: 21).

¹⁹ Dewey reviewed Bosanquet’s *A History of Aesthetic* in January 1893 on the pages of the new-born *Philosophical Review*. Such review is particularly interesting because Dewey did not limit himself to summarize the most important aspects of Bosanquet’s idealistic aesthetic, but also sketched a different solution to the issue of the nature of art. Summarizing Bosanquet’s conclusions on this point, Dewey pointed out that two opposite conceptions of art can be found in the book. “Two conceptions of art”, Dewey wrote, “seem to be struggling with each other throughout Mr. Bosanquet’s history: one of art as essentially a form of symbolism, the other of art as the expression of life in its entire range. The former can be reconciled with Mr. Bosanquet’s fundamental philosophy only by a great stretch of the idea of symbolism; it agrees, however, with the fixed distinction between commonplace reality and artistic reality, and at once lends itself to a conception of art which marks it off into a little realm by itself. The conception of art as expression of life leaves no room for any such division” (EW4: 197). This remark is important because it shows the kind of critical attitude that Dewey had towards traditional idealistic approaches. As is evident in this case, Dewey tried to bring to light and emphasize the aspect of unity implicit in an idealistic account, and to translate it in biological terms. The concept of expression of life, which Dewey left completely undetermined, is the key to facilitate the passage from an orthodox idealism to a form of non-reductive naturalism.

moments of a whole, where such an interdependence should be considered substantially coincident with the empirically investigable processes of interaction between an animal and the reality (both internal and external) that supports or hinders its acts. Particularly significant from this point of view is Dewey's statement of the coincidence of the conclusions achieved by the best philosophy of his days with the results of modern physiological psychology. This statement is an evidence of his understanding of the importance of keeping the two approaches together, rather than simply trying to substitute the one – that is, Hegel's idealistic philosophy of spirit – with the other – that is, James's biological theory of mind. This is a point whose relevance cannot be overestimated: the particular way of combining Hegel's and James's philosophical proposals represents the main aspect of originality of Dewey's work. The many difficulties that he met and eventually overcame in his search for such an equilibrium are the best evidence of the importance that he assigned to this issue.

It was only relatively late – more precisely, in *The Theory of Emotion. The Significance of Emotions*, published in the *Psychological Review* in 1895 – that Dewey openly declared his intention of fusing together Hegel and James, and publicly stated the reasons that prompted him to attempt to combine idealism and naturalistic psychology. Referring to the motives that made James's theory of emotions of such an outstanding importance for him, he pointed out that “what first fixed my especial attention [...] upon James's doctrine of emotion was that it furnishes this old idealistic conception of feeling, hitherto blank and unmediated, with a medium of translation into the terms of concrete phenomena”. And then he added an important remark: “a crude anticipation of James's theory”, he wrote, “is found in Hegel's *Philosophie des Geistes* § 401” (EW4: 171)²⁰. Dewey had in mind here James's thesis that “[i]nstantive reactions and emotional expressions [...] shade imperceptibly into each other” (James 1890: Vol. II, 442). Outward deeds and internal emotions stem from the same source, which James identified with the original activity prompted by a thing that only proleptically can be called an object of emotion. According to Dewey, there is a profound consonance between

²⁰ James devoted to the discussion of emotions a couple of articles and a relevant part of *The Principles of Psychology*. His first contribution to the debate on the nature of emotions was entitled *What is an Emotion*, and published on the pages of *Mind* in 1884. In 1894 James dedicated to the problem another important article, entitled *The Physical Basis of Emotion* and appeared in the *Psychological Review* in 1894. It is this article that very likely prompted Dewey to write his papers on the same topic, even though in the course of his argument he made reference to the chapter 25 of the *Principles of Psychology*, where the discharge theory is formulated with more clarity and precision.

Hegel and James on this point, which adumbrates a more significant agreement between their two philosophical proposals. Indeed, Dewey believed that both Hegel and James were committed to providing an account of emotions that could supplant the common-sense view of emotions as physical expressions of mental states wholly complete in themselves before their objective manifestation (Good 2006: 147ff.). For both, the essence of an emotion is the activity that leads to its expression, its power of becoming physically manifested in an organism. Dewey called the bruteness of reality 'actualism', and insisted that this was the aspect worthy of being preserved of Hegel's philosophy of spirit: "Hegel was a great actualist", he wrote, and with this expression he meant to say that "[Hegel] had the greatest respect, both in his thought and in his practice, for what has actually amounted to something, actually succeeded in getting outward form" (JDLH 1897: 97; see also Good 2010: 65-67). What is real is what has the power of becoming concrete. It is a philosophical justification for a radically naturalistic conception of mind that Dewey searched for in Hegel and James, and that he believed to have found in their twin accounts of emotions.

In the philosophy of subjective spirit Hegel had maintained that "affections originating in the mind and belonging to it, are in order to be felt, and to be as if found, invested with corporeity": it is only as a consequence of the process of corporisation that "the mode or affection gets a place in the subject" and "it is felt in the soul" (Hegel 1894: 23). Moving from very different premises, James arrived at the very same conclusion that emotions are essentially dependent on the organic conditions that make possible their manifestation or corporisation. The scientific explanation of an emotion consists in tracing it back to the feeling of bodily changes caused by the perception of the fact that excites the reaction in the organism. For James, an emotion is nothing but the apprehension of what is going on in the body as a consequence of a stimulus. As is well known, James argued for the thesis that "we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful" (James 1890: Vol. II, 450). The organism is a sounding-board, James argued, which transforms a cognitive apprehension of an external fact – as for instance, the perception of a bear – into an emotion – the fright of that particular bear that is encountered along a walk in the wood. Were it not for the physiological activity of the organism, indeed, the perception of a bear would remain a purely intellectual act. James expressed this pivotal point by saying that "[i]f we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our

consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind" (James 1890: Vol. II, 451).

In Dewey's eyes, the importance of what may be called the James-Hegel theory of emotion was that it paved the way for the formulation of a sound naturalistic account of mental activity. A statement like the following one was truly effective in convincing Dewey of the theoretical availability of his project: "if I were to become corporeally anæsthetic", James wrote, "I should be excluded from the life of the affections, harsh and tender alike, and drag out an existence of merely cognitive or intellectual form" (James 1890: Vol. II, 452). This amounts to saying that an important part of reality becomes meaningful for a subject – emotionally meaningful in the case under discussion, but Dewey believed that such an approach could be extended to the analysis of all forms of meaning – only insofar as the agent is endowed with an organic body²¹. Evidently, the possibility of accounting for significant dimensions of meaning in physiological terms corroborated and reinforced Dewey's conviction that spiritualistic psychology had to be replaced with the new naturalistic psychology. In other words, the concept of corporisation made it possible to argue for the reducibility of mental phenomena to their physiological conditions, where reducibility should not be intended in an eliminativist sense. Rather the contrary, in this context reducibility refers to the possibility of explaining psychical events by discovering the biological facts that lie at their basis, without any need to make reference to meta-empirical assumptions as that of a pure ego or a transcendental subject. Now, this methodological conception of reducibility – which excludes any ontological commitment toward interpreting the psychical as reducible to physical – is an essential part of Dewey's naturalistic project. The critical assimilation of the Hegel-James theory of emotion helped him to shape a version of naturalism that could stand as a *via media* between ontological reductionism and a spiritualistic account of mind that the progress of psychological science had proved to be theoretically and practically useless²².

²¹ Similarly, in his seminal *A Theory of Emotions from the Physiological Standpoint*, Mead noticed that pleasure and pain can be accounted for in strictly physiological terms, assuming the former to be "the normal or rather heightened [sic] process of nutrition in the organs" and the latter "the interference through poisons or violence or otherwise with the process of nutrition as carried out in the finer arteries and blood vessels" (Mead 1895: 163). This statement should be read in the light of Dewey's letters to Angell and to James, where the issue of the nature of sensation and mind is taken into explicit account.

²² A specification is needed here in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding of the interpretation advanced in these pages. It has been argued above that Dewey detected a powerful similarity

It is important to call attention to the complexity of Dewey's appropriation of Hegel's and James's intellectual heritage. What is worth remarking here is not that Hegel and James became the two poles that oriented Dewey's philosophical reflection during the last decade of 19th century. This is an historiographical thesis whose validity is now almost universally accepted amongst Deweyan scholars (Good 2010: in particular 145ff.). The attention should be focused less on the fact of their being brought in accordance than on the motives that prompted Dewey to attempt to merge together James's naturalistic account of mind and Hegel's idealistic theory of subjective spirit. According to the reading advanced here, the reason why Dewey decided to combine the two approaches was that he realized that they were complementary rather than simply similar. To use Dewey's own terms, it is true that in Hegel it is possible to discover "a crude anticipation" of James's theory of emotion, but it is also true that the former is a too powerful conceptual tool to be just a *mere* anticipation of something else (EW4: 171). More neatly stated, Dewey understood that Hegel's idealistic theory of activity and corporisation could provide a fruitful way to correct some of the defects that unfortunately characterized James's philosophical psychology.

2.1.2. *The Continuity of Mind and Nature: The Metaphysics of Dewey's Naturalism*

It has been argued above that the desire to consistently assimilate the most recent scientific results in the field of psychology within his idealistic framework represents the motor force of Dewey's philosophical development. This interpretative thesis has been accepted by all Deweyan scholars: it is for this reason that much emphasis has been placed on the influence exerted by James's work on Dewey's thought. A sensitive scholar as Garrison has correctly argued that "James's biological functionalism attracted Dewey because it showed him

between Hegel's and James's account of emotion. It has also been argued that what has been called the Hegel-James theory represented an important influence on Dewey's thought because it allowed him to realize the potentialities of a naturalistic theory of mind. Nonetheless, this does not amount to saying that Dewey did not perceive the differences existing between Hegel's and James's approaches. Dewey was well aware that the rise of evolutionism as a dominant scientific paradigm at least partially undermined the theoretical availability of Hegel's idealistic philosophy of spirit. This is the reason why he tried to formulate Hegel's genuine insight that reality is activity in the terms made available by the most recent biological and psychological knowledge of the time.

how to naturalize unity in difference, one of the most prized conceptions of his Hegelian heritage" (Garrison 2003: 405). Unfortunately, much less attention has been paid to the inverse movement, that is, to the theoretical changes produced by Dewey's idealistic views on the naturalistic paradigm inherited from James²³. Now, this inverse movement was as important for the genesis of Dewey's moderate, anti-reductionist naturalism as his much-discussed dependence upon James.

For this reason, it would be extremely reductive to assume that Dewey's assimilation of James's *The Principles of Psychology* amounts to a passive reception of the solutions that the latter had offered to the problems that Dewey himself was trying to tackle. This is a point which deserves careful consideration. Dewey did not substitute his early psychological idealism with James's naturalistic philosophical psychology. On the contrary, moving within the horizon of his early idealism, he progressively came to appreciate the theoretical advantages following from the assimilation and combination of Hegel's and James's lessons. But this means that Hegel's philosophy of spirit was not a burden from which Dewey wrestled to emancipate. It rather represented a selective factor that had the merit of directing Dewey's attention towards some previously unnoticed aspects.

The relationship between James and Dewey becomes more clear if due consideration is paid to the role played by Hegel's philosophy of spirit in the economy of Dewey's thought. An accurate appreciation of the complexity and articulateness of Dewey's theoretical framework paves the way for a more satisfactory explanation of the motives that prompted him to express numerous reservations about the theoretical plausibility of some pivotal aspects of James's biological theory of mind. Not only Dewey was not interested in many of the issues that James believed worthy of being dealt with; he was also very critical of some of the conclusions reached by the thinker whose thought he acknowledged as the "one specifiable philosophic factor which entered into my thinking so as to

²³ In *Dewey's Theory of Emotions*, from which the previous quotation is taken, Garrison has come very close to appreciating the relevance of this inverse movement. Referring to the different philosophical sources that Dewey struggled to keep together, Garrison has correctly pointed out not only that "[t]he coordinated unity of action is a Hegelian idea", but also that "the Hegelian influences on Dewey's theory of emotion (and reflex arc concept) [...] often supersede those of James" (Garrison 2003: 406). However, Garrison has not undertaken an analysis of the specific forms in which this influence was exerted. This analysis will be attempted in the following pages.

give it a new direction and quality”²⁴ (LW5: 157). Actually, Dewey struggled for many years to better formulate the naturalistic insights that he found expressed in a still undeveloped form in the pages of the *Principles*. He believed that James’s conclusions were committed to a mechanistic conception of human nature that dramatically undermined the soundness and validity of a truly naturalistic standpoint because it inadvertently introduced a dangerous dichotomy between teleology and the mechanism. Consequently, the principle that directed Dewey’s work of reconstruction of James’s naturalism was that of avoiding any ‘materialistic slump’ that could prevent from seeing the structural similarity existing between ‘reason’ and ‘nature’.

In a recent article, El-Hani and Pihlström have correctly noticed that the later Dewey came close to adopt an emergentist theory of mind, but that he preferred not to embrace it since he realized that it was less fruitful from an experimental perspective than his transactional approach. They have also argued that Dewey’s reservations concerning the notion of emergence, as expressed in *Knowing and the Known*, were not due to a refusal of the concept of emergence, but rather to the rejection of “what he saw as its magical overtones” (El-Hani and Pihlström 2002: 28; for Dewey’s later criticism to emergentism, see LW 16: 45). Following the footsteps of important Deweyan scholars as Tiles and Alexander, El-Hani and Pihlström have therefore been led to conclude that, even though with some important qualifications, Dewey’s naturalism can be considered a genuine form of emergentism (Alexander 1987: 95ff.; Tiles 1990: 49 ff.). According to their reading, Dewey’s insistence on the fact that self is the environment set free – or,

²⁴ As is well known, the later Dewey called attention on two distinct and unreconciled strains in James’s *The Principles of Psychology*. In *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*, for instance, he argued that “the adoption of the subjective tenor of prior psychological tradition” coexisted in James’s thought with a “biological conception of the *psyche*”, where life was thought “in terms of life in action” (LW5: 157-158). But the most famous example of this reading is contained in the fundamental article *The Vanishing Subject in the Psychology of James* (1940; see LW14: 155-167). Dewey’s criticism of James’s psychology have been so much discussed that it is needless to repeat them here (see Gale 1999: 336ff.; Colapietro: 77ff.; Good 2006: 146). What is worth remarking is that Dewey’s conviction of the untenability of James’s psychological theory was not a later acquisition. Actually, Dewey expressed a very similar opinion in many texts written in the ‘90s, in which James’s errors are not merely indicated, but analyzed in detail. It is very difficult to understand why Dewey did not openly express his reservations about James. I think that this is due to the fact that Dewey was always very sensitive to the ‘political’ and academic context in which philosophy is made. My suggestion is that it is very likely that Dewey decided not to criticize James in his published works because he realized that it was more useful to direct his forces against those positions and approaches that were opposite to his own instead of spending time and effort in raising objections against the leading figure of the movement to which, even though with great reservations, Dewey belonged.

as Dewey wrote in *The Quest for Certainty*, “the intellectual activity of man [...] is nature realizing its own potentialities in behalf of a fuller and richer issues of events” (LW4: 171) – is to be taken as an evidence of his adoption of an emergentist paradigm of explanation of mind – where emergence means that meaning can be satisfactorily accounted for in terms of “nature realizing its own potentialities”.

Now, if this were the whole significance attached to that notion, it would be indisputably true that many relevant aspects of Dewey’s naturalistic account of meaning can be easily accommodated within an emergentist theory of mind. Consequently, if one is satisfied with this rather minimal sense of emergentism, there is no reason to question the validity of El-Hani’s and Pihlström’s conclusions. However, when attention is paid to the conception of nature which supports and underlies that uncontroversial conception of meaning, it is easy to find an emergentist reading of Dewey’s naturalism less plausible than El-Hani and Pihlström have claimed to be. Above all, it is hard to maintain that Dewey’s dissatisfaction with emergentism is directed not against emergentism in itself, but only against some ‘magical overtones’ that follow from speaking of the higher symbolic activities as “magically ‘emergent’ into something new and strange” (LW 16: 45). In reality, it seems that far from being undesired, yet relatively unimportant side-effects of a particularly fruitful approach to the issue of the relationship between mind and matter, Dewey read these magical overtones as signs of a more fundamental categorial error, whose consequences became evident in the ineffectiveness of the emergentist theory to explain the continuity between experience and nature.

We are not concerned here with Dewey’s later philosophy: so, the discussion of El-Hani’s and Pihlström’s argument transcends the limits of present work. But some suggestions arising from it may be useful in shedding light on the implicit metaphysics that guided Dewey in his development of a consistent naturalistic theory of meaning. This analysis will eventually highlight the point of disagreement between James and Dewey. Now, when attention is limited to Dewey’s formative years, it seems fair to conclude that even though he looked for a non-reductive naturalism, nonetheless his philosophical theory of meaning was not a kind of emergentism. This because, keeping faithful to the idealistic conception of reality as process and continuity, Dewey could not help criticizing the dualism presupposed in any emergentist or proto-emergentist account of

meaning and mind²⁵. In Dewey's eyes, emergentism is too static a theory of the relation between self and environment to grasp the life of meaning, which consists in the 'helical' movement through which the meaning of natural phenomena that is constructed in a reflective experience becomes a natural property of the things by being embodied in concrete habits of action (for the idea of an hermeneutic helix as the appropriate description of the process of increase of the meaning of experience, see Burke 1994: 229). The metaphysical conception of reality that Dewey was craving for had therefore to be anti-dualistic enough to prevent from conceiving mind and nature as two (relatively) independent realms of being.

A sketchy outline of Dewey's metaphysics of mind can be found in his *Introduction to Philosophy* (1892). In these lectures, Dewey dealt extensively with the issue of establishing an organicist theory of reality that could support his continuist account of the mind/matter relation. Employing a terminology that was still indebted to his early idealistic conception of consciousness as coextensive with experience, he stated that "consciousness is the complete unification of relationship and that, through the evolution from what we call the psychical to what we call the physical, is simply the increasing expression of the unity" (ItP 1892: 39). The natural fact of growth, whose reality can be immediately verified by looking at an orange growing on a tree – this is Dewey's own example –, concerns also the way in which an organism comes to apprehend the meaning of an external object. So, while the growth of an orange, conceived of as a process taking place in the world independently from any activity of mind, "is the expression of the unification and coordination of the different conditions", at the very same time "[t]he orange is not complete until it has established all its relationships, and hence not complete until there has been an eye brought in" (ItP 1892: 38). When seen from this perspective, the eye – that is,

²⁵ In its classic formulation, emergentism states that the combination of two or more elements brings about new and more complex objects with properties that cannot be boiled down to the qualities of their components. In this sense, it is possible to say that these new properties emerge from the interaction of simpler things. As is evident, these assumptions are implicitly dualistic because they take for granted the distinction between a stage of reality in which certain properties are present and a previous stage from which these properties originate but in which they are absent. Dewey strongly criticized this way of conceiving the relationship between reality and experience in the article *Reality as Experience*, in which it is explicitly stated that the fundamental structure of reality is the "fact of *qualitative-transformation-towards*": "[t]he conditions which antecede experience are, in other words, already in *transition* towards the state of affairs in which they are experienced " (MW3: 101; for a now classical discussion of Dewey's metaphysics, see Boisvert 1988).

the human intervention as a consequence of which natural facts acquire significance and enter, so to say, into the realm of meaning – is nothing but “the further unification of the conditions in the orange together with other conditions” (ItP 1892: 39).

By entering in relation with an organism, natural processes are transformed, and new properties accrue to them as a result of new transactions between the self and the environment²⁶. What is real is growth, activity, and activity is realized in the results that it brings about and not in its premises or in its starting points. So, the ‘truth of an object’ – that is, the moment in which the meaning of a thing is completely realized and made explicit – is the act through which this object is constructed or used, not its mere physical presence. “The mere physical chair”, Dewey remarked, “is not the unity, but the idea of a chair is the unity”, where the ideational activity that an organism performs is to be conceived as the coronation of the interactions taking place in the world (ItP 1892: 40-41). The world of human beings is therefore a meaningful world since the relations that stem from the interactions between a ‘subject’ and an ‘object’ are of a semantic nature: they are relations holding between possible ideas or thoughts and the actions that realize them, as a consequence of which, on the one hand, the conceptual import of the former is projected into the latter, and, on the other hand, the concreteness of the latter corrects the incompleteness and incompleteness of the former.

This can be profitably read as the naturalistic counterpart of Dewey’s early idealistic theory of meaning. However, the naturalistic framework in which the thesis of the essential interwovenness of the universal and particular element of experience is now expressed dramatically modifies its overall significance. In particular, it makes it possible to describe the main features of the dynamic unity

²⁶ This is, Dewey argued, the correct point of view from which to frame the opposition between materialism and idealism. When formulated in this way, indeed, the metaphysical debate between idealists and materialists boils down to answering the question “is the reality [...] in the physical or psychical fact?” (ItP 1892: 39). The passage goes on as follows: “If the conditions which materialism calls the real thing were so, how would there be growth? In growth, which is the more real, the conditions simply or the movement? This movement is most fully expressed in man and in man’s consciousness. Then, which is the more real way to look at things, in their physical conditions simply, or in relation to the sense organs? The latter. Then, no materialism. Comparing the physical orange with the act of seeing or of eating: Is matter for philosophical purposes anything else than the less complete movement? Less complete movement of what? Of the whole; a less complete unification of the whole unity. Here is the physical orange; if you arrest that and isolate it, is it the reality? If so, where is there any change, where do you get any more? The real thing, then, is the movement within the orange; and the orange is simply one form of the movement of the whole” (ItP 1892: 39).

of organism and environment in purely scientific terms. Now, the scientific analysis of human experience was taken by Dewey to be the true philosophical contribution of the theory of evolution. Evolutionism suggests that “there is a unity between consciousness and matter and motion”: an unity that could not be grasped before the discovery of the fact evolution, but that from that moment on has to be put at the basis of philosophical reflection (ItP 1892: 39). Indeed, while the language of philosophy naturally makes raise paradoxical questions concerning the relationship between a subject and its object, thus introducing the problem of how to fill the gap between them, the language adopted by evolutionism prevents the very possibility of its appearance. Organism and environment cannot be separated since they are “parts of the same thing” – that is, of a whole encompassing the organism and its environment which has to be conceived of in purely biological terms (ItP 1892: 40). According to Dewey’s reading, the greatest merit of evolutionism has been therefore that of pointing out that “consciousness is not a mere spectator, a ghost” (ItP 1892: 40). Consciousness is an active factor in the process of construction of reality: “it moves things, it is action”, and “the action itself is reality” (ItP 1892: 40).

Leaving aside the issue of the relevance of evolutionism for Dewey’s naturalism – which is extremely problematic and has not yet received adequate attention²⁷ –, what it is important to note for present purposes is that the idea of a continuity between consciousness and matter was taken by Dewey to mean two rather different things. On the one side, it that mind is an evolution and progressive refinement of natural processes. The difference with an emergentist account lies in the fact that natural processes cannot be said to be complete until

²⁷ As is well known, in 1910 Dewey published an important collection of papers entitled *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays*. The first essay – *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy* – is devoted to discussing the theoretical and philosophical consequences of Darwin’s theory of evolution. The reason why *On the Origin of Species*, Dewey maintained, was so influential is because it shows how to substitute the old logic of fixed forms with a new logic of development and growth (MW4: 10ff.). Accordingly, Dewey scholars have been led to emphasize the importance of Darwinism for Dewey’s naturalism. Obviously, nobody should be interested in denying the influence exerted by *evolutionary* thought on Dewey as well as on the other representatives of the pragmatist movement. But it is important not to draw wrong conclusion from correct premises. Their adhesion to an evolutionary paradigm of explanation of reality, meaning, mentality, and so on, does not allows us to conclude that they enthusiastically adopted its Darwinian form. Rather the contrary, it is now commonly acknowledged that Peirce and James were not Darwinian, but Lamarckian. A similar observation can be made for Dewey. It is evident that the later Dewey was a staunch Darwinian, but there is also evidence that in the first part of his life he was more critical of some of Darwin’s most important assumptions. The two papers on the emotions show how complex and highly nuanced was Dewey’s appropriation of Darwin’s version of evolutionism.

their (potential) relation with human organism are brought to light or creatively established in an experience. On the other hand, it was taken to mean that nature is similar enough to mind to find its proper realization in the meanings that are brought about by an act of consciousness. This is the sense of Dewey's otherwise astonishing statement that "matter is not a mere brute fact, but it turns itself inside out and looks at itself" (ItP 1892: 40). The point at stake was that of understanding how to argue for a difference of complexity between mind and nature without prejudicing their continuity. Dewey solved this problem by saying that the notion of activity guarantees the coincidence between the two movements – from nature to mind and from mind to nature –, and that as mind 'emerges' from nature, so nature 'emerge' in mind. Emergentism can be true if only if nature is seen as realizing itself in mind: this because a natural process can be conceived as truly complete only in the moment in which becomes part of human experience.

2.2. Mechanism and Teleology: An Untenable Dualism

The reason why so much attention has been paid to analyzing the differences between Dewey's naturalism and an emergentist account of meaning and mentality is because James's biological theory of mind appeared to Dewey to be committed to too many emergentist assumptions to be a reliable conception of the relation between mind and nature. This issue is only marginally treated in the couple of articles in which Dewey attempted to formulate his naturalistic theory of emotion. Nonetheless, a remarkable suggestion can be found in a seemingly unimportant observation about a passage from *The Principles of Psychology*.

In *The Theory of Emotion. Emotional Attitudes*, Dewey critically referred to James's distinction between teleological and mechanical kinds of explanation of emotions. In the chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* dedicated to the analysis of the emotions, James had argued that many emotional reactions cannot be explained by making reference to the principles individuated by Darwin in his groundbreaking *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* – namely, the principle of "revival in weakened form of reactions useful in more violent dealings with the object inspiring the emotion", and the principle of "reacting similarly to analogous-feeling stimuli" (James 1890: Vol. II, 479-481; see also Darwin 1872: chapter 1, 2

and 3). Indeed, while it is rather easy to trace disgust back to the “incipient regurgitation or retching”, thus highlighting the functional role that such a behavior originally had in a purposive behavior, it is almost impossible to explain in a functional way emotional reactions as “the effects on the viscera and internal glands” or “the dryness of the mouth and diarrhoea and nausea of fear” (James 1890: Vol. II, 481-482). In other words, James maintained that a consistent part of our emotional life is produced by physiological processes that are recalcitrant to be accounted for in terms of the persistence into a more complex behavior of functional activities once useful in coping with environment. They are “purely idiopathic effects of the stimulus” – that is, direct nervous discharges produced by an unknown cause – that have to be explained in purely mechanical or physiological terms (James 1890: Vol. II).

Dewey believed that James was wrong on this point. Indeed, if this were true – that is, if some types of emotions were not amenable of being accounted for in functional terms by being traced back to their original role in an adaptive behavior – James’s theory of emotion would be fatally undermined. Dewey was fascinated by the idea that the discharge theory could provide a genetic account of emotions, so that – to use his own words – it became possible to show that “everything which is aesthetic now was once practical or teleological” (CJD Vol. I: 1893.05.10; J. Dewey to J. R. Angell)²⁸. In other words, he found in the James-Lange theory of emotion the simplest way to formulate in a suitably naturalistic fashion the idealistic insight that sensation is not a given, but rather the internalization of an activity. If James were right, therefore, the complete reducibility of aesthetic to practical or teleological would be impossible. Consequently, an undesired remnant of dualism would be maintained into what purported to be an active theory of mind and meaning (Tiles 1990: 38). This was the reason why Dewey found so important to criticize James’s distinction between teleology and mechanism²⁹. The rejection of that dichotomy paved the

²⁸ “The trouble with the emotions in psychology is that they are regarded too much as absolutely individual things. So long as they are set down as so many eternal and sacred psychic entities, like the old immutable species in natural history, so long all that can be done with them is reverently to catalogue their separate characters, points, and effects. But if we regard them as products of more general causes (as ‘species’ are now regarded as products of heredity and variation), the mere distinguishing and cataloguing becomes of subsidiary importance. Having the goose which lays the golden eggs, the description of each egg already laid is a minor matter. Now the general causes of the emotions are indubitably physiological” (James 1890: Vol. II, 449).

²⁹ More in general, Dewey was persuaded that the language James adopted in his account of mind was affected with dualism and intellectualism. “In Mr. James’s statement the experience is apparently (apparently, I say; I do not know how much is due to the exigency of discussion which

way for the formulation of an unified account of human activity and behavior in which physiological acts could be seen at the very same time as mechanical and teleological – mechanical, because they are performed by the brain and by the whole organism of which brain is a part; teleological, because they are involved in a purposive activity and, for this reason, are functionally explainable (Garrison 2003: 406). “Hope, fear, delight, sorrow, terror, love”, Dewey remarked, “are too important and too relevant in our lives to be in the main the ‘feel’ of bodily attitudes which have themselves no meaning” (EW4: 162). Rather the contrary, meanings pervade experience. Their pervasiveness is due to the fact that everything we feel is intrinsically rational, not in the sense of being the outcome of a conscious act of reflection, but in the sense that instinctive emotional reactions are naturally attuned with the environment in which the organism lives. Dewey expressed this point by saying that emotions normally have an object and involve an attitude towards the object (EW4: 161). Such an attunement – which is a harmony between instinctive actions and successful consequences that satisfy those actions – is the result of an empirically detectable process of adjustment to external conditions, as a consequence of which what was once made in order to serve life becomes an attitude that constitutes an emotion. In this sense, “[t]he reference to emotion in explaining the attitude is wholly irrelevant, the attitude of emotion is explained positively by reference to useful movements” (EW4: 154-155).

Contrary to what James seemed to believe, therefore, teleology and mechanism should not be treated as two different planes of reality, but rather as two different perspectives from which to analyze the same fundamental activity. It is this remnant of emergentism – the incapacity of thinking the relation between mechanism and teleology in dialectical, and therefore functional, terms – that Dewey found unacceptable in James’s analysis of the fundamental structure of human activity (Garrison 2003: 411). This point is well expressed in the following passage, in which Dewey not only clarified what was the issue at stake

necessitates a seeming isolation) split up into three separate parts: First comes the object or idea which operates only as stimulus; secondly, the mode of behavior taken as discharge of this stimulus; third, the Affect or emotional excitation, as the repercussion of this discharge. No such seriality or separation attaches to the emotion as an experience. Nor does reflective analysis seem to establish this order as the best expression of the emotion as an object of psychological abstraction. We might almost infer from the way Mr. James leaves it that he is here a believer in that atomic or mosaic composition of consciousness which he has so effectively dealt with in the case of intellectual consciousness” (EW4: 174).

in his controversy with James, but also threw important light on some aspects of the solution that he believed should be given to that problem:

“The antithesis here is between the merely accidental and the adjusted excitation – not between the mechanical and the teleological. I add this because of the following sentence in James: ‘It seems as if even the changes of blood-pressure and heart-beat during emotional excitement might, instead of being teleologically determined, prove to be purely mechanical or physiological outpourings through the easiest drainage-channels’ (II. p. 482). Certainly, if these are the alternatives, I should go a step farther and say that even the clenching of the fist and the retraction of the lips in anger are simply mechanical outpourings through the easiest available channel. But these are not the alternatives. The real question is simply how this particular channel came to be the easiest possible, whether purely accidentally or because of the performance of movements having some value for life preservation. The ground taken here is that the easiest path is determined by habits which, upon the whole, were evolved as useful” (EW4: 162).

The point of divergence between Dewey and James concerns not the acceptance or rejection of the distinction between teleology and mechanism, but rather the conception of habit that underlies this very distinction, and makes it possible to frame the relation between nature and mind, existence and meaning, either in dualistic or in continuist terms. Dewey considered James’s treatment of habit as formulated in the chapter four of *The Principles of Psychology* as the weak point of James’s physiological account of psychical life. More precisely, Dewey charged James with not having understood that the formation of habits of behavior – which constitute the second nature of human beings, as Hegel so neatly showed in the opening sections of his *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* (Hegel 1894: 41; see also JDLH 1897: 130-131; Garrison 2003: 413) – could not be accounted for in purely mechanistic terms, as if what is natural in human beings were natural in the sense of being opposed to something distinctively rational and meaningful. Rather the contrary, the issue of “how this particular channel came to be the easiest possible” should be treated as a paradigmatic case of the metaphysical primacy of teleological, adaptive activity over mechanism, in the sense that mechanism becomes effective only when it is employed as a means to achieve some ends (EW4: 162). Dewey’s point was that experience actually relies upon previously formed habits as its physical conditions of possibility, but that habits are always the result of a concrete activity which is essentially meaningful insofar as it is teleological.

As has been remarked above, Dewey did not develop this insight in the two conjoint papers on *The Theory of Emotion*. A detailed analysis of this issue, as well as a clear statement of his dissatisfaction with James's conception of habit, can be found in the lectures on *Psychological Ethics* that Dewey delivered at the University of Chicago in 1898. In the context of a review of the most recent theories of habit, Dewey discussed at length James's account, which he defined as "the best statement of the prevalent view" (PE 1898: 1121). As in his previous articles, Dewey focused the attention on the problem of understanding the formation of habits of behavior. Consistently with his overall approach, he remarked that "the whole point of interest in the discussion comes to this: Why does the discharge take such and such a channel at the outset?". And then he went on to conclude: "Mr. James assumes that that is merely a mechanical matter. I do not doubt that the process as a process is mechanical, but I want to point out that reference to an end comes in there"³⁰ (PE 1898: 1122). As is evident, the conceptual framework in which Dewey moved was left substantially unmodified, but the language through which he formulated his criticisms to James and expounded his own solution to that fundamental issue was richer and more articulate than the one he used in *The Theory of Emotion*³¹. The difference lies in the fact that James's language of stimulus and answer is substituted with the language of coordination³² (Garrison 2003: 414). As is well known, this is the core

³⁰ See also the following passage taken from the set of lectures on the theory of logic, where the charge of emergentism is formulated with the greatest clarity: " James's chapter on Habit. He finds the basis of association in a neural path the continual traveling of which makes the transmission of subsequent impulses easier. He makes it a mere matter of accident as to how this path first came to be traversed. But is it a matter of mere accident as to where the point of highest tension is and as to where the point of lowest tension is found? If there is some functional principle which determines this, what is it? On p. 594 he seems to imply that the effects of attention and volition are over and above those of habit, which has a kind of prepotency. Is this effect of interest and attention something which lies outside of association which is selective, or is it simply the recognition of the functional factor which is everywhere? The fact is, James simply gives us a double statement of the same thing, a mechanical statement from the standpoint of habit and a functional or teleological statement from the standpoint of attention, interest, volition, etc." (ToL 1899-1900: 558).

³¹ It is interesting to note that it was Dewey himself who openly recognized that his language was now different from James's one. In so doing, he testified that, if not a break, at least a complete emancipation from the one who he identified as the most important amongst his interlocutors had occurred (on this point, see PE 1898: 1124).

³² 'Coordination' was not a technical term of psychology. In the *Baldwin Dictionary*, for instance, there is no entry corresponding to this notion. The term was usually employed with a rather limited sense in the sections of psychological handbooks and treatises dealing with the function of the brain. This is evident both in James's *The Principles of Psychology* and – even more remarkably – in Ladd's *Elements of Physiological Psychology* (see, respectively, James 1890: 33 and Ladd 1887: 160ff.) On the contrary, Dewey put it at the center of his account of meaning and experience. In so

idea of Dewey's seminal article *The Reflex Arc Concept in Philosophy*, published in 1896 in the *Psychological Review*. However, its roots lie in the highly idiosyncratic assimilation of Hegel's thought that kept him busy for the first years of the '90's.

Dewey maintained that a satisfactory solution to the issue of accounting for the process of formation of habits of behavior could be achieved if one paid due attention to the activities that an organism continuously performs in its 'transactions' with the environment. Indeed, when it is reminded that an organism is always in action, and that it is not prompted to act by an external stimulus, but its readiness to act is a sheer consequence of its being a living animal, it is clear that a purely mechanistic explanation of the acquisition of habits ceases to be an available theoretical option. James's account would be correct if and only if human behavior could be adequately described as follows: a) "[t]he outward stimuli pour in through the sense organs"; b) "[t]he excitations are conducted to the brain, the central organ, and that agitation must find some way out"; c) the agitation "pours out along a certain channel and then through the influence of nutrition there is a modification left behind" (PE 1898: 1121). But this is not a satisfactory depiction of meaningful experience. Human experience is activity – where action is an unified whole – so that no radical separation can be introduced among the three phases of stimulus, internal reworking, and reaction (LW17: 155). A reaction is a response, that is, an act endowed with meaning, its meaningfulness depending entirely on its being 'functionally' coordinated with its stimulus (EW5: 97). With the partial exception of those "motor tricks" wholly devoid of any "teleological significance", each action is a coordination of different experiences that are unified in a concrete activity³³ (PE 1898: 1124).

doing, he emphasized the internal relatedness of human behavior, as well as the unity of the mechanical and the teleological element of activity. This use of the term 'co-ordination' can be found in *The Theory of Emotion. Emotional Attitudes* (see, for instance, EW4: 160). But see also *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology*, where the theoretical relevance of the notion of co-ordination is clearly stated: "[u]pon analysis", Dewey wrote, "we find that we begin not with a sensory stimulus, but with a sensori-motor coordination, the optical-ocular, and that in a certain sense it is the movement which is primary, and the sensation which is secondary, the movement of body, head and eye muscles determining the quality of what is experienced" (EW5: 97).

³³ In his *Introduction to Philosophy* Dewey had already stated that an unified activity that "finds expression [...] in an entire reflex-arc is a whole, a concrete, and individual" (ItP 1892: 31). However in 1892, the year in which Dewey delivered the lecture from which the previous passage is drawn, he employed 'reflex arc' as a synonymous of 'organic circle'. Four year later, in *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology*, Dewey refused to equate the two terms, rather insisting on the unfortunate residual dualism that was at the basis of the distinction between peripheral and central structures and function, stimulus and response (EW5: 96). However, the terminological shift does

The theoretical importance of Dewey's insistence on the idealistic and Hegelian notion of whole and coordination for his account of the process of habit formation depends on the fact that it paved the way for conceiving of motor discharge as a "factor in the coordination" rather than as an outgoing current that incidentally follows a wholly independent ingoing current (PE 1898: 1125). Indeed, when meaning is defined – in strictly post-Kantian terms – as a set of relations connecting together two elements, the ontological and methodological separation of stimulus and response introduced by James risks to fatally undermine the possibility of explaining the meaningfulness of experience. The kind of connection that holds between stimulus and response, when they are conceived as wholly independent entities, is mere juxtaposition, while meaning is a deeper kind of unity in which the different elements entering in relation are reciprocally modified. The difference between the two approaches can be illustrated by referring to the well-known example of the child who acquires the habit of not putting his finger in a candle flame after having burned himself. Dewey wrote:

"Take the ordinary instance of a child putting his finger in the candle flame. Here is the incoming stimulus—the heat, the burning—and there is supposed to be the outgoing current. The child draws his hand back. As a matter of fact there are no disconnections. There is a circle, not a mere arc. The child in drawing his hand back modifies the stimulus and that is the reason for the occurrence of the reaction: namely to change the preceding stimulus. It is this fact, that every change exists for the sake of modifying the stimulus, that constitutes the nature of the response" (PE 1898: 1124).

The point that Dewey was willing to stress is that "just in so far as it is actually a member of such a coordination does [a motor discharge] succeed in forming a habit" (PE 1898: 1124). Indeed, Dewey remarked, we start with a sensori-motor coordination and not with a sensory stimulus: "it is the movement which is primary" since it is the movement of the body, head and eye muscles that determines "the quality of what is experienced" (EW5: 96). In Dewey's philosophy, the distinctively Hegelian tenet of the primacy of activity over substance became the thesis of the primacy of function over structure – an

not correspond to a conceptual change in this case. Dewey never changed his mind about the importance of endorsing an organicist view of mind and reality as a way out from a dualistic theory of activity that made it impossible to account for the fact of meaning. He simply realized that 'reflex arc' was a term too compromised with dualistic echoes to be used to express the kind of continuity that he was eager to stress as distinctive of human experience.

experimentally testable hypothesis whose theoretical value was dependent upon its capability of directing concrete, empirical research. It is in the context of this consideration that Dewey was led to argue that “the real beginning is with the act of seeing; it is looking, and not a sensation of light” (EW5: 97). What is original is the unity of a coordination between two different acts – what Dewey called ‘sensori-motor’ circuit. Consequently, a motor discharge creates a new habit if and only if it is able to “unify the organism”, that is, to re-establish an unified activity in which different actions are coordinated into a harmonic whole (PE 1898: 1125. Dewey was aware that this thesis was helpful in bringing to light the theoretical inconsistency of traditional approaches. From that perspective point, indeed, the reference to the repetition of an act – to which many psychologists recurred to account for the process of habit formation – reveals itself to be an unsatisfactory explanation because it presupposes an already existing coordination. As Dewey concisely observed, “[i]t is putting the cart before the horse to say that habit is formed by repetition, because when a man can easily repeat a line of action it shows that he has a habit formed”³⁴ (PE 1898: 1120).

Dewey followed a different line of reasoning. An outgoing current is caused by an ingoing current: a stimulus produces a certain number of motor discharges. If at least one of these motor discharges does not succeed in unifying the others in a harmonic whole, the mere fact that a series of motor discharges has happened does not involve the formation of a habit of behavior. Rather the contrary, since the result of this motor discharge increases rather than diminishes the instability of the organism, it is not possible to establish a habitual line of action and a habitual line of thought. To use the terminology of the late Dewey, the situation is one of confusion, where different possible solutions are available, the plurality of plausible solutions being the objective state of confusion. On the contrary, if a motor discharge is effective in establishing a coordination, the divergent actions initiated by the organism are replaced by a continuous activity in which the different motor discharges are coordinated one with the others and – taken together as reactions that follow from a stimulus – with the ingoing current that has provoked them. Consequently, the otherwise contradictory

³⁴ A similar position was held also by Peirce who criticized as harshly as Dewey did the attempt to explain habit as the result of repetitions of act. Peirce’s well known description of his brother’s ability to extinguish a fire is an instance of his refusal of equating habit formation and repetition. It is highly plausible that Dewey and Peirce independently arrived at the same conclusion, even though a common source of (critical) inspiration was James’s *The Principles of Psychology*. On the importance of William James’s *The Principles of Psychology* for Peirce’s theory of habit formation, see (Houser 2011: 49ff.).

series of acts “reinforce each other in a single response”: as a consequence of this process of reinforcement, a satisfactory habit of behavior is settled (PE 1898: 1125).

In the formed habit the meaning of ingoing and outgoing currents is transfigured. Dewey expressed this thesis by noting that “the so-called response” is *into* the stimulus rather than being a response *to* a stimulus (EW5: 98). After the establishment of the habit of not putting fingers in a candle flame, the act of seeing a flame becomes significant of the feeling of pain that has been caused by a previous burn. Dewey intriguingly argued that “[t]he burn is the original seeing”, and that “the original optical-ocular experience [is] enlarged and transformed in its value” (EW5: 98). In other words, as a consequence of this attained unity, what previously existed as an unrelated activity becomes part of a larger whole, and gets its proper meaning. Once again, Dewey conceived meaning in terms of relations – the full significance of an activity, he noticed, “is brought out just in the degree in which it is related, that is, cooperates with other activities in constituting a more comprehensive one” (LW17: 154).

However, the naturalization of idealism undertaken by Dewey entailed a remarkable terminological and conceptual change: relations are now equated with functions of the organism. In so doing, his whole theory of meaning and experience is subjected to an interesting empirical turn. As has been pointed out in the first part of the present chapter, Dewey became progressively aware that the study of biological functions provided a much more reliable standpoint for philosophical reflection than the study of the functions of a transcendental subject or the inquiry into the unconscious acts of inference through which an absolute consciousness creates the world³⁵. The reason why Dewey assigned such an outstanding place to the notion of function within his theory of meaning was that he realized that the recognition of the primacy of function over facts, states, or ideas sheltered him from many categorial confusions.

³⁵ Dewey’ argument can be presented as follows: philosophy has to do with functions because they are the real activities of which experience is made up. In a relatively late letter to A. W. Moore, dated January 02 1905, Dewey highlighted the importance of appreciating the fact that philosophy is an analysis of the way in which biological functions structure our concrete experience. After having expressed his dissatisfaction with the term ‘pragmatism’, and in particular after having criticized the misleading impression that had been conveyed by some of its proponents that pragmatism was a complete philosophical system, he wrote that “Philosophy is Functionalism in the sense that it treats only of functions of experience (not of facts, nor of states, ideas, &); it is Geneticism [as] a mode of analyzing & identifying these functions; it is Instrumentalism as a theory of the significance of the Knowledge-function; it is Experimentalism as a theory of the test of worth of all functions” (CJD Vol. I: 1905.01.02; J. Dewey to A. W. Moore).

First of all, the insistence on concrete biological activities as the ultimate ground of experience made it impossible to relapse into a dualism of mind and world. Functions are activities performed by a living being, whose organic structures are the result of a continuous process of adaptation to the social and natural environment. Then, it would be utterly meaningless to maintain that self and environment should be treated as two independent entities. This point has already been highlighted above, so it is not necessary to dwell further on it (see above 2.1.2.). What concerns us here is rather the fact that, moving within a naturalistic conceptual framework, it becomes easier to appreciate that functions and habits have the same structural complexity of experience since they are modes of an activity that takes place in the world. More clearly stated, the natural continuity between self and world that constitutes the material condition of possibility of functions and habits undermines the very plausibility of a transcendental account of meaning. Transcendental approaches assume that a self endowed with a set of pre-established functions organizes its material. From this perspective, functions and data are both given, and the resulting product, that is, meaningful experience, is the fruit of their interaction (ToL 1899-1900: 547). This means that function is taken not as the encompassing whole that gives unity to its elements, thus supplying them with their meaning, but rather as one of the elements that cooperate in constructing an object. In so doing, the primacy of practice is definitely abandoned, and – in Hegelian rather than Deweyan terms – the language of spirit is once again substituted with the language of substance. Dewey called this assumption “a fallacy”, and remarked that the constituents of a function are in turn functions (ToL 1899-1900: 547). The components of the act of grabbing an object are the act of seeing it and the act of moving the hand, not an alleged group of sense-data corresponding to retinal impressions and to bodily sensations one feels when moves his hand. There is no moment in which activity gives way to the brute fact of givenness, because there is no moment in which an organism ceases to be a living being whose functions and habits of behavior are attuned with the environment. The insight that Dewey expressed in his letter to James, according to which Hegel’s philosophy was free from the defects that tainted neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian analysis of meaning and experience, found in his active, non-reductionist naturalism its most convincing confirmation. When combined together, naturalism and Hegelianism show that there is no need to resort to transcendental hypotheses in order to account for the fact of meaning. Transcendentalism relies upon a faculty psychology whose

validity, according to Dewey, had been fatally undermined by James's biological psychology, on the one hand, and Hegel's philosophical theory of mind, on the other hand (see Good 2010: 64).

Secondly, the acknowledgment of the natural teleology that is implicated in every function as a mode of behavior of an organism enabled Dewey to frame in a more concrete way the issue of the relation between mechanism and teleology. In his criticism to James's conviction that simpler emotions were not amenable of teleological explanations, we saw Dewey arguing for the plausibility of a 'methodological' treatment of the distinction between teleological and mechanical analyses. Far from being two different types of causality, Dewey maintained, teleology and mechanism should be conceived as two different ways of handling concrete experience. The adoption of the notion of function as the key to explaining meaningful experience made it possible for Dewey not only to lay stress on the fact that that distinction was a remnant of a dualistic view of mind-body relation, but also to highlight the relative primacy of teleology over mechanism. Indeed, when it is understood a) that a function is a complex mode of response of a whole organism, which is performed by the physiological structure of the body; b) that every function or habit "is there for the sake of adaptation, for the sake of adjustment" (PE 1898: 1126); c) that teleology is a 'natural category' that can be empirically ascertained; then, there is no place left for separating mechanism and teleology. Mechanicist is every account of actions that focuses its attention exclusively upon the machinery that carries on the function, intentionally bracketing the intrinsic reference of the function to an end. On the contrary, an account is teleological if and only if the action in its entirety is taken into account. "Even if we give the most mechanical explanation possible", Dewey remarked, "it would be true that those lines of action which were selected had a teleological result in helping maintain the animal in its struggle for existence" (PE 1898: 120). When seen from this perspective, teleology reveals itself to be the very structure of human and animal behavior, while mechanism is a legitimate principle of explanation only when it is remembered that it is the fruit of an abstraction, whose theoretical validity is dependent upon the recognition of the motives for which such an abstraction has been made. This is the reason why Dewey was persuaded that it was impossible to "resolve function into structural elements" (ToL 1899-1900: 546). Every possible analysis of the machinery through which an end is achieved presupposes the concrete unity of a function, whose process of genesis and development coincides with the

process of adaptation of the organism to the changed conditions of the environment³⁶. In this realization that the embodied concept – the end of the function, in less Hegelian terms – responds to the logic of evolution, naturalism and idealism find their reciprocal legitimation.

Before moving to discuss in detail the bearings of Dewey's naturalization of idealism on some technical issues as the nature of interest and the possibility of translating the language of apperception in strictly physiological terms, it may be useful to spend a few words to recapitulate the different levels in which his attempt to merge together Hegelianism and naturalism is articulated. It has been argued above that Dewey saw Hegel's philosophy of spirit and James's biological psychology as complementary approaches. At that time, however, it was not possible to provide a more precise description of what such a complementarity amounts to. Now that its different aspects have been taken into account, we are in a better position to clarify the sense of the 'double movement' which has been pointed out as the backbone of Dewey's project of naturalizing idealism and idealizing naturalism. In so doing, a more definite meaning will be also assigned to the statement that the development of Dewey's thought can be accounted for as the result of a tension between his willingness to keeping faithful to the idealistic assumption that reality and experience are coextensive and his desire to live up to the highest standards of scientific research.

At the basis of Dewey's mature, non-reductive naturalism there is a powerful philosophical assumption concerning the proper nature of human behavior. As many philosophers and psychologists of the time, Dewey was convinced that "experience is simply what we do" since human beings are at their root "practical beings", and that practice "constitutes at first both self and world of reality" (LW 17: 154-155). Moreover, he also maintained that human beings, precisely because they are animal organisms, act so as to minimize the efforts that they put forth in adapting to the environment. Dewey agreed with those upholders of 'energetism' – as, for instance, William James – who defended the view that energy is the essence of an organism *qua* organism, and that the amount of energy with which a living being is naturally endowed is limited (Franzese 2008: 145ff.). Consistently, he argued that the reason why an organism

³⁶ Referring to those psychologists – notably, Titchener – who were committed to carry out such a reduction, Dewey provocatively remarked that physiologists never believed that the analysis and description of the structural elements of an eye amounted to an analysis of the function of seeing. Rather the contrary a "[s]tudy of the structure tells you how function is carried on, tells you what the machinery or means is; but this is not seeing" (ToL 1899-1900: 546).

naturally craves for unity is that it is only in an unified behavior that a living being does not waste its energy in a fruitless attempt to follow contradictory suggestions³⁷. The Hegelian conception of the dialectical movement of the spirit was therefore reformulated by Dewey in strictly biological terms. As a consequence, the bearer of the dialectical movement was no more identified with the *Geist*, but rather with the concrete individual that struggles to attain an adaptive equilibrium with his environment. Accordingly, the necessity of a moment of synthesis in which thesis and antithesis are both overcome and preserved was no more conceived of as a logical prescription, but rather as a biological fact. The shift from the abstractness of spirit to the concreteness of organism was undoubtedly due to Dewey's assimilation of the methodological and theoretical standpoint of biological psychology, even though it should not be overlooked the fact that Dewey's biologization of Hegelianism was subsequent to the Hegelianization of his early psychological idealism. The latter was as important as the former to pave the way for his realization that activity is the concrete activity of an organism dealing with the difficulties that its environment presents to it.

So, at this extremely general level of analysis, the traditional interpretative thesis that insists on the relevance of the role played by James's biological psychology in prompting Dewey to revise his Hegelianism may be said to be substantially correct, once it is reminded that Dewey's adoption of a truly Hegelian standpoint was the result of a long process of revision of his early assumptions. However, the translation of Hegelian tenets in biological terms retroacted upon the biological and psychological conceptions that Dewey employed to describe human behavior and experience. His account of emotions, his conception of reflex arc as a continuous circle, his theory of habit and habitual actions, his very theory of activity as a natural event; all these concepts stemmed from a critique of the traditional language of psychology – and, consequently, of its traditional theoretical framework – which was inspired by a Hegelian conception of mind. For what concerns its technical aspects, Dewey's holistic and

³⁷ So, for instance, in his *Theory of Interest* (1896 and 1899) Dewey remarked: "The problem of attaining the proper balance between the impulses on one side and an ideal or end on the other is just the question of getting enough interest in the end to prevent a too sudden expenditure of the waste energy to direct this excited energy so that it shall be tributary to realizing the end" (EW5: 133). Dewey's acceptance of the language of energy is a remarkable trait of continuity of his thought. In *Human Nature and Conduct* – written almost 30 years later – Dewey was still convinced of its theoretical validity, to the extent that he decided to put it at the basis of his mature philosophical anthropology.

dialectical approach to meaning and mind was therefore more indebted to Hegel than to James. Indeed, it was the former who supplied Dewey with the conceptual tools necessary to depart from the dominant view, to which James was unfortunately still committed. Consequently, at a more technical level the relation between James and Hegel is reversed. In this case, Hegel's philosophy of mind represented a necessary corrective to many dualistic distortions that were surreptitiously introduced into the standard scientific account of mind, while James's biological philosophy was the element in need of conceptual revision³⁸.

³⁸ The last remarks have two important consequences. On the one hand, they help laying stress once again on the complexity of Dewey's theoretical framework, and to explain the difficulties that he met in shaping his mature naturalistic theory of meaning. On the other hand, they permit a better understanding of the sense in which one is entitled to argue for the persistence of distinctively Hegelian themes in Dewey's mature philosophy. This issue has comparatively been given little prominence here, even though it is one of the most debated points in Deweyan scholarship. In the light of what has been said, it seems possible to conclude that the permanent Hegelian deposit in the philosophy of Dewey is twofold: at a general level, it contributed to define his naturalistic perspective on meaning; at a specific level, it provided him with the conceptual instruments that only made it possible to formulate his general theory of meaningful experience. Now, it is reasonable to believe that a similar distinction of levels can be found in Dewey's mature philosophy. This remark is particularly important because it suggests that the continuity of Dewey's philosophy should be looked for less in his general philosophical theses than in the technical solutions that he elaborated in order to satisfactorily address specific problems as the relation means-ends, the issue of habitual meaning, and so on. When seen from this perspective, the theory of habits as organic functions formulated in *Human Nature and Conduct*, or the theory of the reciprocal determination of means and ends in a process of valuation sketched in *Logic: Theory of Inquiry* and in *Theory of Valuation* are the best instances of such a continuity. Consequently, Dewey's problematic adhesion to pragmatism, as well as its controversial acceptance of behaviorism – which have been traditionally regarded by Deweyan scholars as a significant break in his intellectual development, as well as a radical departure from his earlier idealism –, should not be taken as representing such a dramatic rupture with previous positions as has been commonly believed. If attention is paid to the persistence of an idealistic terminology, the issue of determining the continuity of his thought takes a more concrete form, and his abiding commitment to Hegel's ideas of whole and activity as the essence of human behavior can be easily brought to the fore.

3. Dewey's Biological Theory of Meaning

3.1. The Naturalization of Apperception

At the beginning of the previous paragraph, it has been maintained that the success of Dewey's efforts of translating his early idealistic theory of meaning in biological terms revolved around the possibility of naturalizing three fundamental tenets: a) the idea that experience is activity; b) the idea that apperception is the ultimate source of meaning; c) the idea that interest is the selective factor that makes it possible for a thing to become a significant part of meaningful experience. The discussion of the first point has led to an important conclusion. It has been shown that Dewey believed that the idealistic notion of activity should be abandoned as no longer viable, and substituted with a biological conception of it in which the emphasis should be put on the physiological processes that bring about meaningful experience. Activity is a wholly natural event taking place in the world: both its origin and its conditions of possibility are empirically detectable³⁹. What was left to do, therefore, was to provide a detailed account of the organic activities that lay at the basis of meaningful experience. The naturalization of the idealistic theory of interest and apperception was the necessary completion of Dewey's attempt to ground his idealistic conception of meaning on a thoroughly naturalistic anthropology. In other words, what was left to do was to show in concrete how a constructivist conception of meaning could be maintained within a naturalistic framework.

Dewey's non-reductive naturalism hinges upon the recognition of the capacity of an organism to enter into the realm of meaning – to borrow an expression from Santayana –, without any need to recur to an alleged supernatural faculty in order to explain the meaningfulness of experience⁴⁰. In

³⁹ It is as a consequence of this momentous conceptual change that Dewey came to view philosophy – defined as the inquiry into the proper nature of experience (ItP 1892: 26) – as continuous with other sciences. Dewey argued that once it is realized that there is no ontological break between natural world and human experience, then it should be evident that no methodological break between sciences and philosophy is allowed to be introduced.

⁴⁰ A remark is needed here to avoid a possible misunderstanding. In these pages, the attention has been mainly focused upon the natural activities that structure meaningful experience, in the conviction that the distinctive trait of Dewey's non-reductive naturalism consists in the redefinition of the notion of human nature. The insistence on Dewey's heterodox account of habit was motivated precisely by the need of highlighting this point. In any case, it would be erroneous to reduce Dewey's naturalistic theory of meaning to a discussion of the biological processes of

the first chapter, it has been remarked that one of the most serious problems that the young Dewey had to face concerned the issue of accounting for the possibility of having direct acquaintance with meanings. This is an aspect of human experience that Dewey always found worthy of serious consideration. The fact that a thing is encountered as a significant object – or, to use his own words, “that things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man, and thereby to themselves” – stroke him as a “wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales” (LW1: 132). However, the difficulties that had seemed insurmountable within his early idealistic framework almost entirely disappeared when he realized that the adoption of a constructivist account of meaning does not compel one to endorse an idealistic theory of mind or to fall back into an associationist view as the one that Dewey himself had harshly criticized in his early works.

In the light of his non-reductive naturalism, indeed, it became evident that the idealistic and mentalistic assumptions that meaning depends on the activity of a mind, and that some kind of unconscious activity has to be postulated in order to explain the seemingly obvious fact that objects are experienced as having a meaning irrespectively of any conscious acts of reflection, are entirely independent from the constructivist tenet that the whole meaning of a thing consists of the set of relations that that thing has with other elements. In so doing – that is, by separating the latter from the former, thus freeing the constructivist paradigm from unnecessary metaphysical commitments – the problem of explaining the possibility of immediately apprehending the meaning of things became far less difficult to solve. The key to achieving a satisfactory solution is the acknowledgment of the potentiality of the body, and the recognition that it is not an absolute mind, but rather the concrete organism that performs the activities of drawing those relations of which meaning consists. Such an approach should not be conceived of as a relapse into a form of associationist thought because the pivotal notion of Dewey’s theory of meaning – namely, his concept of habit – was rich enough to include in itself both teleology and mechanism. As has been repeatedly remarked above, the interwovenness of teleological and mechanical causality that Dewey progressively came to perceive as the essential feature of human behavior was a distinctively Hegelian trait of

construction of meaning. The cultural dimension is as important as the natural for the possibility of a meaningful experience. In a certain sense, it can be said that culture supplies with the content of meaning, while nature provides the mechanism that makes possible the embodiment of meanings in a concrete behavior.

his thought, through which he intended to correct James's unilateral view of habitual coordinated activity, and, in so doing, to definitely reject the associationist bias from which the latter was unable to completely free himself.

That habit should be viewed as the naturalistic counterpart of the idealistic concept of apperception is a point that Dewey implicitly or explicitly appealed to in many of the texts he wrote during the 90's. As is well known, his attempt to revise his early idealism went hand in hand with the recognition of the inadequacy of transcendental explanations, and such a recognition led him to conclude that the language of apperception should be abandoned because of its commitment to dualistic assumptions (ToL 1899-1900: 547). For this reason, one may argue that it would be more correct to speak of a replacement of apperception with habit rather than of a naturalization of apperception, as if Dewey were willing to preserve within his non-reductive naturalism a concept that was clearly inadequate to express his organicist and biological account of meaning. Undoubtedly, this remark has some foundation. Nonetheless, since apperception and habit are theoretically equivalent notions, the statement that Dewey attempted a naturalization of the concept of apperception could be accepted as a fruitful suggestion for further analyses. From an interpretative point of view, the assimilation of apperception and habit may not only help to bring to light the theoretical richness of the latter, but may also allow to better understand which philosophical questions Dewey believed could be solved through a shift in paradigm.

In any case, it is important to note that such an assimilation is far from being unwarranted. It was Dewey himself who stressed their similarity in an important passage drawn from his lectures on the *Theory of Logic* (1899-1900), which is worth being quoted in its entirety:

"In the first place, all habit and all apperception (which is simply a name for habit on its intellectual side) involve the application of the outcome of one experience to the construction or determination of another. It is through habit that the continuity of experience is effected, and that means that the attitude which is instituted in and through one experience becomes a determining factor in the constitution of other experiences. Speaking of this psychological point of view it would be true then that there is something which may be fairly called generalization in any and all experience, in so far as anything is used beyond itself, so far as any aspect or factor or result of any experience is used for an end beyond itself. All suggestion occurring through the association of ideas would be generalization in this general psychological sense. So far as one experience is used to suggest, to call up before the mind, another experience of any sort, it will

be, as recent writers have pointed out (James, for example) because of the projection of a certain core of identity, so to speak, that a certain core persists and becomes a centre of accretion about which other differential elements cohere. Habit is the persistence of the attitude which is appropriate to one experience over into the construction or constitution of another, thereby constituting the thread or connection of identity between them. This aspect of generalization is found in all forms of experience wherever the principle of habit comes into play" (ToL 1899-1900: 782).

It is evident from this quotation that Dewey was persuaded that the notion of apperception could be reduced to that of habit, and in so doing could be absorbed in a different conceptual framework from the one in which it had been originally framed. The essence of habit is generalization, Dewey argued, and generalization not only determines the continuity of experience, but also establishes those relations between past and present elements that constitute the core identity of an object. Habit is therefore the natural, biological process through which present material gets enriched with past meanings, thus becoming a part of ordered, significant experience. Dewey's reference to psychology – that is, to the scientific study of the concrete biological functions through which generalization is brought about – is obviously the key to understanding the originality of his naturalistic theory of meaning. Indeed, even though in these lectures Dewey did not go as far as to provide an accurate description of the psycho-physiological processes at the basis of habitual generalizations, he was well aware that the plausibility of his naturalistic account of meaning depended entirely upon the possibility of giving such a description.

One of the reason why Dewey did not devote great attention to the issue of explaining the psychological constitution of immediately apprehended meaning is probably that he believed he had already successfully tackled this problem in *The Theory of Emotion. The Significance of Emotions*. The fact that he first expounded his physiological account of meaningful experience in the context of an article purporting to frame a naturalistic theory of emotions is not casual. Indeed, while the specific theoretical problem that Dewey aimed at facing in that article was that of accounting for emotions in purely naturalistic terms, his general problem was rather that of clarifying the nature of meaningful experience, in both its emotional and intellectual aspects. Dewey's argument moves from a criticism of James's discharge theory, and in particular, of the latter's assumption that the conscious recognition of an object is a preliminary condition of the arousal of an emotion, as if there were two different processes

going on in the organism – one which produces the intellectual content of the experience, and the other which brings about its emotional quality. Referring to James's assertion that "[w]hatever be our reaction on the situation, in the last resort it is an *instinctive reaction* on that one of its elements which strikes us for the first time being *as most vitally important*", Dewey argued that James was right in laying stress on the importance of the instinctive character of reactions, even though he did not manage to fully appreciate the momentous theoretical bearings of his assumption (James 1894: 518; EW4: 175). According to Dewey, indeed, James committed the psychologist's fallacy in not understanding that speaking of an "elements which strikes us for the first time being *as most vitally important*" introduces an intellectualist distortion that fatally undermines the very possibility of providing a truly naturalistic account of emotions and, consequently, of the whole psychical life of human beings – or, in more Deweyan terms, of meaningful experience. The point Dewey was eager to highlight is that James's reference to the *conscious* apprehension of an element of the situation projects on concrete experience some categories that hold at the level of reflection⁴¹.

Dewey identified the way out from this difficulty in the realization that the constitution of directly experienced meaning does not depend upon conscious recognition of objects, but is the outcome of a determinate coordination of activities (EW4: 183; see also Cunningham 1995: 867ff.). As has been remarked in the previous section, Dewey believed that an organism is always carrying on some activities, through which it tries to maintain or improve its adaption with the environment. Consequently, some habits of behavior are already in use when a man encounters an object in experience. Assuming for the sake of the argument that he already knows what that object is – so that his actual experience is not concerned with consciously constructing its meaning, but simply with unreflectively responding to environmental conditions – a certain activity immediately provokes another activity which functions as a response. Take, for

⁴¹ Take the case of a bear that causes an emotion of fright. James maintained that the correct explanation of this fact is that a) a bear is perceived; b) some organic reactions are caused by that perception; c) the feeling of these changes is the emotion. However, Dewey argued, if this account were true, no real explanation of emotions would be actually provided, since the bear is supposed to be a frightening object *before* the emotion of fear is concretely sensed. This kind of explanation entails the separation of intellectual and emotional elements of experience. Consequently, it risks to cause a relapse into the language of faculty psychology which would contradict what is, at least in Dewey's eyes, the most important theoretical result of scientific psychology – namely, the conception of experience as a unified activity in which every possible distinction is a functionally useful conceptual tool for handling original material.

instance, the case of a man coming across a bear in a wood. The experience of a frightening bear depends upon some already formed habits of seeing connected through already organized paths of association in the brain with already established motor habits and with vegetative functions that are necessary to maintain motor activities (EW4: 185). So, when a man comes across a bear, he starts running away from it because of a previously existing sensori-motor coordination that 'informs' him that a bear is an extremely dangerous animal, and that a dangerous animal should be kept at a safe distance. In less metaphorical terms, there is an already formed coordination between habits of seeing – which supplies the classification of a patch of color on the retina as a bear – and habits of movement associated with that specific perceptual content, which in turn is nothing but a coordination of the excitations of eye with touch centres (EW4: 176). Dewey expressed this point by saying that “[t]he reaction is not made on the basis of the apprehension of some quality in the object”, but rather “it is made on the basis of an organized habit, of an organized coordination of activities, one which instinctively stimulates the other” (EW4: 175-176). There is no intervention of conscious reflection as a consequence of which an object enters in an experience as one of its meaningful elements. Rather the contrary, the bear is constituted as a meaningful object in the very same organic activity in which the emotion of fright originates: the construction of its meaning depends upon the existence of already organized habits connecting the movements of eyes with those of the legs. This highly articulated coordination constitutes the whole meaning of an object *in that particular context or situation*⁴². Or, to use Dewey’s own words, “[i]t is the kind of *coordination of acts* which, brought to sensational consciousness, constitutes the bear a fearful or a laughable

⁴² The qualification is necessary because Dewey believed that objects in different contexts assume different meanings. So, for instance, a bear is a different object for a man who accidentally comes across him and, say, for a gamekeeper. Dewey’s contextualism is best expressed in the opening pages of *The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism* where it is said that: “Immediate empiricism postulates that things – anything, everything, in the ordinary or nontechnical use of the term ‘thing’ – are what they are experienced as. Hence, if one wishes to describe anything truly, his task is to tell what it is experienced as being. If it is a horse that is to be described, or the *equus* that is to be defined, then must the horse-trader, or the jockey, or the timid family man who wants a ‘safe driver’, or the zoologist or the paleontologist tell us what the horse is which is experienced. If these accounts turn out different in some respects, as well as congruous in others, this is no reason for assuming the content of one to be exclusively ‘real’, and that of others to be ‘phenomenal’; for each account of what is experienced will manifest that it is the account of the horse-dealer, or of the zoologist, and hence will give the conditions requisite for understanding the differences as well as the agreements of the various accounts. And the principle varies not a whit if we bring in the psychologist’s horse, the logician’s horse, or the metaphysician’s horse” (MW3: 158-159).

or an indifferent object" (EW4: 175). The meaning of a thing directly experienced is nothing but the set of already established activities coordinated in a unified whole which direct and control the behavior of the agent, and enable him to predict the reactions of that particular part of environment to the actions that he will perform on it.

Three important considerations can be made around Dewey's naturalization of apperception. First of all, the insistence on the constructive role of instinctive coordination of organic activities implies that no duplication is needed to explain the emotion of fright that is felt when a bear is perceived. Consequently, Dewey was able not only to correct the shortcomings of James's discharge theory, but also to ground his own naturalistic theory of meaning on more solid basis. Object and emotion are abstraction from a concrete experience which is at the very same time emotional and intellectual⁴³. It is only when experience is analyzed that emotion can be severed from its object. "The reality", Dewey maintained, "is that whole activity which may be described equally well as 'that terrible bear', or 'Oh, how frightened I am'" (EW4: 176). And then he added that "[i]t is precisely and identically the same actual concrete experience", while "the 'bear', considered as one element, and the 'fright', considered as another, are distinctions introduced in reflection upon this experience, not separate experience" (EW4: 176). Far from being a purely cognitive phenomenon, experience is the encompassing whole in which values, meanings, appreciations are essentially interwoven since they stem from the very same organic activities⁴⁴.

⁴³ The concept of tertiary quality as the pervading emotional quality of a situation – a notion that Dewey drew from Santayana, and exploited as a key notion in his account of reasoning and experience as formulated in his later works – is grounded in the analysis of emotions that Dewey conducted during the 90's (Alexander 1988: 110; Tiles 1990: 52). It is in the light of his physiological theory of emotions that Dewey was led to view meaning as a real and concrete property of things in the world, instead of conceiving it as a purely psychical product that is projected upon raw material.

⁴⁴ These remarks are particularly important because they allow to clarify a point that has been at the center of numerous debates on Dewey's conception of experience. As is well known, scholars have long insisted on Dewey's distinction between 'experience had' and 'experience known', and have traditionally maintained that that distinction represents one of his most relevant theoretical acquisition. Experience had has usually been defined as the direct, pre-reflective experience of objects in the world, while experience known is a distinctively cognitive event in which an object is reconstructed according to the needs of the subject of the inquiry (Hildebrand 2003: 61ff.). If kept within the limits set by that definition, and conceived in functional terms, the distinction is undoubtedly correct, and worth being preserved. However, some interpreters have gone as far as to argue that what Dewey intended to say was that experience had is fully devoid of cognitive elements, and that its being had instead of being known depends entirely upon its lack of intellectual elements. It is important to understand why this reading is unwarranted. Indeed, while

The second consideration concerns more directly the relation between the traditional conception of apperception and the naturalized version of it that Dewey provided in the concept of habit. From what has been said above, it should be now clear in which sense and to what extent the recognition of the role of habit in the constitution of meaning paves the way for the possibility of definitely rejecting the hypothesis that a transcendental machinery is needed to explain the possibility of meaningful experience. Dewey did not tackle this issue in his *The Theory of Emotion*, but devoted considerable attention to it in a series of lectures entitled *Theory of Logic*, which he delivered at the University of Chicago in 1899. In the context of a criticism of the idealists' appeal to absolute consciousness as the ultimate warrant for the consistency of experience, Dewey explicitly stated that "[t]he substitute for this objective constitutive thought process of Green, etc., is the practical or teleological organization, organization through our past habits"⁴⁵ (ToL 1899-1900: 624). And few lines below it can be

one cannot deny that it is not impossible to find few passages that seem to corroborate an interpretation along this line, there is plenty of reasons to maintain that the complete expunction of cognitive elements from experience had is in direct contradiction with both the spirit and the letter of Dewey's appeal to pre-reflective mode of apprehension of the meaning of objects. Indeed, Dewey believed that meaning can be directly experienced, and that an immediate apprehension of meaning is possible because of biological processes which supply the structured and organized basis against which consciousness as a distinctive function of behavior arises. In every possible experience there are settled meanings that are not questioned (Ryan 1994). But this means that in every possible experience there is a certain amount of knowledge that is not made object of reflective inquiry. Settled meanings are the outcome of successful physiological acts of connection of different activities as a consequence of which both the elements that are parts of the situation – the bear, the wood, the possible escape routes – and the whole situation as such – the frightening encounter with a bear in the wood – are experienced as significant. Dewey's reference to generalization as the distinctive character of habit, as well his powerful statement that some kind of generalization can be found "in all forms of experience wherever the principle of habit comes into play", are evidences that he did not believe possible to expunge cognitive elements from immediate experience (ToL 1899-1900: 782). The immediacy of experience is a mediated immediacy, in which knowledge resulting from previous inquiries is embodied in the direct, unreflective apprehension of things. Dewey's insistence on the mechanisms through which habits construct experience is by no means a denial of the meaningfulness of that kind of experience. To argue that the contrary is true would amount to underestimating the theoretical richness and complexity of Dewey's naturalistic account of meaning, and to radically misunderstanding the philosophical significance of the tenet that teleology and mechanism are not two different kinds of causality, but only two perspectives from which to look at the very same original activity.

⁴⁵ "The intellectual school distinguishes between what it calls the objective constitutive and the individual or personal part of thought. The former is the same as the transcendental logic of Kant and the objective logic of Hegel. That would seem to relieve the intellectual school of that difficulty. But what is the concrete relation between this universal constitutive thought process and the individual reflective thought process? The reflective individual thought process must come into play to correct the mistakes of the universal constitutive thought process. (ToL 1899-1900: 622). The issue of Dewey's relation with idealistic logic will be the object of the next chapter.

read that “[i]n this practical organization we find the working substitute for this transcendental logical determination which the intellectual school insists upon” (ToL 1899-1900: 625). From Dewey’s perspective, habits are theoretically equivalent to the pure categories of thought for what concerns their role in the construction of meaningful experience. The only difference between them – but it is a difference that subtends a radical difference of philosophical viewpoints about the nature of that construction – consists in the fact that the former are amenable to experimental investigations that bring to light the concrete process of their genesis.

This is probably Dewey’s clearest statement of the continuity he perceived existing between the idealistic attempt of explaining meaningful experience by making reference to a constitutive activity of thought and his ambitious project of accounting for it in purely biological terms, as the product of physiological processes which connect simpler activities in a larger whole. The idealistic position can be summarized as follows: the possibility of directly experiencing meaning independently from an intervention of conscious reflection is determined by the activity of a meta-empirical subject whose sole function is to apply its concepts or categories to raw materials according to a rule. Indeed, since idealists believed meaning to be universal – having to do with the relation existing between different elements in a whole or, in more functional terms, between some antecedents and their consequences within a concrete activity –, they argued that it cannot be boiled down to the material that is put in relation. In a certain sense, this was just a different way of expressing Kant’s fundamental tenet that experience never gives its judgments true universality and necessity (Kant 1781/1787: B4). Dewey unreservedly accepted the assumption that meaning is general or universal⁴⁶. To know the intellectual meaning of an object is to know its consequences, that is, to know how it will react to certain actions made by the subject. This consideration can be extended to hold more generally for all possible meanings, not only those consciously created in a reflective experience. Indeed, since “some element of reflection or inference may be required in any situation to which the term ‘experience’ is applicable in any way”, one is entitled to conclude that directly experienced meanings are nothing but general expectations of future consequences that are not brought to consciousness at the

⁴⁶ Even in his mature works, where the empiricist influences are undoubtedly stronger than in his early texts, Dewey remained faithful to this fundamental tenet. So, for instance, in *Experience and Nature* he remarked that he agreed with the classic theory in conceiving form, not matter, as the proper object of knowledge (LW1: 246).

present moment, but act as factors determining the horizon of that particularly activity which constitutes a single, individual experience (MW10: 321). In every possible experience, he stated, “there are certain previous activities which persist, habits which continue to operate, and which in operating define a certain phase of the experience for us” (ToL 1899-1900: 625).

Evidently, Dewey could not accept the thesis that meaning is externally projected upon a material that is essentially devoid of order. This would have amounted to relapse into that dogmatic dualism that Dewey never got tired of criticizing in his early works. The correct insistence on the universality of meaning should not result therefore in overlooking the importance of the particular elements that are related according to the general rule which defines the content of a determinate meaning. James missed the mark in criticizing the young Dewey for not having understood that relations could not exist without their terms, but the general principle to which he appealed was undoubtedly correct: particularity and universality should not be severed. Dewey was well aware that a reliable solution to this difficulty depended upon the possibility of thinking together relation and related terms along the lines that he himself had outlined in his *Mind* articles – *The Psychological Standpoint* and *Psychology as Philosophical Method*. Consistently, he developed his notion of habit so as to satisfy the criteria for a definition of individuality as the level in which particular and universal element find their reciprocal realization.

According to the standard view – from which Dewey did not distance himself even when he subjected traditional accounts to harsh criticism –, habit is a general way of behaving whose essence consists in its being a mode of activity directed towards an end. Consistently, “the general exists for us as a mode of action which is in its core identical in a great variety of different cases” (ToL 1899-1900: 706). However, habits are real only insofar as they have the power to determine a series of actions in which every item is put in relation to its antecedents and consequents. So, Dewey pointed out, “every general line of action or interest is embodied in a series of particular overt acts, each of which not simply passes on the stimulus to the next, but enters as a contributing factor into the conscious value of all the others” (PE 1898: 117). As a consequence of this constitutive presence of the general into the particular, “each step in the act is not isolated consciously, but we somehow feel in it the meaning of what has gone before, and foresee in it the significance of what comes after” (PE 1898: 1117). The acknowledgment of activity as the essence of habit allowed Dewey to cut the

Gordian knot of the relation between universality and particularity, and opened the door to a truly Hegelian account of meaning⁴⁷.

The essential interwovenness of general expectations and particular corroborations defines the concrete individuality of habit and establishes the condition of possibility of its verification. Thus, particular acts provide the actualization and verification of the general habit of behavior. In so doing, overt acts lose their stubborn separateness while habit loses its empty abstractness. Following some clearly recognizable Hegelian suggestions, Dewey was therefore led to argue that reality is individual rather than particular or universal. As is evident, this was just another way to express his early assumption that “the real esse of things is neither *percipi*, nor their *intelligi* alone; it is their *experiri*” (EW1: 151). However, he now formulated that thesis in a different and more Hegelian language. The pointed that Dewey wanted to express is that there is nothing like an object in general, but always a concrete object existing in a concrete situation (ToL 1899-1900: 702). The reality of generals consists in their being actualized, that is, in their power to have actual effects in the world. Therefore, what may be called Dewey’s ‘individualism’ – the thesis according to which what is real is the concrete situation in which meanings are experienced – grounds its roots in his realization of the importance of keeping faithful to Hegel’s fundamental insight that “what is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational”⁴⁸ (Hegel 1874: 10; for an exhaustive discussion of this point, see Good 2010: 67).

Finally, the third consideration concerns the theoretical advantages that follow from the substitution of the concept of apperception with the notion of habit for what concerns the possibility of providing a satisfactory analysis of the

⁴⁷ The key to understanding this point is to read it as equivalent to Dewey’s well-known definition of habits as processes running smoothly without any interference. As has been remarked above, Dewey’s theory of meaningful experience relies upon the assumption that some part of previous experience are always active in present experience, in the sense that previously acquired habits unconsciously directed present activities. To say that habits continue to operate independently from the fact that attention is actually paid to them means that all the expectations constituting the intellectual content of a habit are continuously corroborated and confirmed by the series of reactions brought about by the “series of particular overt acts” through which habit actualizes itself, and gets concretely embodied in human behavior and experience (PE 1898: 1117). The concrete objects of experience are nothing but these habits turned inside out, objectified mode of responses.

⁴⁸ This is the essential point of Hegel’s actualism from which Dewey never departed even when he decided to abandon Hegelian terminology in favor of a conceptual framework more attentive to empiricist themes, in which Hegel was progressively substituted with Bacon. Again, the importance of Hegel’s thought for the development of Dewey’s philosophy reveals itself to be much more deep and complex than has been recognized by Dewey himself in his autobiographical remarks.

factors constituting experience. Indeed, the recognition of the primacy of habit entailed a radical reshaping of Dewey's conceptual framework which resulted in a loss of salience of the issue of sensation. As has been repeatedly remarked, Dewey's greatest philosophical problem was of clarifying the theoretical status of sensation. Indeed, the main difficulty for a consistent idealism was to explain the qualitative aspect of experience since the latter seems to be given rather than constructed by the activity of mind. Dewey's preliminary solution consisted in showing how the aesthetic character of a sensation – that is, its having certain qualities which define its being that particular sensation – could be traced back to teleological activities of which the former is the natural outcome (CJD Vol. I: 1893.05.10; J. Dewey to J. R. Angell). There was a certain amount of imprecision in that formulation since Dewey misleadingly equated the quality of experience with sensation, thus blurring the distinction between a quality actually felt and a refined product of reflection whose validity is entirely dependent on its capacity of accounting for the qualitative aspect of experience. The oscillation is a sign that at the time he wrote that letter he had not yet managed to develop a terminology adequate to express his mature conception of experience. With the idea of habit as coordination, as well as with the physiological theory of emotion and meaning that stems from that concept, Dewey found a way to account for the qualitative aspect of experience without being compelled to appeal to the problematic concept of sensation⁴⁹.

Indeed, as a consequence of the insistence on the physiological origin of the connections constituting meaningful experience, the twin notions of a subject performing an activity of synthesis and atomistic and unrelated sensations lose their theoretical justifications. There is no need to rely upon the notion of sensation because a more satisfactory account of experience can be achieved by exploiting the opportunities provided by a truly naturalistic approach. Obviously, Dewey did not go as far as to deny that sensations play a role in experience. He limited himself to highlighting that the conscious apprehension of

⁴⁹ It should be not overlooked the important role played by scientific experiments on attention and habit made by Angell and Moore. In their important article *Reaction Time: A Study of Attention and Habit* Angell and Moore tried to formulate an alternative explanation – which they called “dynamogenetic” – of the difference between the time of the so-called motor form of reaction and the time of sensory reaction (Angell and Moore 1896: 246). They credited Dewey and Mead for having provided them with important suggestions which they put at the basis of their new functionalistic approach to the investigations of reaction times (on this point, see Feffer 1993: 154; Campbell 1995: 32-33). The fact that his philosophical theory of experience could be fruitfully applied to make scientific experiments was undoubtedly perceived by Dewey as an important confirmation of the theoretical validity and soundness of his philosophy of experience.

a qualitative aspect of experience is not a factor in the process of construction of that very experience. Sensations are refined products of reflection in the sense that they are constructed for the sake of making a conscious act of inquiry more reasonable and, in the last analysis, more effective. So, sensations are actually experienced, but their proper collocation, so to say, is in reflective experience where meanings are built, not in primary experience where meanings are immediately felt (see chapter 3, 2.3.1).

In laying stress on the functional nature of sensations, Dewey eventually managed to provide a solution to the issue that at the beginning of his Chicago years he had found so difficult to handle. More precisely, Dewey came to realize that the givenness of a sensation is a myth that must be dispelled rather than a genuine theoretical problem that has to be solved. The definite rejection of this myth paves the way for a thorough philosophy of experience in which no reference to elements falling outside the scope of experience is admitted. Far from being brute data, indeed, sensations are always constructions. In particular, sensations as qualitative features of a particular experience are constructed by physiological processes of coordination, while sensations as refined objects are constructed within a conscious process of inquiry. There is nothing in meaningful experience which can be correctly treated as a case of sheer existence: experience is always 'categorized' and laden with meanings.

3.2. *A Naturalistic Theory of the Self: The Notion of Interest*

In the light of what has been said until now, it should be easier to see along which lines Dewey attempted to naturalize the last fundamental tenet that characterized his early psychological idealism – that is, the idea that interest is the selective factor that makes it possible for a thing to become a significant part of meaningful experience. Dewey treated the issue of interest in his essay *Interest as Related to Will*, originally appeared in 1895 and then revised and republished with the title of *Interest in Relation to Training of the Will* in 1899. Even though it was written having in mind the educational debate between upholders of the theory of effort and defenders of the theory of interest, *Interest in Relation to Training of the Will* was conceived as having a more general philosophical bearing. In this text Dewey did not limited himself to deduce some remarkable

educational consequences from his philosophical conception of interest; he also attempted to provide a general theory of meaningful experience. In order to achieve this goal, he had to highlight the intimate relation existing between interest and meaning. Within Dewey's naturalistic framework, interest becomes an empirically ascertainable factor that determines the responses of an organism to the stimuli coming from the environment, and whose effectiveness in directing concrete line of actions is due to its being ingrained in the bundle of habits that construct meaningful experience.

Traditional theory of interest in the educational field revolved around the assumption of the "externality of the object [...] to the self" (EW5: 117). In so doing, both the theorists of efforts and the theorists of interest assumed that the self has to be prompted to act by an external factor – that is, a factor external to activity – since the agent was considered indifferent to the particular object he aims at. Evidently, Dewey could not accept this way of framing the problem of the nature of interest. The conclusions that follow from those premises are dualistic and mechanistic: they lead to a conception of the self as a set of potential courses of activity that do not find their proper realization in the external world. On the contrary, interest is "a form of self-expressive activity" since the essence of the self is to 'actualize' itself and construct its own meanings (EW5: 125). Consequently, the dualism between self and world, private intentions and public acts, supports an anti-Hegelian theory of the self which, in Dewey's eyes, does not explain how it is possible for a self to have a meaningful world in view.

Obviously, Dewey did not mean to deny that there are moments in which the coordination between self and world is broken or interrupted. The point that he wanted to stress was rather that these moments are possible only because the continuity between self and world is the normal condition rather than an exception or a goal to be achieved. The interest that an agent takes for the things of his world is an evidence of the fact that the self finds its realization in the activities through which the environment is modeled according to its needs and desires. But it also means that the only things that are 'semantically' real for a self are those which attract its attention. An object is part of a meaningful experience if and only if it is part of a purposeful activity. As Dewey wrote, "[t]he object has no conscious existence [...] save *in* the activity" (EW5: 125). Therefore, to say that, in a case of immediate experience, the object attracts attention is a "psychological impossibility" (EW5: 125-126). This is impossible because it would entail a reduplication of the object – the first one lying outside the scope of the activity of

the self and the second being part of such an activity, but only as the result of an action of the independent object on the self. To say that an object is interesting for an agent means that the latter continues an activity which results in the presence of that object (EW5: 126). In more technical terms, the activity is the encompassing whole in which a mediation is established between certain actions and their consequences: the fact of mediation defines the proper meaning of the thing in that individual course of action⁵⁰.

Dewey was very clear on this point: mediation is the essential structure of interest⁵¹. Interest can be both mediated or immediate. In the latter case, self-expression is direct and unproblematic: “[i]t puts itself forth with no thought of anything beyond” (EW5: 125). In the former case, a process of reflection is needed to show that a certain object belongs to the activity with which the agent is concerned. In so doing, the meaning of that particular thing is enhanced as a consequence of its being seen as a factor in a more complex whole. Referring to a child learning how to play an instrument, Dewey wrote: “[t]he musical score and the technique of fingering, in which the child can find no interest when it is presented as an end in itself, when it is isolated, becomes fascinating when the child realizes its place and bearings in helping him to give better and fuller utterance to his love of song” (EW5: 126). And then he added an explanation of the philosophical significance of that remark. “It is all a question of relationship”, he argued, “and while a the little child takes only a near view of things, as he grows older he becomes capable of extending his range, and seeing an act, or a thing, or a fact, not by itself, but in its value as part of a larger whole” (EW5: 126).

What is important to remark here is the essential connection that Dewey saw between meaning and interest. Meaning is mediation, but the kind of mediation that is established between different things or acts depends upon the interests of

⁵⁰ The logical structure of the notion of interest is revealed, Dewey remarked, by its etymology. Indeed, ‘interest’ means ‘to be between’, that is, to be “engaged, engrossed, or entirely taken up with some activity because of its recognized worth” (EW5: 122). So, he concluded, “[i]nterest marks the annihilation of the distance between the person and the materials and results of his action; it is the instrument which effects their organic union” (EW5: 122). In this sense, Interest is the glue that binds the self and world together and allows the self to have a world in view.

⁵¹ As is well known, mediation is a Hegelian notion. It refers to the process through which the immediacy of a knowledge is denied and sublated: “to mediate”, Hegel wrote in the *Introduction* to the so called *Lesser Logic*, “is to take something as a beginning and to go onward to a second thing; so that the existence of this second thing depends on our having reached it from something else contradistinguished from it” (Hegel 1874: 20). Starting from around 1894 Dewey adopted the term mediation and used it to refer to the process of construction – both biological and logical – of the relations that define the meaning of a thing. For a discussion of this point, see chapter 3, 2.2.2..

the self, that is, upon the activities that the self is interested in performing. Consequently, the world is different for every self because the meaning of the things is function of the interests that define the character of a self. Since the object is an element of a purposeful activity, the world of a botanist is different from the world of a person who has no botanic knowledge (ToL 1899-1900: 590). For the former a plant has an extremely articulated meaning while for the latter it is almost indistinguishable from all the others. But this means that the botanist and the layman live in two different worlds since the things they experience have different meanings. When the idea of a transcendental self is definitively abandoned and substituted with the concept of a living organism acting to cope with its environment, the thesis of the correlativeness of self and world implies a 'proliferation of worlds' which seems to have relativistic implications. Indeed, to say that the world changes with the change of the interests of the self seems to be equivalent to say that there is no objective world to which the various agents make reference.

Evidently, this seemingly paradoxical conclusion cannot be dispelled by treating it as an undesired by-product of Dewey's naturalization of idealism. Rather the contrary, a certain form of pluralism follows directly from Dewey's definition of the object in terms of activity, and it is very likely that it was Dewey's aim to argue for its theoretical validity as a fundamental tenet of his theory of experience. So, the point is not to belittle the relevance of this thesis for Dewey's thought, but to understand the reason why he did not perceive it as problematic. This issue can be formulated in a simpler and more direct manner: it consists in asking the question of why – contrary to James, for instance – Dewey was not concerned with the twin problems of relativism and solipsism.

Dewey's philosophy of experience is a form of contextualism. Since the meaning of an object depends upon the habits that direct and control the activity in which the agent is engaged it is evident that it depends upon the actual conditions in which that object is experienced. In this sense, it is true that the meaning of the objects that make up the world of a self varies with their 'location' in experience. But Dewey's contextualism is objective and perspectival, not subjective and relativistic. The interest that constructs the meaning of an object is not a private and unquestionable choice of the self. On the contrary, it is an objective property of a self that interacts with its environment.

This is the point that Dewey wanted to emphasize in his account of interest. Interest is both subjective and objective. It is subjective because "it signifies an

internal realization, or feeling, of worth" (EW5: 122). But it is objective because an interest "does not end simply in itself, as bare feelings may, but always has some object, end, or aim to which it attaches" (EW5: 122). The unity of the subjective and objective aspect defines the 'speculative structure' of the concept of interest. But the ultimate condition of possibility of the realization of interest in a course of action relies on its being a projective and dynamic force of an organism. It is only because the self is a living organism endowed with active habits and impulses that it is possible for it to have an object in view and, consequently, to construct the meanings of the objects of its environment in accordance with the purpose of its activity.

Evidently, this conclusion follows directly from Dewey's rejection of James's (residual) intellectualism in favor of a more radical form of naturalism. Now, naturalism is Dewey's answer to the question raised above about the possibility of a contextualism without relativism. Habits of action are natural properties of the organism in the sense that they are the results of natural processes of interactions between that organism and the environment that supports or hinders its actions. Consequently, they represent particular realization of the potentialities of nature: meaningful experience is only one of the possible ways – actually, the most refined way – in which natural things can interact. But this means that far from being a relativistic menace, the existence of a plurality of worlds is a natural fact that can be accounted for in biological and naturalistic terms. Indeed, the variations among the different ways of constructing the world in accordance with the set of interests defining the character of the different selves can be explained by making reference to the conditions – in the last analysis, educational conditions – in which the various characters have originated. Human beings are organisms with different biographies, backgrounds, and concerns: there is nothing strange in the fact that the activities in which they are engaged are different and differently meaningful. But all these activities are natural activities that have to respond to a common world. It is this common world that guarantees the possibility of an intersubjective agreement among human beings. This in two different senses, one retrospective and the other prospective. On the one hand, since human beings have the same biological constitution, the simplest level of meaning is substantially identical. The most basic connections are, so to say, identical for all men since they are dependent upon the physiological structure of human brain. On the other hand, the

common world is the tribunal which is called upon to decide upon the validity and consistency of the different worlds constructed by the agents.

Dewey's contextualism is therefore a form of perspectivism, but his version of perspectivism is naturalistic and 'practacist'. Dewey's naturalistic theory of meaning revolved around the acknowledgment of the essential relationship existing between nature and activity, where the latter was conceived of as the distinctive trait of the former, and the former was taken to be the horizon of possibility of the latter. Meaningful experience is both the realization of nature and the expression of the creativity of the self. As is evident, this was just another way to formulate the Hegelian insight that individuality is the synthesis of particularity and universality, necessity and freedom. In so doing, by insisting on the 'speculative' power of the concept of meaning, interest, and habit, Dewey managed to avoid the risks of reductionism without opening the door to a pluralism without rational constraints.

Chapter 3

Logical Meaning:

The Discovery of Reflective Experience

1. From Immediate to Reflective Experience

1.1. What Kind of Continuity? An Interpretation of Dewey's Naturalization of Logic

In the previous chapter an attempt has been made to point out that no clear break can be detected between Dewey's early psychological idealism and the non-reductive naturalism that characterizes his mature thought. In order to prove the continuity of Deweyan philosophy, it has been shown that the fundamental tenets of Dewey's biological functionalism are the result of the project of naturalization of his idealistic philosophy that he undertook after his return to Michigan in 1888, and that occupied him for the following ten years. In particular, great emphasis has been placed on the role played by the rediscovery of Hegel's philosophy, on the one side, and the realization of the theoretical fertility of scientific naturalism, on the other side, in directing Dewey's process of revision of his early position. It has been highlighted that the synthesis of Hegelian themes with the most recent results of biological psychology brought about a highly idiosyncratic conception of experience grounded on the assumption that the standard idealistic notion of activity can be translated

without loss in naturalistic terms. Thanks to such a complex work of translation and redefinition of concepts, it has been argued that at the turn of the century Dewey was able to preserve all the insights that he found valuable in the idealistic tradition – that is, the belief that experience is a whole in which meanings are directly apprehended as natural properties of things – without being compelled to embrace the theoretical framework in which they had been originally formulated.

However, any continuist interpretation of Dewey's philosophical growth seems to be in contradiction with the actual development of his logical thought. Dewey's functionalist logic seems in no way reducible to the account of the activity of thought formulated in chapter VIII of *Psychology*, in which the young Dewey outlined an analysis of the process of thinking, and expounded what may be called his early theory of logic (but for a different reading, which emphasizes the continuity rather than ruptures and breaks, see Garrison 2006). There was no clear reference in that work to the idea of doubt as the break of previously formed habits, as a consequence of which reflection arises. As Shook has pointed out, it is true that in *Psychology* Dewey spoke of dissatisfaction, but the latter was conceived as "the experience of insufficiently related things standing in contrast to the already harmoniously related known objects of experience" (Shook 2000: 176). Doubt was thus traced back to the realization of an insufficient degree of self-relatedness amongst the elements of experience, and, consistently, was accounted for in expressivist terms. Dissatisfaction was read as providing evidence that a full, satisfactory comprehension of reality has not yet been achieved. Now, it seems clear to me that the idealistic view of mental activity that lies at the basis of the expressivist conception of dissatisfaction and doubt does not consent to frame an instrumentalist theory of thought. From an instrumentalist point of view, indeed, thinking is to be conceived a series of acts whose aim consists in reconstructing a contradictory experience. The subject that performs the activity of thinking is a finite agent, and its actions are specific responses to specific problems (Shook 200: 152). On the contrary, the standard idealistic approach – to which the young Dewey undoubtedly adhered, even though in a very different way than British neo-Hegelians – was mainly interested in understanding the relation between finite and infinity, and was consequently committed to explain how a finite being can achieve an absolute standpoint. From the latter point of view, the problem of accounting for the

rationality of the processes through which an organism can attain a satisfactory adaptation to the environment was not considered particularly relevant.

In many of his later works, Dewey charged traditional idealism with being constitutively unable to explain how it is possible that finite thought comes to existence in a world created by an absolute mind. "What is left to do for a finite mind in a world that is perfect through and through, being the product of an absolute mind?": this is the question that Dewey believed idealists could not answer if they remain faithful to their theoretical assumptions (see, in particular, LW4: 241). Within an idealistic framework the individual agent – which is the logical attitude assumes by an organism in particular circumstances or conditions – is almost entirely deprived of the possibility of redirecting the course of events, since the only task that he may reasonably accomplish is that of bringing to light what is only implicitly present in the simplest forms of experience. It was this consideration that prompted Dewey to formulate, in the last decade of the 19th century, a different conception of thinking activity. Any expressivist approach to logical issues appeared to him as a stumbling block to the possibility of developing a consistent theory of logic, that is, an account of the acts of judgment through which conduct is made rational.

That the practical turn of Dewey's philosophical reflection represents a major event in the history of his intellectual formation is an interpretative thesis that is now universally accepted by Deweyan scholars. Following some important suggestions given by Dewey himself in his autobiographical sketch *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*, his growing attention for practical issues (both ethical and political) has been at least partially accounted for by being traced back to his encounter with Franklin Ford, a newspaperman whom Dewey met in 1888, and with whom he planned to found a newspaper, named *Thought News* (Westbrook 1991: 61; Ryan 1995: 107-110; Weber 2009: 95ff.; Good 2006: 155ff.). In a letter to William James dated June 3, 1891, Dewey clearly stated the reason why he was willing to attribute such an outstanding importance to the influence that Ford exerted on his philosophical development. In this letter, Dewey remarked that "[b]y some sort of instinct, and by the impossibility of my doing anything in particular, I was led into philosophy and into idealism – i.e. the conception of some organism comprehending both man's thought and the external world". Ford had the merit of calling Dewey's attention to the concrete processes through which knowledge is created and distributed, and to the social mechanisms that hinder the diffusion and distribution of intelligence. In particular, Dewey

credited Ford with having understood that “the question of inquiry” should be identified with “the question of the relation of intelligence to the objective world”, thus providing a reliable basis for an empirical analysis of the activity of thinking. In so doing, Ford was able to bring thought back to the concrete operations through which a human being actually produces the conditions for his adaptation to the environment. So, Dewey concluded, “what I have got out of it” is the conviction that “philosophy has been the assertion of the unity of intelligence and the external world in idea or subjectively, while if true in idea it must finally secure the condition of its objective expression” (CJD Vol. 1: 1891.06.03, J. Dewey to W. James).

The last statement defines the main outlines of Dewey’s instrumental conception of thought. This revolves around the idea that what is real has to manifest itself in actions through which things in the external world are modified. As we saw in the previous chapter, this was the single aspect of Hegel’s philosophy that Dewey was willing to incorporate into his new naturalistic framework¹. What is important to remark here is that Dewey believed to be possible to apply the Hegelian conception of reality as actuality to the analysis of the function of thought in experience. A general conception is real

¹ Starting from 1891 Dewey began using the term ‘self-expression’ instead of self-realization. The abandonment of the latter in favor of the former marks a remarkable break in the development of Dewey’s ethical thought. An extremely accurate discussion of this point is provided by Good in his *A Search for Unity in Diversity* where it is made clear both the Hegelian origin of this notion and the break with the past that the terminological change involved (Good 2006: 187ff.). In any case, I think it is possible to continue to use the term ‘realization’ and ‘self-realization’ to express Dewey’s allegiance to a Hegelian framework without particular consequences. Apart from the obvious advantages deriving from the simplicity of adopting the same word to express the same phenomenon, there is a specific historiographical argument that can be added in support to that terminological choice. Dewey interpreters have rightly insisted on the unity underlying his philosophy. However, such a unity, which cannot neither be denied nor overlooked, should not be read as a sheer identity or as a repetition of the same schemes in different context. The very idea of a moderately continuist interpretation points in this direction. So, it is true that the growth of Dewey’s ethical thought is undoubtedly strictly correlated with the development of his logical theory, but the two aspects are not immediately reducible one to the other. This is particularly evident if one takes into consideration Dewey’s *Psychology*. The first part of the book, devoted to the analysis of the knowledge process, is – to say the least – profoundly committed to the idealistic theories of knowledge of that time. Accordingly, it is difficult not to find it an outmoded and theoretically useless approach to logical issues. On the contrary, the theses contained in the last section, which deals with the structure of ethical action, are much more similar to Dewey’s later position. Indeed, not only in that section the young Dewey adopted the language of biology to explain human activity, but he also attempted to formulate a genetic account of the way in which impulses become morally significant that is substantially identical to the view Dewey expounded in *Human Nature and Conduct*. This difference between Dewey’s ethical and theoretical philosophy should not be overlooked when developing an overview of his whole thought.

if and only if it is powerful enough to secure the conditions for its objective expression. Thus, thought is a task whose completion requires a commitment from the side of the agent who undertakes to perform the process of reflection. Ford exerted a life-long influence on Dewey precisely because he made him aware that the value of an act of reflection consists in its practical bearings, and that the unity of thought and being should be brought about in the world rather than taken as given in idea.

Emphasizing the relevance of this shift from pure thought to action, many Deweyan scholars have been led to maintain that Dewey's drift from absolutism represented a radical departure from his early positions – a rupture that becomes particularly evident when his theory of logic is taken into consideration. Now, if this were true, the traditional discontinuist interpretation would be more reliable than any continuist reading of Dewey's philosophical development. Consequently, this alternative interpretative approach is to be discussed with particular attention. To begin with, no one should be interested in denying that by 1891 Dewey felt the need to revise his early psychological idealism, and that this revision gave birth to a new and original conception of logic (Shook 2000: 146-147). It is a fact that the instrumentalist account of concepts is one of Dewey's later theoretical acquisitions. Nonetheless, the irreducibility of instrumentalism to Dewey's early expressivism does not rule out the possibility of harmonizing the recognition of this remarkable break in his philosophical development with a moderately continuist interpretation of his thought. Rather the contrary, it is believed not only that Dewey's change of view on logical issues can be easily explained within the context of the interpretative framework sketched in the previous chapter, but also that this change of view seems to corroborate rather than deny its validity. To appreciate this point, it is sufficient to take into consideration the qualification 'moderate'. The insistence on the moderateness of the continuity characterizing Dewey's intellectual development should be read as a sign to call attention to the fact that this process of growth was not free from moments of break and rupture. The continuity of Dewey's philosophical development was the consequence, on the one side, of the persistence of a set of problems that Dewey never ceased to consider worthy of being discussed, and, on the other side, of his abiding commitment to the twin idealistic tenets that meaning is relation and that experience is the encompassing whole in which reality reveals itself as immediately meaningful. Once it is realized that continuity should not be conceived as the identity of solutions proposed, it

becomes easier to understand that continuity and discontinuity are historiographical concepts not mutually exclusive, but rather reciprocally determined. The presence of some degree of discontinuity does not prejudice the existence of a deeper, more fundamental continuity.

These methodological observations are not an end in themselves, their intended function being rather to offer some new and interesting clues of interpretation. In the light of this specification, indeed, a different issue comes to the fore, which can give a new direction to the study on Dewey's transitional years. According to this reading, the question that one should try to answer is not the traditional one – that is, 'why did Dewey decide to abandon his early psychological idealism?' – but rather the more refined one that asks why the manifold tensions that run through Dewey's attempt to naturalize his early idealistic theory of meaning came to light precisely at the level of logical theory.

To answer this question, it is useful to reconsider the main lines of the moderately continuist interpretation expounded in the previous chapter. In those pages it has been pointed out that Dewey's ambitious project of naturalizing immediate experience revolves around the possibility of providing a naturalistic account of meaning in terms of the connections between stimuli and responses established by an organism. We saw that for Dewey naturalization of meaning means that attention has to be shifted from the apperceptive acts through which a meta-empirical mind projects its categories on a material to the physiological operations of an organism striving to live in the world. In addition, it has been remarked that the naturalization of immediate experience went hand in hand with the functionalization of secondary experience, and it has also been stressed that the two processes cannot be reduced to a single factor. While the former consists of a translation – no matter how difficult and mediated – of some idealistic tenets in biological language, the latter involves a much more radical rethinking of the philosophical assumptions at the basis of Dewey's early expressivist conception of thought. The difference between the two lines of naturalization can be traced back to the fact that the mature Dewey preserves the idealistic insight that spontaneity shapes immediate experience – since he sees in it an important correction to the mechanistic distortions introduced by the associationist school –, whereas he cannot accept the expressivist view of thought advanced by British idealists.

This difference of approach is not particularly difficult to explain. In the first case, idealism was consonant with the spirit of his non-reductive naturalism. The

idealistic insistence on the importance of attention for the construction of meaningful experience paved the way for the possibility of conceiving the embodiment of meaning in existence. As James before him, Dewey struggled to formulate a psychological explanation of attention, thus avoiding the temptation – into which he had fallen in his early years – of treating the act of attention as the property of a metaphysical *Wille*. Contrary to James, however, he believed that such an explanation could not be achieved unless the theoretical apparatus of scientific psychology was subjected to a powerful revision. His aim was to shape a biological concept of mind on the model of the Hegelian concept of a unity realizing itself in its own manifestations.

In the second case, on the contrary, some idealistic assumptions about the role of thought in experience were openly in contrast with Dewey's project of practicalization of idealism. Two aspects are worthy of particular note. On the one hand, the expressivist analysis of thought is strictly interwoven with an axiological consideration about the relationship between what is implicit and what is explicit. Meanings that are only implicitly developed in perception are also imperfectly constructed. So, the process through which they are made explicit is, at the very same time, a process through which their imperfections are corrected. Accordingly, the type of knowledge obtained through reflection is higher and truer than the one got through direct acquaintance with things. An expressivist account of thought leads therefore to an intellectualist depreciation of immediate experience that makes it impossible to understand the circle between immediate and reflective experience. It is the latter that allows to explain both the coming into being of reflection and the possibility of immediate experience to be enriched with the products of thinking activity. On the other hand, an expressivist account of thought risks to surreptitiously introduce a mild form of representationalist theory of knowledge into the very heart of the practical conception of logic that Dewey was craving for. Obviously, the reflective act through which something implicit in perception is made explicit in reflection is an active operation performed by a mind. No one can deny or question this naïve sense of activity. However, Dewey was aware that a general reference to the activity of mind was not enough to define a practical conception of thinking activity². Dewey's problem was not that of arguing for the

² Traditionally, the process through which what is implicit is made explicit was conceived as a transformation in thought rather than in reality of the content grasped in perception. So, for instance, in the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel wrote that "philosophy puts thoughts categories, or in more precise language, adequate *notions*, in the place of the generalized images we

spontaneity of mind in all its manifestations, but that of qualifying such an activity so as to avoid the tendency of treating it as a set of operations performed behind the scene of experience or independently from it.

In the light of these remarks, it starts to become easier to understand why one should expect logical theory to be the locus in which all the tensions generated by Dewey's attempt to naturalize his early idealistic conception of meaning come to light. This point can be highlighted by a simple remark. British idealism was an extremely complex tradition whose different strains of thought were combined together in precarious wholes by its various representatives. Now, Dewey exploited the theoretical resources made available by British idealism in an original way. As has been pointed out in the previous chapter, Dewey's elaboration of some idealistic themes along lines that were only adumbrated in the original formulations led to a profound reassessment of the entire tradition. His program of naturalizing activity represented an effort of developing the idealistic insight that the essence of man is spontaneity in a way that enabled him to bring that powerful philosophical assumption in harmony with the scientific results. But the conviction that science and philosophy cannot be in contradiction was another important idealistic tenet that Dewey was not willing to abandon. Following Hegel's lesson, indeed, British neo-Hegelians maintained that idealism was the only theoretical framework able to account for the successes of human beings in understanding the world. That natural events can be explained by discovering the general laws that rule their behavior was taken as an evidence of the fact that nature is not something absolutely opposed to reason. So, Dewey's decision to adhere to the new scientific psychology and to translate the notion of activity in biological terms was motivated by his belief that those two tenets were the living part of idealistic tradition.

ordinarily called ideas", amongst which he ranked "[t]he several modes of feeling, perception, desire, and will, so far as we are *aware* of them" (Hegel 1874: 7). It is true that Hegel admitted that the change of form entailed a change in the content, but he was clear in remarking that the activity of thought had to be conceived as absolutely pure. In this sense, all the differences existing between expressivism and representationalism notwithstanding, the former is similar to the latter because the apprehension of the real nature of things is completely independent from the operations through which data are produced and general hypotheses are tested, that is, from the concrete activity as a consequence of which the situation is changed and a new object is constructed. Consequently, a reading of Dewey's instrumentalist account of the logical activity of mind that does not emphasize the practical bearings of thought is therefore wrong and reductive since it does not grasp the originality of Dewey's position (see Dicker 1972 for a clear exposition of this kind of interpretation).

Moving from these assumptions, Dewey progressively came to realize that an expressivist conception of thought was not functional to the development of a truly naturalistic account of experience and meaning. The very idea of an activity not taking place and not realizing itself in the objective world seemed to him more and more a contradiction in terms. From the new empirical and naturalistic standpoint that Dewey advocated, thinking could not be treated as a meta-empirical activity. Rather, it should be conceived as a mode of behavior defined and made possible by the conditions from which it originates and by the consequences that it can produce. In more contemporary terms, Dewey discovered that the essential situatedness of thinking activity was the key-notion to complete his project of naturalization. As a consequence of that discovery, he not only started conceiving reflection as a natural activity, like breathing and digesting, but also put great emphasis on the fact that thinking needs time to be completed, being a process of recollection of data and construction of hypotheses in the light of which meaning can be produced and warranted. In so doing, Dewey managed to define thought as a natural event whose goal consists in reconstructing a contradictory situation. Contrary to his early texts, in which thought was conceived as a process whose sole aim was to express what is implicit, in his instrumentalist phase – which starts from the second half of the last decade of 19th century – reflection became an active force that does not limit itself to make the implicit explicit, but changes the objective conditions from which it originates. It is only as a consequence of this shift of perspective on logical issues that Dewey succeeded in developing a consistent naturalistic philosophy of experience – both immediate and reflective – that hinges upon the Hegelian concept of realization and the post-Kantian constructivist paradigm of explanation of meaning³.

³ It is important to remark that at the time in which Dewey started doubting of the correctness of his early views about the nature of thought there were various solutions open to him. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* represented an extremely interesting option since it was an original combination of the post-Darwinian assumption that reflection is a tool to foster the adaptation of the organism to its environment with the classical idea of thought as a faculty transcending appearances and able to grasp the true essence of reality. As is well known, Dewey was greatly interested in Bradley's philosophical proposal, in which he saw many similarities with his own position. In *The Intellectualist Criterion for Truth* (1907) Dewey credited the English philosopher with working towards "disintegration of intellectualism of the epistemological type, and towards the substitution of a philosophy of experience" (MW: 50; Shook 2000: 153). Dewey was aware that, contrary to other British idealists as Green, Bradley had managed to develop a modern philosophical theory – modern in the sense of being a genuine philosophy of experience. Dewey believed that he himself and Bradley were aiming at achieving the same goal: to discover the concrete behind the abstractions created by thought in order to understand reality. However, from

1.2. Dewey and the New Logic: The Discovery of a Standpoint

Previous remarks have brought to the fore the issue of understanding what were the sources from which Dewey drew the conceptual tools to naturalize thinking activity. There are many textual evidences showing that Dewey was deeply impressed by the development of what he called 'the new logic', which he identified with the "attempt to take account of the methods of thinking employed

both a logical and a metaphysical point of view Dewey could not rest satisfied with Bradley's categories. He argued that Bradley's absolutism should be corrected by removing the idea of an absolute experience and by rejecting the supposed irreducibility of thought to other natural activities. According to Bradley, the goal of thought is to grasp the absolute which is free from contradictions, and, in so doing, to correct the defects of the ordinary ways of conceiving of reality. Dewey put great emphasis on this point: if Bradley had realized that thinking is a particular kind of natural activity, Dewey argued, he would have been able to free himself from the problems that had traditionally haunted philosophy – as, for instance, the *metaphysical* problem of the relation existing between appearance and reality (MW4: 57; see also Bradley 1893: 152). On Dewey's reading, Bradley held an unfortunate distinction between practical action aiming at altering a conflicting situation and theoretical activity aiming at introducing a new shape in a contradictory material. In so doing, he was led to maintain that thought has nothing to do with the concrete practical activities through which human beings handle the difficulties stemming from their continuous interaction with the environment. Thinking is the solution, on the theoretical side, of the very same problems directly faced in action: nonetheless, the two kinds of solution run parallel without reciprocally influencing one another. Dewey partially distorted Bradley's text here, overemphasizing a distinction that the latter intended to be much less radical. According to Dewey, the natural outcome of Bradley's position is that practice is almost entirely devoid of rationality since the results of thinking activity cannot be used to shed light on the operations performed to reconstruct a problematic situation. This means that thinking is conceived of as not being a real force in the world, and, consequently, as not being able to solve the contradictions that gives birth to reflection. In any case, Dewey admitted that Bradley came "within an ace of stating a true doctrine" – that is, the doctrine of instrumentalism (MW4: 57). Referring to Bradley's thesis that while practical impulse alters the conflicting situation, "on the theoretical side" the goal is "to bring the content to such a shape that the variety remains peaceably in one", Dewey remarked: "If one substitutes for the word 'on' the word 'through', one gets a conception of theory and of thinking that does justice to the autonomy of the operation and yet so connects it with other activities as to give it a serious business" (MW4: 59). In so doing, indeed, thinking becomes a mode of activity whose practical efficacy can be accounted for in a simple and straightforwardly naturalistic way. So, what Dewey found unsatisfactory about Bradley's view of thinking was that the latter had not inquired neither into the motives that originate reflection nor into the goal that can be achieved through reflection, thus preventing himself from enhancing the heuristic power of his account of thought, and from realizing that thinking activity is just a phase of experience – "the form that certain practical activities take after colliding" (MW4: 59). This means that the issue at stake between Bradley and Dewey was whether it was fruitful or not to adhere to an intellectualist conception of thought, once it was denied the theoretical availability of an intellectualist conception of experience. Bradley was convinced that the rejection of the latter should go hand in hand with the maintenance of an intellectualist criterion for what concerns theory, while Dewey progressively came to be persuaded that naturalization – this was the way in which he intended the rejection of intellectualism – should be carried on at both levels.

by science" (EW3: 75). Among the most important representatives of the new logic Dewey ranked Jevons, Sigwart, Wundt, Bradley, Bosanquet, and Lotze⁴. Starting from the article *Is Logic a Dualistic Science?* – published in 1890 in *The Open Court*, a weekly journal edited by Paul Carus – Dewey embraced the new approach to logical issues formulated by British and German logicians, and began to criticize the idea of thinking *in vacuo* in favor of a conception of thought as a bundle of methods developed by the natural scientists in their controlled efforts of understanding reality. Consequently, logic lost its supposed aloofness to become a meta-reflection on the methods of scientific inquiries, as well as a critical analysis of the relationship between thought and facts that is left unaccounted in scientific investigations. What is important to note for present purposes is that the 'discovery' of the new logic enabled Dewey to definitely reject the traditional theory of thought as "a faculty or an entity existing in the mind, apart from facts, having its own fixed forms, with which facts have nothing to do"⁵ (EW3: 127).

In *The Present Position of Logical Theory*, published in *The Monist* in 1891, Dewey clearly emphasized this point. In the context of a criticism of the traditional conception of logic, he not only wrote that "[t]hought means to logic what it means to science: method", but also added that thought should be conceived of as nothing but "the attitude and form which intelligence takes in reference to fact" (EW3: 126). Thanks to the identification of thought with method, and as a consequence of the realization that method is an attitude *freely* adopted by an inquirer – the choice of the conceptual frameworks is a free act of the agent since thought is the realm of the freedom –, Dewey believed it was

⁴ In the lectures on logical theory that Dewey delivered during the '90s – and whose results were eventually condensed in his four contributions to *The Studies in Logical Theory* – his attention was mainly focused on discussing the works of the last three philosophers, namely, Bradley's *Logic* (1883), Bosanquet's *Logic, or the Morphology of Knowledge* (1888), and Lotze's *Logic* (originally published in German in 1874 and translated in English in 1888 by Bosanquet). Particular attention was also devoted to Mill's *Logic*. These are the texts that compound the background of Dewey's logical reflections.

⁵ One may object that Dewey's refusal of formal logic is not a particularly new and remarkable fact. Indeed, following the footsteps of his teacher Morris and of many other British idealists, the young Dewey had already taken a firm stand against any attempt of treating reality and thought as two separate entities. This is undoubtedly true: far from being an original thesis, the criticism against formalism represented a major trait of continuity in Dewey's thought. What is interesting is rather the new mode in which Dewey formulated that fundamental tenet. In *Is Logic a Dualistic Science?* he did not argue for it in typical idealistic terms, by referring to the necessary interwovenness of logical and empirical elements in experience, but adopted an experimental stance that paved the way for a more 'pragmatic' analysis of thought. It is this deviation from his early idealism that will constitute the object of present discussion.

possible to account for the relative independency and autonomy of thought and, at the very same time, to defend on a positive ground the common-sense conviction that knowledge is knowledge *of* reality, and not a subjective manipulation of ideas to which it luckily happens to mirror the structure of reality⁶. According to this view, indeed, logic should be conceived of as the theoretical understanding of the explanatory successes of natural sciences, which has to be accounted for by referring them to the conception of thought as the rational articulation of reality. This, Dewey argued, was the truth of Hegel's philosophy, the point in which Hegel managed to overcome Kantian dualism and to capture the "quintessence of the scientific spirit" (EW3: 138; see Sleeper 2001: 19 and Good 2006: 238; see also Bernstein 1971: 172 for a more theoretical interpretation of Dewey's statement)⁷.

⁶ Dewey expressed this seemingly paradoxical relationship between thought and reality with the following words: "*a priori* elements supplied from outside the fact itself, *a priori* elements somehow entering into the fact from without and controlling it – this is to give up the very spirit of science. For if science means anything, it is that our ideas, our judgments may in some degree reflect and report the fact itself. Science means, on the one hand, that thought is free to attack and get hold of its subject-matter, and, on the other, that fact is free to break through into thought; free to impress itself – or rather to express itself – in intelligence without vitiation or deflection. Scientific men are true to the instinct of the scientific spirit in fighting shy of a distinct *a priori* factor supplied to fact from the mind. Apriorism of this sort must seem like an effort to cramp the freedom both of intelligence and of fact, to bring them under the yoke of fixed, external form" (EW3: 136; but see also Dewey's exchange with James on the notion of consciousness, chapter 2, 1.1.). Please note the idea that freedom is autonomy from external constraints, which Dewey drew directly from Kant and German idealists.

⁷ Such a conclusion may appear surprising at a first glance: indeed, it may seem more natural to argue that the emphasis on method as a way of behaving entails a certain form of subjectivism, according to which a conceptual scheme is used as a grid to interpret an external, given reality. If this were the case, however, Dewey's 'methodological' account of thought would imply an explicit rejection of the kind of objectivity that he was looking for. Consequently his new logical standpoint would be openly contradictory. Dewey was well aware of this problem: the main issue with which he dealt in the numerous articles on logic that he wrote in the first years of the 90's was how to exorcise the risk of subjectivism that was implicitly or explicitly present in almost all the traditional theories of logic. Nonetheless, he was convinced that transcendentalism in general, and Hegelian philosophy in particular, not only played an important role in abolishing formal logic as "the sufficient method and criterion of scientific truth", but were also successful in understanding the essential relation existing between fact and thought (EW3: 132). Dewey seemed to rely here on a Kantian argument: the idea that knowledge is not a problem, but rather a fact that cannot be question, and recommends a greater confidence in the power of intelligence to grasp reality. To say that a certain proposition is a case of knowledge means that it has not a purely subjective validity, but it somehow represents things as they are in themselves. It was Kant who pointed out that the synthesis of concepts in judgment is objective. Dewey accepted this fundamental assumption, and tried to put it at the basis of his philosophical "inquiry into the special forms and methods of science" (EW2: 32). In Dewey's eyes, the truth of transcendentalism was precisely this: Kant, in an incomplete form, and Hegel, in a fully developed manner, had the merit of realizing that the

New logic represents the *general* conceptual framework that Dewey adopted in order to develop his functionalist theory of thought as a natural activity. The insistence on the notion of method as the quintessence of thinking and the acknowledgment of the importance of Hegelian logic for a correct understanding of the nature of thought show beyond any reasonable doubt that a remarkable change had occurred in Dewey's philosophy. As has been pointed out in the first chapter, in his *Psychology as Philosophic Method* Dewey criticized Hegelian logic for being an abstraction from the concrete fact. According to the young Dewey, it was not logic but psychology – insofar as the latter is conceived not as a natural science, but rather as the science of the absolute – the science of the absolute. By 1891 a different evaluation of Hegelian logic is proposed: Hegel now represents “the quintessence of the scientific spirit” because of his realization that reality is intrinsically significant, and that thought is the conscious apprehension of the meaning of facts. “What Hegel means by objective thought”, Dewey remarked in *The Present Position of Logical Theory*, “is the meaning, the significance of the fact itself; and by methods of thought he understands simply the processes in which this meaning of fact is evolved”(EW3: 138). It is Hegel's method that called Dewey's attention: his method – and not any of the particular results that he achieved by applying it to the study of politics, religion, art – is the living and vital part of Hegel's philosophy. Thanks to the mediation of new logic, Dewey came to realize that his early insistence on idealization as the life of meaning – and the consequent conception of psychology as the science of the evolution of meaning from an unconscious to a conscious state – was too indeterminate to be a workable hypothesis: this because it lacked of any reference to the concrete processes through which idealization of meaning could be brought about. Starting from the 90's Dewey advanced a different solution which revolved around the identification of thought with methods, and, in turn, of methods with scientific inquiries. The movement of meaning is the movement of the fact, and the movement of the fact is carried on by sciences. Logic – which comes necessarily after the full development of modern science – is the study of the rationality of the fact, of its intrinsic meaning, as it has been brought to light by natural sciences. To use Dewey's own words, logic “deals simply with the inner anatomy of the realm of scientific reality, and has simply endeavored [...] to dissect and lay bare, at large and in general, the features of the subject-matter

different methods or types of thought are nothing but “various forms which reality progressively takes as it is progressively mastered as to its meaning” (EW3. 133).

with which the positive sciences have been occupying themselves in particular and in detail" (EW3: 141).

Previous remarks, however, advise prudence. From the passages quoted above, indeed, it clearly emerges that at the time in which he wrote *The Present Position of Logical Theory* Dewey was still committed to an expressivist conception of thought as the one he had formulated in his early works. In that article, Dewey still conceived different methods of thought as different modes in which reality reveals itself to man. The successes of natural sciences were therefore accounted for in an expressivist fashion, and the theoretical justification of their explanatory power was undertaken within a traditional idealistic framework. Accordingly, the adoption of the standpoint made available by the development of new logic was undoubtedly important to redirect the course of Dewey's reflection, but was not a sufficient factor to determine his abandonment of his early expressivism. To develop his instrumentalist account of thought, and, consequently, to free himself from any metaphysical suggestion concerning the relationship between thought and reality, Dewey had to exploit many other theoretical resources. Kant, Hegel, British and German idealists, Anglo-American psychologists of his time: these were the main "authorities" in logical field to which Dewey referred to in order to replace his early expressivist conception of thought with a naturalistic view of the activity of thinking. Hegel – and Dewey here had in mind the Hegel of the *Logic of the Encyclopedia*, not the Hegel of the *Philosophy of Spirit* – provided fundamental insights to understanding the reconstructive role of thought within experience. On the contrary, Kant, British idealists, and Anglo-American psychologists supplied the technical concepts necessary to explain in functional terms the structure of the judgment – the distinction between subject and object and their relation to the copula – and the difference existing between categorical and hypothetical judgments. These were the most pressing problems in logical theory, and Dewey was well aware that the theoretical viability of any philosophical analysis aiming at clarifying the methods and forms of human intelligence depended on its capacity of formulating a satisfactory solution to those issues. It is for this reason that he devoted great attention to idealistic logics. Dewey was convinced that these works represented the state-of-the-art in the discipline, and that a mature logical theory could not avoid starting from the results that authors like Bradley, Bosanquet, and Lotze had been able to reach.

The manifold sources that Dewey tried to combine together in his logical texts are the best evidence that his project of outlining a naturalistic and

functionalist theory of thought was a much more difficult enterprise to realize than the naturalization of immediate experience. In the former case, indeed, Dewey's mature philosophy of experience came out from merging together two different, but not contradictory perspectives as Hegelianism and scientific psychology. On the contrary, instrumentalism originated from the combination of seemingly incompatible points of view, which Dewey used as tiles of a more complex pattern. Consequently, what holds true for the comprehension of Dewey's naturalization of immediate experience is not necessarily a valid category to understand his effort to naturalize thought, even though it is undoubtedly true that Dewey was willing to think them together. This is the ultimate sense of the distinction drawn before between the two different processes of naturalization that characterize Dewey's mature philosophy. Such distinction was introduced in order to highlight the fact that the two lines of naturalization followed two different logics and required different approaches of analysis.

For what concerns logical theory, three different strains of thought can be singled out as worthy of particular note, which corresponds to the three different theoretical problems mentioned above. First of all, the question of the nature of concepts and theories; secondly; the problem of defining the conditions of possibility of reflective experience – that is, the concrete conditions from which an act of thinking originates; thirdly, the problem of developing a theory of logic powerful enough and rich enough to explain the different types of judgments employed in scientific inquiries, and to provide a functional account of the logical elements (subject, predicate, and copula) that constitute a judgment. This complex bundle of issues is the subject-matter of the present chapter. More precisely, the first two questions will be discussed and analyzed in section two: taken together, they define what may be called – paraphrasing the use of the term 'esthetic' made by Dewey in *Art as Experience* (1934) – the 'logical', that is, the logical quality of experience⁸. The third section will be devoted to discussing

⁸ With the term 'esthetic', Dewey wrote in *Art as Experience*, it is intended the quality that pervades and characterizes an experience of consummation (LW10: 16). Similarly, with the term 'logical', it is intended here to refer to the logical aspect of experience, that is, the quality that every experience of reflection possesses and by which it is characterized as an experience of that kind. This is formulated in its ultimate form in the controlled methods of natural sciences, and is made explicit object of investigation in the refined analyses of logical theory. However, an inquiry into this particular quality of experience "must begin in the raw", that is, in the concrete acts of reflection through which the meanings of a problematic situation is reconstructed (LW10: 10). The logical is the quality that characterizes every experience in which a reflective reconstruction of a problematic

in detail the constructivist aspects of Dewey's conception of thought. Particular attention will be paid to Dewey's analysis of the processes through which a contradictory experience is transformed into a harmonic and consistent whole. Since it is at this level that the constructivist structure of instrumentalism emerges in its clearest form, it is this the best perspective point from which to evaluate the distinctive features of Dewey's theory of conscious construction of meanings, as well as its relation to his biological account of the meaningfulness of immediate experience.

In so doing, the two conceptions of constructivism that Dewey developed in order to avoid the twin errors of traditional idealism – the over-intellectualization of experience and the underestimation of the creativity of thought – are brought to light. On the present reading, the difference between them is to be traced back to a different account of the relationship between the universal and the particular element of meaning. Indeed, Dewey's logical theory is less Hegelian than his theory of immediate experience. This because an analysis of the conscious acts of reconstruction of meaning has to pay due regard to the lack of unity and harmony that characterizes those situations which call up reflection. While immediate experience is a direct and unproblematic apprehension of the meaning of objects – so that the introduction of a dualism between mind and world, ideas and facts, would be wholly unwarranted and illegitimate –, reflective experience is structured around the tension between subject and object, ideas and facts, the uncertain and the certain. Consequently, Hegel's philosophy cannot be the whole truth about the nature of thinking as a reconstructive activity – even though Dewey believed Hegel's categories of realization and individuality to be the pillars of any consistent account of experience. Dewey's logical theory is as much indebted to Kant as to Hegel since it was the former who elaborated the concepts for framing the contrast between understanding and sensibility, thought and reality. One of the main aims of the present chapter is thus to emphasize the Kantian roots of Dewey's instrumentalism, and, in particular of his functionalist theory of concepts. The ultimate goal of the insistence on Dewey's Kantianism is to call attention once again to the complexity of his constructivist theory of meaning⁹.

situation is undertaken. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the logical and logical theory: logical theory is the *conscious* or *deliberate* reflection on the essence and structure of the logical (see also the distinction between operational and instrumental as formulated in LW 12: 22).

⁹ The emphasis on Dewey's Kantianism is certainly not a new interpretative proposal. In his *The Kantian Ground of Dewey's Functional Self*, for instance, F. Ryan has argued that Kant exerted a

2. The Definition of the 'Logical'

2.1. The Kantian Ground of Dewey's Instrumentalism

2.1.1. *Crossing the Bridge between Theory and Practice: Ideas as Tools*

By 1890 Dewey began to subject his early theory of universal meaning to harsh criticism. His new interest in modern logic represented from this point of view a remarkable departure from his previous commitment to psychology as the science of the concrete life of meaning. Since this commitment has been described above as Kantian, one may be tempted to conclude that Dewey's drift away from idealism was motivated by a desire to rethink and redefine his adherence to Kantianism. In a certain sense, this is trivially true. It is true, in other words, that Dewey became dissatisfied with his early account of meaning, that this account was Kantian in a broad sense, and that in all the works written

significant influence on Dewey's functional account of mind. According to his reading, in the 1890 article *On Some Current Conceptions of the Term "Self"* Dewey attempted to formulate a reconstruction of Hegel's absolute self "on the basis of considerations, surprisingly enough, borrowed from Kant", the surprise being due to the fact that it has been a commonplace amongst Deweyan scholars to maintain that Kant represented for Dewey the source of every philosophical difficulty that tainted contemporary thought (Ryan 1992: 129; see, for instance, Boisvert 1998: 9-10). Ryan argues that Dewey looked to Kant's philosophy in order to find a way to formulate a conception of experience as a unity of subject and object without being compelled to rely on a metaphysical account of self-consciousness. The synthesis of Kant and Hegel is therefore the most important result achieved by Dewey in *On Some Current Conceptions of the Term "Self"*: it enabled him to highlight the fact that self-consciousness is a function that constitutes experience from within, so that to acknowledge the limits of human experience does not mean to admit a reality beyond experience. In so doing, it paved the way for Dewey's mature view of self-consciousness, and grounded his methodological belief that experience is available for experimental investigations. Ryan's claim of the importance of Kantian philosophy for the development of Dewey's functionalism is obviously worthy of being preserved. Nonetheless, his reconstruction is not convincing: many aspects of his reading do not seem to match well with the actual steps through which Dewey drifted away from his early psychological idealism. I will not discuss in detail Ryan's argument, which is extremely complex and articulated. A different interpretation of the very same facts has already been outlined in chapter 2. I limit myself to question the assumption on which Ryan builds his theoretical reconstruction of Dewey's debt to Kant, that is, the conviction that *On Some Current Conceptions of the Term "Self"* should be read as something more than a critical discussion of the different conceptions of self that were available at that time. I think that this assumption is both unwarranted and unfruitful from an interpretative perspective since it generates many confusions and controversies. For a remarkable example of the difficulties that stem from that assumption, see Shook 2000: 133-138.

during the 90's he looked for a different way of explaining the possibility of meaningful experience. Nonetheless, his realization that the kind of psychological idealism he had expounded in his youth was not a workable philosophical hypothesis did not amount to a wholesale rejection of Kantianism. It rather entailed a qualification, which went hand in hand with a remarkable limitation of its explanatory power. Indeed, Dewey came very soon to realize that Kant did not provide a satisfactory explanation of the nature of concrete experience, but that Kant's functionalist conception of concepts was a reliable basis for the naturalistic theory of logic that he was trying to develop. Dewey turned again to Kant in order to find a solution to those problems that he did not manage to solve within a Hegel-inspired idealistic framework.

Dewey believed that Hegel's concept of *Begriff* was too undetermined to be exploited as a model for understanding the nature of the concrete reflective practices through which human beings reconstruct problematic meanings. Certainly, in Dewey's eyes Hegel had the merit of highlighting the coextensiveness of being and thought, as well as of showing that sciences can grasp the true reality of thing, and not merely its phenomenal appearance. Moreover, by 1894 Dewey progressively came to realize that Hegel's notion of dialectic could be a satisfactory description of the movement of thought and reality from a state of dissatisfaction and conflict to a state of rest and harmony. However, he remained convinced that even though Hegel's logic was undoubtedly an important source for defining the role of reconstructive thought in experience – better, for Dewey Hegel's thought was the source for understanding the relationship between thought and experience –, it did not supply the concepts needed to explain its essential structure. What is lacking in Hegel's philosophy is precisely an account of the nature of the concepts that enable the agent to transform a contradictory experience in a meaningful and harmonic whole. On the contrary, Kant's insistence on the constructive role of categories appeared to Dewey as a particularly promising perspective from which to define in purely experimental terms the way in which abstract concepts or universal meanings contribute to the construction of objectivity.

As is well known, Dewey's instrumentalism is a theory of concepts as tools for redirecting experience and, in so doing, reconstructing the meaning of a problematic situation. Dewey expressed for the first time this thesis – even though only in a rather incomplete form – in *Moral Theory and Practice* (1891), in the context of a discussion of the relationship between thought and action. In this

article, Dewey's purpose was not primarily to formulate an instrumentalist account of concepts, but rather to criticize the traditional separation between theory and practice formulated by moral philosophers as Bosanquet, Adler, and Sidgwick (Pappas 2008: 43; Welchman 1995: 65ff.). However, in order to reach this goal he had to argue for a different consideration of the role of theory in experience, which in turn required to take stance about the nature of the concepts used in the theory. It is not correct to say, Dewey maintained, that "moral theory is something other than, or something beyond, an analysis of conduct" (EW3: 94). Even though widely accepted, this is an "aborted conception of theory" that has to be abandoned if one is interested in ascertaining the specific *function* played by theory in the construction of experience (EW3: 94). Indeed, the traditional dualism between action and theory – Dewey here referred explicitly to *moral* theory, but it is evident that he believed that the same consideration holds for every possible type of theory – prevents from seeing that theory makes a difference in experience. It is this difference that defines the nature of the theoretical approach to practical issues. Theory is the construction of an act in thought: the function of the adoption of a theoretical attitude is the possibility of testing the practicability of a general plan of conduct before acting according to it.

The key feature of Dewey's proto-functionalism conception of the logical is the idea that theory is "*the doing – the act itself, in its emerging*"¹⁰ (EW3: 95). By laying stress on the continuity between theory and practice, Dewey tried to formulate a conception of theory as a relatively independent logical space that makes it possible to defer the performance of action, such a postponement being the condition of possibility of the enrichment of the particular act with universal meaning. Dewey discussed at length this point in an important article published in 1892 on the *Philosophical Review*. In that text, entitled *Green's Theory of Moral Motive*, Dewey outlined a different conception of theory which could avoid the twin errors of treating moral theory either as a metaphysical analysis of "the general conditions under which morality is possible" or as a body of rules of

¹⁰ A terminological remark is needed. As Shook has pointed out, the first occurrence of the term 'instrumentalism' is in the expression 'Principles of Instrumental Logic', which was the title of a book that Dewey never wrote but which was advertised in a list of works in preparation (Shook 2000: 176). So, even though Dewey started using the label 'instrumentalism' to refer to his own position only in 1904, it is possible to use this term to refer to the logical views that he elaborated during the last decade of the 19th century. In the following pages, I will also use the term 'proto-functionalism' to stress the fact that, at a certain stage of development, Dewey's logical theory was not completely free from expressivist elements.

action that have to tell an agent what to do in a specific case (EW3: 155). In both cases, indeed, theory and action are conceived of as separated entities, the only difference between the two approaches residing in where emphasis is placed. Consequently, Dewey argued, a satisfactory account of the nature of theory can arise only from thinking together the two aspects without favoring one side over the other. The problem that Dewey had to face was, once again, that of thinking together universality and particularity, meaning and existence, abstractness and concreteness. It is not surprising, therefore, that Dewey's refusal of severing theory and action was formulated in distinctively Hegelian terms. Theory reveals and constructs the meaning of an action by bringing to light its possible consequences and its possible relations with its antecedents; conduct verifies the validity of the theory by applying it as a rule of action. "So far are we from any divorce of moral theory and practice", Dewey wrote, "that theory is the ideal act, and conduct is the executed insight" (EW3: 95). The truth of a theory consists in its actuality, that is in its capacity of meeting the commitments it has undertaken.

In the light of this new conception of theory, which revolves around an expressivist interpretation of the notion of actuality, it was rather natural for Dewey to argue that theory is a *tool*, an *instrument* to rationalize existence. Moral theories are nothing but "tools of analysis" that enable the agent to *constitute* and resolve a practical situation in the most rational way¹¹ (EW3: 100). So, Dewey argued, only when the question concerning the conditions and the consequences of an action is "raised and answered" an action acquires a moral meaning (EW3: 100). On the contrary, if these relations are not drawn, action is merely instinctive or sentimental. What is particularly important for present purposes is the type of argument that Dewey used in order to articulate his instrumentalist view of the nature of theories. In *Moral Theory and Practice* Dewey expressly stated that the functionalization of theory can be achieved by extending to it the instrumental nature of ideas. Ideas are mental conceptions of what should be done: they provide rules to govern conduct (EW3: 97). Dewey's fundamental assumption was that theory and ideas should not be conceived of as two different ways of

¹¹ Contrary to what one may be inclined to think, Dewey did not consider theories as mere instruments for reconstructing the meaning of a particular situation. At the same time, indeed, they are instruments for constructing that particular situation as a situation of a certain kind. This rather surprising conclusion follows directly from Dewey's definition of meaning: since the entire meaning of an object consists in the set of possible relations that link it to other elements, the selection of certain relations to the detriment of others constructs the object in accordance with certain principles to the detriment of others. This point will be discussed at length further below, in particular in 3.1.2..

approaching reality. Rather the contrary, “an idea of what is to be done and moral theory are identical”, the only difference between them consists in the “degree of analysis of what practice is” (EW3: 97). Ideas are the tools through which theory analyzes (the meaning of) a particular situation. Consequently, theory is nothing but a more powerful tool which exploits less general and more specific tools to achieve its end, that is, the clarification of the particular case in question. So, for instance, the Golden Rule according to which one should treat the others as one would like others to treat himself is nothing but “the idea of the value of individuality”; a philosophical theory of ethics is “a similar idea, but one of deeper grasp, and therefore wider hold” (EW3: 101). In other words, Dewey came to see ideas and theory as different degrees of articulation of action in thought. In so doing, he managed not only to bring theory in relation to practice, thus vindicating the Hegelian conception of the actuality of thought and paving the way for an instrumentalist account of the logical element in experience; he also managed to dynamicize ideas by seeing them in continuity with theory. As is well known, it was a distinctively idealistic tenet that concept is the least developed form of thinking, and that judgment and reasoning develop and assert what is only implicitly contained in the concept. The early Dewey had expounded a canonical view of the relationships amongst concept, judgment, and reasoning in the first edition of his *Psychology* (see, for instance, EW2: 186). Consequently, the Dewey of *Moral Theory of Practice* limited himself to preserve this idealistic insight in a context of thought that was only seemingly identical with his previous formulations.

It is evident that the plausibility of Dewey’s attempt to functionalize theory depended on the availability of an instrumentalist conception of ideas. The fact that in those two articles Dewey took such an availability for granted, without attempting to provide an argument in its support, is an evidence that at the time he wrote *Moral Theory of Practice* and *Green’s Theory of Moral Motive* he believed that he had already developed a sound functionalist theory of concepts. So, the two questions that remain to be answered are: where did Dewey first expound his instrumentalist account of concepts? and whence did Dewey take the materials necessary to formulate it?

2.1.2. *The Truth of Kantian Constructivism*

It is to the third revised edition of *Psychology*, published in the same year in which *Moral Theory and Practice* appeared (1891), that one has to turn in order to find Dewey's answers to the questions mentioned above – and, in particular, to the second paragraph of Chapter VIII, entitled *Conception*, in which the nature of concepts is discussed. In the first edition of this work, Dewey had given a definition of conception as the act of “taking together into one idea the element of meaning common to a number of objects and things” (EW2: lxxx). Psychologically speaking, Dewey had argued, a concept is undistinguishable from an image. The only difference between them consists in the fact that in the image the accent is put on “the concrete sensuous embodiment of the idea”, while in the concept any reference to the particular nature of the images is neglected (EW2: lxxx). So, for instance, if two people think of a locomotive, their mental images will probably be different; nonetheless, such a difference does not rule out the possibility of a reciprocal understanding, the latter being entirely dependent upon the symbolic quality of the image that constitutes the essence of the concept.

In formulating this view, the young Dewey drew heavily from Bradley's analysis of the relationship between logic and psychology. As has been remarked in the first chapter, the problem that both Bradley and the young Dewey intended to face was that of accounting for the possibility of separating logic from psychology, so as to prevent the reduction of the former to the latter. In Dewey's case, his almost unilateral concern with the issue of defining the scope and proper structure of thinking – defined as the apperception of the apperceptive process that constructs perception (EW2: 180) – went hand in hand with an unoriginal and rather undetermined account of the nature of concepts. Dewey's early theory of concepts was substantially identical to the one advanced by the upholders of an empiricist view. According to the standard empiricist approach, concepts are products of an act of abstraction through which “ideas taken from particular beings become general representatives of all of the same kind” (Locke 1690/ 1955: Book II, Chapter 11, Paragraph 9). In this sense, Dewey's reference to the mental act of “taking together into one idea the element of meaning common to a number of objects and things” was nothing but an attempt to paraphrase in contemporary and more idealistic terms Locke's original theory of the acquisition of concepts.

It is not difficult to see why the young Dewey could rest satisfied with an empiricist theory of concept-formation. From an idealistic point of view as the one endorsed in the first edition of *Psychology*, since the act of abstraction that constitutes concept can be seen as a process that “definitely [brings] out” those elements of “idealization”, of “relation”, of “mind activity”, which are not “consciously present” in perception, an empiricist theory of concepts can be extremely useful in developing an expressivist account of thought (EW2: 180). There is a content in perception that is abstracted, brought out, and made free in conception. It is only at this level that Dewey was compelled to reject the empiricist theory of concepts. His point of disagreement with the empiricist account was on the role played by analysis in the process of thinking. Empiricists had failed to understand that the act of analysis is essentially related to the act of synthesis: the abstract idea is immediately connected with as many concrete objects as possible, and in so doing both the universal meaning contained in the idea and the objects to which the universal meaning is referred – but not predicated, since concept is not a case of judgment – are enriched. Dewey believed that one of Hegel’s greatest theoretical achievement had been the realization that concept is a concrete unity that is further developed in judgment, where abstract ideas are put in relation one with the others (Garrison 2006: 6ff.). In any case, the Hegelian correction of the empiricist account of concept formation did not affect its overall validity. Mind idealizes its material through abstractive processes: conception is the first and simplest *conscious* act of abstraction and refinement of the meaning constructed in perception.

In the third edition of the work, this general expressivist framework of thought and the theory of abstraction and concept formation are maintained almost unchanged. On the contrary, Dewey completely revised the first part of the section in which the general definition of what is a concept is provided. Looking for a reliable criterion for distinguishing percepts from concepts, Dewey highlighted that the only difference existing among the various kinds of mental states is a difference of function. In the first edition of the *Psychology*, he had already pointed out that a percept and a concept may well be the very same image, and yet have a different role in reasoning. However, at that time he did not manage to grasp the reason of this fact: he limited himself to mention a not clearly defined “difference [...] in the laying of stress, of accent” (EW: lxxx). Four years later, he had the language and the conceptual tools to clearly formulate this point. What is different in the two cases is only the *use* that is made of the image.

A percept is an image referring to an object present in space: the function that constitutes a percept uses an image as a copy of an external object. Consistently, what is important is its sensuous quality, its capacity of resembling the thing to which it refers. On the contrary, a concept does not involve any reference to concrete objects existing in space and time. "A concept", Dewey wrote, "is an image having the function of symbolizing some law or principle in accordance with which a thing or number of things may be constructed" (EW2: 179). The function that defines a concept is the use of the corresponding image as a general rule of construction. Stated in other words, a concept is a set of instructions that allow to mentally construct all the objects of a certain kind according to a general principle. From this perspective, Dewey remarked, the concept of a triangle is "the way in which lines are made and then combined", and its meaning consists entirely in "the processes by which the three lines are put together" (EW2: 179). Accordingly, the concept establishes how a thing must be made in order to belong to a certain class, where a class is not a static group, but rather "a number of objects having as a basis a common principle" (EW2: 180).

It is difficult not to see many Kantian echoes in Dewey's proto-functional definition of concepts. As is well known, in *The Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had argued that concepts rest on functions, where by function it is meant "the unity of the action of ordering different representations under a common one" (Kant 1787/1998: A68/B93). In a certain sense, Dewey's instrumentalism can be profitably read as an extension of Kant's functionalist view of concepts to the entire field of mental phenomena. In particular, Dewey's view of concepts as rules of construction is substantially equivalent to Kant's notion of schema. Long before Bradley's criticism of psychologism, indeed, Kant had already understood the importance of distinguishing between the schema of an object and its image. The synthesis of imagination – of which a schema (both empirical and pure) is a product – aims at determining "the unity in the determination of sensibility". Consequently, Kant was led to conclude that the schema of a number is essentially different from an image of that very number. "[I]f I place five points in a row", Kant observed, "this is an image of the number five". Instead, the schema of the number five is to be defined as the "representation of a method for representing a multitude [...] in accordance with a certain concept"¹² (Kant 1787/1998: A140/B180).

¹² Obviously, there is a remarkable difference here between the two positions: in Dewey, the distinction between schema and concept loses its significance since, differently from Kant, he rejects

The theoretical similarities between Dewey and Kant are not exhausted by these seemingly external accordances. In reality, there are textual evidences that show how extensive had been the influence exerted by Kant on Dewey's understanding of the nature of concepts. As has been pointed out above, in order to illustrate his instrumentalist theory of concepts Dewey used the example of the construction of a triangle. Shook has devoted great attention to the discussion of Dewey's systematic recourse to the concept of triangle as an appropriate illustration of his constructivism (Shook 2000: 167-169; see also White 1943: 67). Indeed, not only in the section *Conception* of the third edition of *Psychology*, but also in the article *How Do Concepts Arise from Percepts?*, published in the *Public School Journal* in November 1891, Dewey made extensive reference to it. In this article, Dewey used almost the same words he had used in his *Psychology*: "The concept 'triangle', in other words, is the *way in which three lines are put together*; it is a *mode* or form of construction"¹³ (EW3: 144). There is no doubt, therefore, that Dewey saw his instrumentalism about concepts as essentially related to the truth of mathematical constructivism. Thanks to Shook's masterful analysis, this aspect of Dewey's thought has received due consideration. What has passed completely unnoticed, however, is the Kantian origin of that particular kind of constructivism that Dewey put at the basis of his instrumentalism. Indeed, it is very likely that Dewey drew the instrumentalist account of the concept of

the idea of a distinction between understanding and sensibility, and between a priori and a posteriori. According to Dewey, a concept necessarily incorporates the schema of its concrete construction as its constituent part: the reference to a mental function which uses an image to symbolize a general principle is how he tried to formulate the anti-Kantian thesis that thought and sensibility cannot be severed. This assumption is important because it represents the basis of Dewey's attempt to give an empiricist turn to his Hegelian-inspired conception of thought.

¹³ It is important to remark that Dewey continued to use this example to highlight the constructivist nature of concepts even in some articles written in the first decade of the 20th century. So, for instance, in *Experience and Objective Idealism* it can be read that "[t]he concept of triangle, taken geometrically, means doubtless a determinate method of constructing space element" (MW3: 133). It is important to quote extensively this passage because it is an evidence of the particular way in which Dewey read and assimilated Kant. After stating that the constructivist account of concept is what should be preserved of Kantian philosophy, Dewey remarked: "but to Kant [the concept of triangle] also means something that exists in the mind *prior* to all such geometrical constructions and that unconsciously lays down the law not only for their conscious elaboration, but also for any space perception, even for that which takes a rectangle to be a triangle" (MW3: 133-134). Dewey's philosophical development can also be read as an effort to separate constructivism from transcendentalism, and to integrate the former within a naturalistic and empiricist framework. So, Dewey concluded that "[t]he first of the meanings [the constructivist theory of concepts] is intelligible, and marks a definite contribution to the logic of science. But it is not 'objective idealism'; it is a contribution to a revised empiricism. The second [the transcendental account of the origin of concepts] is a dark saying" (MW3: 134).

triangle from an important passage of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, and, more precisely, from Caird's critical exposition of the Kantian theory of concepts, as formulated in *The Critical Philosophy of Kant* (1889)¹⁴.

Amongst the other things, in the Chapter IV of his fundamental book on Kant's thought, entitled *The Transcendental Deduction of Categories*, Caird undertook the task of expounding in a clear and precise way Kant's thesis that the correspondence of ideas to objects should not be intended in realistic terms. Rather the contrary, Kant's view is that correspondence is "correspondence to a conception or known rule of relation between the elements of the manifold of perception, which we combine as referring to an object" (Caird 1889: 337). In order to better clarify the transcendental notion of correspondence, Caird quoted a passage from the transcendental deduction of the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*: "[s]o we think a triangle when we are conscious of the combination of three lines according to a rule by which such an image of perception could always be constructed"¹⁵ (Caird 1889: 338; the quotation is drawn from Kant 1781/87: A 105). Caird then concluded that, according to Kant, the "conception of anything as an object" is "nothing but the recognition of a rule according to which the manifold of perception is put together in it" (Caird 1889: 338). This is the essential core of Kant's theory of objectivity: since the universality of a rule

¹⁴ It is well known that Dewey was profoundly impressed by this book. One year after its publication, he enthusiastically reviewed it on the pages of the *Andover Review*. "All would admit", Dewey wrote, "that Professor Caird has written *the* book upon Kant, – most would add, in any language" (EW3: 180). Caird combined a sovereign mastery of Kant's writings with a profound sensitivity to philosophical questions. Dewey was well aware that Caird's exposition of Kantian thought was far from theoretically neutral: Caird read Kant as an important source of philosophical insights, from which to move on to tackle those questions that Kant had left unanswered. The very same approach was adopted by Dewey.

¹⁵ It may be useful to quote at length the entire passage as it is translated by Caird: "[s]o we think a triangle when we are conscious of the combination of three lines according to a rule by which such an image of perception could always be constructed. This unity of rule determines all the manifold, and limits it to conditions which make the unity of apperception possible, and the conception of this unity is just that consciousness of the object (= X) which I think through the predicates contained in the definition of a triangle" (Caird 1889: 338). Compare it with Muller's standard translation: "[t]hus we conceive a triangle as an object, if we are conscious of the combination of three straight lines, according to a rule, which renders such an intuition possible at all times. This unity of rule determines the manifold and limits it to conditions which render the unity of apperception possible, and the concept of that unity is really the representation of the object = x, which I think, by means of the predicates of a triangle. No knowledge is possible without a concept, however obscure or imperfect it may be, and a concept is always, with regard to its form, something general, something that can serve as a rule" (Kant 1881:105-106). As is evident, Caird's version puts a greater emphasis on the constructivist elements of Kant's thought: Dewey followed Caird's footsteps in exploiting Kant's thought as a source for formulating a constructivist account of concepts.

and the objectivity of the conception are just “different words for the same thing”, the objectivity and universality of an object – or, in more Deweyan terms, the universal meaning of an object qua object of a determinate kind – are to be traced back to the objectivity and universality of the corresponding rule (Caird 1889: 338).

As is evident, the language used by Dewey in the third edition of the *Psychology* and in many articles written during the 90's is almost identical to the one used by Kant – or, better said, by Caird's Kant. Caird and Dewey employed the same words – “rule”, “construction”, etc. – and the very same example – the example of the concept of a triangle as a rule of formation – to express their constructivist views. For this reason, Dewey's discovery of the theoretical soundness of a functionalist account of concepts can be described as an attempt to keep faithful to the essential insight of Kantian philosophy. The instrumentalist theory of concepts is modeled on Kant's transcendental conception of categories as general rules of construction of objects. Dewey's idea that universality and objectivity are normative properties of a concept is structurally dependent on the idea of the Copernican revolution. Obviously, Dewey was well aware of the importance of Kant's philosophy long before the appearance of Caird's *The Critical Philosophy of Kant*. Nonetheless, my suggestion is that Caird's masterful analysis of Kant's theory of objectivity made him aware that his early theory of concepts was not in accordance with the general spirit of his idealistic philosophy. More precisely, as a consequence of his reading of Caird's book Dewey came to realize that his early psychological idealism was not a straightforwardly constructivist perspective as he had probably believed. Indeed, while in the chapter of his *Psychology* devoted to the analysis of perception he had managed to formulate a sound, constructivist explanation of the processes through which sensations are made objective and meaningful by being related one with the others according to a general concept, his account of concepts was static rather than constructivist, and therefore not completely satisfactory from an idealistic point of view. His insistence on abstraction as the essential feature of concepts was substantially identical to the empiricist theory of concept formation. Caird had the merit of showing that a different account of concepts was possible, and that the main outlines of a truly constructivist approach to this issue were to be found in the foundation moment of the entire post-Kantian idealistic tradition, that is, in the transcendental deduction of categories as formulated in the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

The theoretical consequences of this shift towards a Kantian-inspired theory of concepts were momentous. As Dewey himself was willing to point out, the idea of a concept as a rule of construction rather than as an abstraction from particular things made it possible to emphasize in a more vigorous way the creative nature of mind. When a concept is conceived as a “mode of mental movement”, as “a form of mental action”, it is much easier to appreciate the activity that lies at the basis of every conscious act of apprehension of the meaning of things (EW2: 180). Universal meaning – meaning taken in abstraction from the particular things in which it is embodied – is not a content that stems from “taking together into one idea the element of meaning common to a number of objects and things” (EW2: lxxx). Rather, it is the result of an act of grasping the rule of formation that is common to a certain class of things, and which defines an object as an object of a certain kind. In the short span of time dividing the first and the third edition of *Psychology*, Dewey came to realize that the construction of concepts cannot be accounted for in terms of acts of abstraction.

The constructive nature of concepts is expressly asserted in *How Do Concepts Arise from Percepts?*, in which the empiricist account of the process of concept formation is subjected to a harsh criticism. Again, Dewey’s argument starts with the classical exposition of the difference between concepts and percepts, but the conclusions drawn from it are extremely original. The concept of triangle, Dewey argued in that article, “contains not less but more than the percept”: indeed, concepts are general while percepts are particular; concepts are ideal – they can be grasped “*only in and through the activity which constitutes [them]*” – while percepts are sensuous (EW4: 144). Dewey did not explain what he meant to say with the statement that concepts contain more than percept, but it is reasonable to believe that his was a not particularly successful attempt to express the idea that the universal meaning of a concept is more complex than the particular meaning of a percept. The reason of its greater complexity is due to the fact of its being rationally articulated. The whole meaning of a concept (universal meaning) consists of the net of relations that it entertains with other concepts belonging to the same logical space. Percepts, on the contrary, are full of material elements that cannot be explained in the light of the corresponding general concept. So, for instance, the universal concept of triangle establishes the rule of construction of a particular triangle, but necessarily leaves undetermined the length of its sides, the color of its surface, and so on. It is this ‘empirical’ and non-logical quality that identifies an object as that particular object having that particular meaning.

Moving from the assumption of the greater complexity of concepts over percepts Dewey was led to conclude that the acquisition of a concept cannot consist in “dropping traits”, but in “finding out what the real traits are” (EW4: 144). Concept is an enhancement of percept: consequently it cannot be explained as resulting from an abstractive process that diminishes, rather than increases, its degree of meaning and reality. “It is true”, Dewey openly acknowledged, “that certain features are excluded”; but it is equally true that “this dropping out of certain features is not what gives rise to the concept” (EW4: 144).

Dewey was very careful to highlight that the relationship between concept and percept should be reversed in order to be satisfactory in the light of the dynamic theory of mind that he was trying to substitute for the traditional view. What Dewey wanted to say is that concept – conceived of as a general mode of activity – precedes the very possibility of perception since it is the meaning of the concept that provides the rule of construction and, a fortiori, of identification of a thing as a thing of a certain kind. Paradoxically as it may seem, this thesis is trivially true if it is taken to mean, as Dewey intended it, that an act of recognition necessarily presupposes a criterion for establishing which aspects of an object should be considered relevant for its being that specific *kind* of object. In this sense, it is evident that abstraction from particulars cannot be the principle of explanation of the acquisition of concepts since “*it is on the basis of the concept, the principle of construction, that certain features are omitted*” (EW4: 144). But this thesis has another significance which is more philosophically sophisticated. The thesis of the irreducibility of concepts to acts of abstractions is just another way of stating the absoluteness of the logical. According to Dewey, who followed Hegel on this point, logic is grounded on nothing but itself. This rather startling thesis is confirmed by what Dewey wrote about the possibility of coming to know a concept. “The only way to know the concept triangle”, Dewey remarked, “is to make it – to go through the act of putting together the lines in the way called for” (EW4: 144). In the last analysis, this was another way of saying that the only absolute is the spontaneous activity of mind, which is the source of every possible meaning¹⁶.

¹⁶ It is not by chance, therefore, that in *How Do Concepts Arises from Percepts?* Dewey did not even attempt to outline an account of the creative process of formation of concept. It is very likely that he did not know how to conciliate these three seemingly contradictory ideas: a) concepts are products of a creative, spontaneous activity of mind; b) mind is not endowed with a set of fixed categories; c) concepts are definitions. It is only in his *Logic* that he understood how to solve this problem, but the solution presented in that text revolves around a conventionalist theory of logical norms – amongst which Dewey ranked concepts as well as logical laws – that was not available to Dewey at the

In conclusion, it can be said that Dewey's early theory of concepts was unsatisfactory for two strictly interrelated reasons: firstly, because it overemphasized the interdependence between existence and meaning; secondly, because it did not highlight the relational nature of concepts. Indeed, while the role of judgment and reasoning in the process of idealization was explained in terms of their capacity to make explicit the relations that constitute the object of perception, the function of concept was not accounted in the same way. In the case of concept, indeed, the young Dewey did not believe it was possible to clearly separate existence and meaning. Consequently, he did not describe the expressivist power of concepts in relational terms: the relational aspect of a concept was boiled down to the possibility of applying it to refer to "as many concrete objects as possible" (EW2: 181). Therefore, it is conception – the act of application of concepts – rather than concepts themselves to be truly productive of relations. Relations stem from the synthetic act through which a concept is used to refer to things, but concept taken in itself is simply an image to which it happens to be used to symbolize all the objects of the same kind. In this sense, Dewey remarked that if one thinks of a locomotive "[w]hat is experienced is only the symbolic quality of the image; its power of signifying the essential property, the *idea* of a locomotive" (EW2: lxxx).

The instrumentalist theory of concepts satisfied the two requirements that Dewey's early account had not been able to meet. As a rule of construction, concept is something different in principle from the image on which it relies; since it is a precept, it involves a normative element as its constitutive part. As Dewey put it, "[a] cotton loom is particular in all its parts; every yard of cloth produced is particular, yet the way in which the parts go together, the function of the loom is not particular" (EW4: 144). It is the relational structure of the function that is formulated in the concept. This is the greatest point of divergence between Dewey's early and mature accounts of concepts¹⁷. Indeed, even though in the

beginning of the 90's, even though, at least in Dewey's case, it stems largely from his effort to rethink in an instrumentalist way the Kantian notion of a priori. On Dewey's later logic, and in particular on its relationship with the issues raised by logical empiricists, see Brodbeck 1949 and Pap 1946; see also Jewett 2011. For a general discussion of the problem, see Ferrari 2003.

¹⁷ This is a particularly complicated point. By stressing the difference between the two accounts it is not intended to say that Dewey's early theory of concepts explicitly excluded, or was explicitly contrary to, the idea that concept is relationally articulated. As has been already noted above, in the first edition of *Psychology* Dewey rather generally referred to conception as the act of "taking together into one idea the element of meaning common" (EW2: lxxx). It is evident that this definitions does not prevent from conceiving the meaning of a concept as something complex. The point is that the young Dewey did not explicitly recognized rational articulation as a distinctive

original formulation the quality selected as determining a certain concept was defined as the *essential* property of the corresponding class of things, thus introducing a reference to a normative dimension, it is evident that Dewey was not able at that time to give a criterion for defining which properties should be taken as constituting the essence of a thing. On the contrary, the identification of concepts with rules of construction provided an easy procedure to individuate what is the essential meaning of an object: a rule expresses the essence of a thing if and only if it defines the set of operations through which an object of that kind can be constructed. Moreover, to say that concepts are normative in this strong sense is substantially equivalent to say that they are intrinsically relational. A concept states the conditions that are to be satisfied by an object to be an object of a certain kind. Now, it belongs to the very essence of a concept that it can be expressed as a rule, and that a rule can be expressed as an “if-then” clause: so, for instance, if you draw three lines in a certain way, you will construct a triangle. The definition of a concept is therefore nothing but the statement of the relations constituting the meaning of an object. Or, in more expressivist terms, the definition of a concept is nothing but the act of bringing to light the relations that constitute – even though only in an imperfect form – the meaning of an object of perception¹⁸.

feature of concepts. Consequently, Dewey’s idealistic theory of mental activity was underdetermined in relation to the explanation of the essential structure of concepts.

¹⁸ The implicit assumption that was at the basis of Dewey’s argument is that this way of conceiving concepts can be successfully extended beyond the boundaries of mathematics. Dewey was well aware that this extension had to be justified and explained, and in a series of lectures on logic delivered at the University of Chicago in 1899-1900 he attempted to provide the needed justification. “Mathematics was the first science to become scientific”, Dewey observed, “because it was the first science to find and apply the genetic method for the proper analysis of the fact” (ToL 1899-1900: 541). Kant had the merit of understanding the philosophical significance of this fact. Kant’s claim that mathematical propositions are synthetic was read by Dewey as a clear acknowledgment of the “dynamic, constructive, genetic mode of definition in mathematics” (ToL 1899-1900: 541). By the term genesis, Dewey did not mean to refer to a mere succession of events, but rather to the logical structure of a satisfactory definition: a good definition “puts the fact and the production of the fact under your control”, thus showing the “how” rather than the “that” of a certain object (ToL 1899-1900: 541). Accordingly, genesis should be taken as signifying not the antecedent conditions of a thing, but its teleological or logical conditions of possibility. The realization that genesis is nothing but the recognition of the relations that constitute an object allowed Dewey to draw the conclusion that there is “no difference in principle between the mathematical and the strictly historical sciences” (ToL 1899-1900: 542). In both cases, indeed, what is relevant for a concept is the “teleological or logical mode of production” of a thing (ToL 1899-1900: 542). In so doing, Dewey believed he had found a way to formulate in strictly genetic and constructivist terms the essential features of every possible kind of concepts.

Before moving on to discussing Dewey's theory of judgment, a further remark may be useful. In the light of what has been said until now, it seems legitimate to say that the publication of the third edition of *Psychology* represented a remarkable change in Dewey's philosophy, and that this change was due to a more intense and systematic exploitation of Kantian constructivist themes. However, it is important not to overestimate the novelty and radicality of Dewey's discovery of the instrumentalist and functional nature of concepts – it is for this reason that his position has been labeled 'proto-functionalism'. Several considerations recommend caution. The first one is, obviously, Dewey's decision not to revise those sections of the *Psychology* in which an expressivist account of judgment and reasoning is provided. Such a decision can be explained in several ways – one may even argue that Dewey limited himself to correct the most important errors even though he was aware that the whole project of treating knowledge as a process of idealization of material was fatally flawed. Nonetheless, all these explanations are largely speculative: what is indisputable is the fact that Dewey did not feel the need to modify those passages in which his commitment to an expressivist conception of thought was made explicit. Consequently, one is forced to take this fact as an evidence that, at the time of the appearance of the third revised edition of *Psychology*, Dewey did not find any contradiction in the coexistence of expressivist and instrumentalist themes.

In *How Do Concepts Arise from Percepts?*, the compatibility of an instrumentalist account of concepts with an expressivist conception of thought is not only tolerated, but clearly expressed and asserted. In that article, the revolutionary account of concepts as rules of construction goes hand in hand with the conservative thesis that "the concept arises from the percept *through realizing the full meaning implied, but not explicit in the percept*" (EW3: 143). In conformity with the principles of an expressivist theory of knowledge, Dewey interpreted conceptual knowledge as the apprehension of the true nature of objects. "The concept", Dewey wrote, "is knowledge of what the real object is – the object taken with reference to its principle of construction" (EW3: 145). On the contrary, the percept provides only a limited and accidental knowledge of the object. Accordingly, the difference between perceptual and conceptual knowledge is to be traced back to the difference between incomplete and complete knowledge of an object. This is the conclusion that Dewey was willing to draw from the assumption of the greater complexity and richness of concepts. But this means that, in the last analysis, the horizon of Dewey's theory of

knowledge was realistic rather than constructivist. The construction of a concept as a rule of action turns out to be not a productive creation of a tool through which it becomes possible to analyze in a fruitful manner a given situation, but rather the discovery of the essence of an object. Moreover, the realistic option necessarily entails a metaphysics as its fundamental presupposition. It follows therefore that logic cannot be grounded upon itself, but depends on how things are: in this sense, logic is valid if and only if it adequately reflects the structure of reality. As is evident, this conclusion is in potential contrast with what has been referred to as the thesis of the absoluteness of concepts – that is, the thesis that the reality of a concept consists in its being constructed. Furthermore, an expressivist approach implicitly leads to a denial of the possibility of the autonomy of thought. Again, the issue at stake is how the relationship between existence and meaning should be conceived. Dewey's incapacity to free himself from the remnants of a dogmatic conception of thought led to an unfortunate depotentialization of the genuine demands originating from his critical assimilation of Kant's transcendental constructivism.

For all these reasons, it does not seem correct to maintain that as a consequence of the discovery of the functional nature of concepts Dewey succeeded in completely abandoning the expressivist conception of thought he had previously embraced. Some other factors were needed to make him aware that the shift from expressivism to a thorough and consistent instrumentalism had to be further carried out. This factor was a better understanding of Hegel's *Logic*, and, in particular, the realization that Hegel's notion of dialectic could be successfully translated in biological and scientific terms. But this would not have been possible if Dewey had not discovered in the notion of judgment the ground of logical theory. As Dewey wrote in the preface of *The Studies in Logical Theory*, "judgment is the central function of knowing, and hence affords the central problem of logic" (MW2: 296). This standpoint was reached only as the end of a long process of rethinking of the fundamental assumptions of logical theory.

2.2. *Thinking is Judging: The Essential Tenet of Instrumentalism*

2.2.1. *Judgment and Experience: From the 'Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics' to 'The Study of Ethics'*

In 1894 Dewey published an important book entitled *The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus*. As many other works written in the first years of the 90's, this book too has been considered by Deweyan scholars as a relevant turning point in Dewey's intellectual development. Since in its opening pages Dewey coined the expression 'experimental idealism' to refer to his own philosophical position, many interpreters – and in particular White in his *The Origins of Dewey Instrumentalism* (White 1943) – have been led to argue that *The Study of Ethics* should be read as a sign of Dewey's definitive abandonment of idealism in favor of a naturalistic view of mind, meaning, and ethics. We are now in a position to reject any attempt to individuate sharp breaks in Dewey's philosophical development. Nonetheless, in the present case particular caution is needed: it would be wrong to deny that *The Study of Ethics* presents remarkable traits of novelty. Indeed, if one compares the opening pages of that book with the first sections of the *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, published three years before, one cannot avoid the impression that Dewey's approach to logical issues had undergone some noticeable transformation¹⁹.

In the *Introduction* of the *Outlines*, Dewey had defined ethics as a "science of conduct, understanding by conduct man's activity in the whole reach" (EW3: 241). In so doing, ethics was conceived of as a theoretical science aiming at understanding the nature of moral action: "its business", Dewey wrote, "is to detect the element of obligation in conduct, to examine conduct to see what gives it is *worth*" (EW3: 241). However, Dewey's intention was not to argue that the science of ethics is purely formal and value-free. On the contrary, he was persuaded that the business of scientific ethics should be to judge rather than to describe. Ethics is a scientific study of the nature of conduct. However, since the

¹⁹ For a comparison between the *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* and *the Study of Ethics* with the aim of clarifying the development of the notion of self-realization, see Welchman 1995: 99ff.. In particular, Welchman's discussion of the importance of Dewey's confrontation with Bradley is worthy of being taken into serious consideration since it provides a clear and useful overview of the complexity of the debate on ethical issues to which Dewey took part. On this point, see also Welchman 1989: 415ff., where an analysis is provided of the philosophical significance of the *Outlines* for Dewey's intellectual development.

very possibility of conduct depends on the selection of proper ends, the main task of a science of conduct is to provide knowledge of the *summum bonum* of man, and, consequently, to indicate the right conduct to pursue. Thanks to the knowledge of the *summum bonum*, Dewey remarked, “we have a standard by which to judge particular acts” (EW3: 243). In stressing the close relation existing between knowledge and action Dewey was keeping faithful to the fundamental instrumentalist insight that theory is a tool to analyze the practical situation in its constituent elements. Theory is not abstract in the sense of being an abstraction, but in the much more fruitful sense of being a theoretical refinement of the situation that makes it possible to resolve a problem instead of “merely looking at it” (EW3: 100).

However, Dewey’s legitimate desire to transform ethical theory into an useful tool of analysis for the ‘reconstruction’ of moral situations was not supported by a mature conception of logic. At the time he wrote *The Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, indeed, Dewey did not have a satisfactory theory of thought that could account for the relative autonomy of theory from practice. So, not only Dewey could not explain the relationship existing between ethics as a philosophical science and the ethical as the distinctive quality of human activity originating when action is considered in relation to its end; he did not even see the importance of drawing such distinction. The incapacity of appreciating the philosophical value of this distinction led Dewey to over-intellectualize (moral) experience, and, consequently, to extend the logical far beyond its legitimate boundaries. As a consequence of the conflation of the *fact of morality* with the acts of reflection upon it Dewey’s moral philosophy was exposed to the risk of intellectualism. Consequently, his attempt to formulate a sound ethical *theory* was fated to fail: Dewey lacked the necessary theoretical resources to reach a purely scientific standpoint from which only his project of constructing ethics as a relatively independent logical space could be successfully accomplished.

In *The Study of Ethics*, Dewey rejected the approach developed three years before in *The Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics*, and formulated a different conception of ethical theory relying upon a different conception of science, theory, and logic. The opening sentence of this book – “[s]ubject-matter of ethical theory is judgment concerning the *value* of conduct” (EW4: 223) – is a sign of Dewey’s recognition of the defects of his previous position, as well as of his better understanding of the nature of the logical aspect of experience. While in 1891 Dewey was confident that no difficulty could arise from the equation of

moral reflection with the concrete fact of conduct, in 1894 Dewey came to identify with clarity judgment as the source and proper *locus* of objectivity, and distinguished judgment from its subject-matter. In *The Study of Ethics* Dewey defined ethical theory as the “*systematic judgment*” whose subject-matter are judgments dealing with the value of conduct (EW4: 223). The task of ethical judgments is to generalize and reconstruct what Dewey called “previous judgments”, which, in turn, are nothing but attempts to generalize and reconstruct habits of action (EW4: 223). So, while in the *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* conduct was seen as substantially homogeneous – which was a natural consequence of the adoption of an expressivist conception of thought –, in the 1894 work conduct was tripartite, each of the three levels corresponding to a different degree of generalization. The tripartition of conduct was accounted for in functional terms: habits are spontaneous, natural generalizations; judgments about *conduct* are efforts to deal with relatively minor problems, which do not involve a radical questioning of ethical principles ruling conduct; judgments about the *value* of conduct are “more conscious and more generalized” efforts to reconstruct judgments about conduct on the basis of a “deeper principle” (EW4: 223-224). Consequently, ethical theory is a “*critical judgment upon conduct*” that arises only when previously valid habits enter in conflict one with the others, thus depriving conduct of a reliable guide to action.

The consequences of this way of stating the problem are of the greatest significance. First of all, it follows from this approach that ethical reality – that is, the entire scope of conduct – is from the very beginning ethically meaningful: experience has not to wait for reflection in order to be morally significant. Taken in itself, this result is not particularly original: it is simply a corollary of Dewey’s adoption of an idealistic theory of meaning and experience according to which nothing is given but everything is constructed. What is interesting is how Dewey now argued for the validity of this view, and the conclusions that he thought could be drawn from it. The explicit premise of his argument is that primitive judgments do not “relate to isolated acts”, but rather to habits of action, that is to general ways of behaving (EW4: 223). The importance of the reference to habit as the basic level of ethical reality cannot be overestimated since it represents a significant attempt to revise the over-intellectualization of moral experience that Dewey propounded in the *Outlines*. This point deserves careful attention. In *The Study of Ethics* Dewey remained faithful to the idea formulated in 1891 that an act is moral if and only if it is “a part of conduct”. An act has moral significance if

and only if it expresses the character of the agent, that is, if it is “a part of a system of plans (purposes) and interests” (EW4: 228). As is evident, Dewey’s intention was that of grounding the theory of ethics upon a general theory of activity, and, more precisely, upon a Hegelian conception of reality as actuality: the real is individual, and what is ethically individual – that is, the character – is nothing but the expression of the universal – the general rule of action – in the particular – the concrete action. The novelty of Dewey’s position cannot be found at this general level. What is new is rather his conviction that habits are essential components of the moral universe; that they do not possess a lower and imperfect degree of moral validity; and that the function of reflection is not to complete what is incomplete, but to reconstruct the principles of conduct that have lost their ability of providing reliable rules of action.

Relying upon his relational theory of meaning, Dewey defined moral meaning as that particular form of mediation which refers possible consequences back to the impulse that it is expected will occasion them. Since this definition of meaning is extremely general, it holds true for every possible form of mediation, both habitual and ‘conscious’²⁰. Dewey thus located the distinctive feature of habitual meaning in the immediacy of this type of mediation. Habits are characterized by the fact that consequences are completely absorbed in the impulse that it is likely will cause them²¹. In so doing, consequences become the specific *content* of the act, thus causing a transformation of the original impulse. As a consequence of this work of mediation, “the immediate and the mediate no

²⁰ In *The Study of Ethics* Dewey adopted the term ‘conscious’ to refer to what he later called ‘deliberate’ – that is, the controlled process of reconstruction of immediate experience. The use of a mentalistic terminology is probably a heritage of his early idealistic upbringing, but is also an evidence of a lack of methodological awareness. Indeed, the word ‘conscious’ presupposes the very conception of mind that Dewey was trying to substitute by adopting an experimental approach to experience. For a clarification of this point, it is useful to compare the *Studies in Logical Theory* with the *Essays in Experimental Logic*. As is well known, the *Essays in Experimental Logic* is a collection of previously published articles. Among the others, Dewey decided to reprint the four articles originally appeared in the *Studies in Logical Theory*. The most remarkable changes concern precisely the use of the term ‘conscious’, which is methodically substituted with ‘deliberate’.

²¹ In this phase, Dewey was still committed to a narrow view of habit as an immediate and cognitively irrelevant response to external stimuli. Consequently, he was led to distinguish between these three general moments of ethical reality. The tripartition was subsequently abandoned in favor of a less mechanistic conception of human conduct, in which habitual action is seen as partaking of the nature of reason. As has been remarked in the previous chapter, this was the main point of dissatisfaction with James’ version of naturalism. One of the distinctive traits of Dewey’s mature thought is precisely the correction of the mechanistic account of habit that was at the basis of that view.

longer have any separate existence”: the mediating experience is completely absorbed into the immediate impulse (EW4: 240).

The realization that the grounding level of meaning can be accounted for without any appeal to the conscious activity of thought brings to light the relative ‘superficiality’ of judging. Far from being coextensive with meaning, reflection originates when habitual meanings cannot determine an unified course of action. There are some situations, Dewey argued, in which possible experiences constituting the content of a certain impulse are so numerous and complex that it is impossible to bring about the mediated immediacy that characterizes habitual meaning. This happens when the habitual situation is dramatically altered, and the ‘natural’ consequences of an impulse “do not organically react of themselves” (EW4: 241). In these cases, the settled habits of behavior fail to provide a set of tools through which to analyze the moral situation into its components, and the agent has to “think it over” and calculate “the probable meaning of an act” (EW4: 241). In these situations – which Dewey defined as cases of generalizations –, the mediation between impulse and its consequences has to be constructed rather than taken as a given. The task of reflective thought is precisely to keep the conduct thoughtful, thus preventing the reduction of conduct to a mere repetition of already acquired tendencies to action.

The distinction between habitual and consciously constructed meanings – or, in more Deweyan terms, between customary and reflective morality – enabled Dewey to formulate the problem of the logical status of ethical theory in a new and more consistent way. Once it is acknowledged that the task of judging is not to create meaning *ex nihilo* but simply to reconstruct already formed habits of behavior in which meaning is, so to say, condensed, it became easier to appreciate not only the fact of the autonomy of theory from practice, but also the reasons why theory *must* be relatively autonomous from practice. In this regard, two aspects of Dewey’s argument are particularly worthy of being highlighted. Firstly, theory is to be conceived of as independent from practice because a detachment from the concreteness of conduct is necessary in order to achieve a perspective from which to formulate a critical judgment upon its validity. In this sense, Dewey was concerned with arguing for the possibility of conceiving theory as a logical space arising from practical needs, but whose significance consists in supplying the tools for constituting refined objects in accordance with the fundamental concepts of a particular science (see below 3.1.2.). Paradoxical as it may seem, Dewey believed that theory can be practical precisely because – and

only insofar as – it is theoretical²². Reflecting over the problem whether ethics is a science or not – and Dewey unhesitatingly embraced the first position – he progressively came to realize that a consistent form of instrumentalism involved the abandonment of the assumption that, to be valid, thought must be a case of *representative* knowledge. The validity of a theory cannot be explained in terms of representation: theory has a structure of its own which is not isomorphous with the structure of reality. Or, in less epistemological terms, thinking is an activity that is defined by specific rules and characterized by specific conditions of felicity. As the mature Dewey put it in *Experience and Nature*, reflective thought is grounded on experience: “the vine of pendant theory is attached at both ends to the pillars of observed subject-matter” (LW1: 11). Nonetheless, the vine of pendant theory is not reducible to the pillars that sustain it.

Secondly, Dewey pointed out that practice too should be conceived as independent from theory. If every action involved an act of thought as the source of the mediation between itself and its consequences, it would be impossible to have a meaningful conduct: “our whole time” he remarked “would be taken up with minute and anxious reflection and our deeds would have no effectiveness” (EW4: 241). Even though Dewey continued to maintain that ethical theory is only a “more conscious and more generalized phase of conduct”, the significance of this remark is completely different from the insistence on the continuity between theory and conduct that was the core of his early expressivism (EW4: 224). In *The Study of Ethics*, Dewey wanted to call attention to the extremely limited power of reflection rather than to stress the constitutive role of thought: meaning is mediation, and reflection is only a particular form of mediation that does not coincide with the scope of what is ethically meaningful. Dewey’s statement that if thinking were constitutive of meaning, the complexity of experience would be unexplainable should be read as a recognition of the inconsistency of his early position, as well as of any idealistic attempt to ground meaning on thought²³.

²² “That is the paradox of action, that on the whole it is more practical to frame a statement which has nothing to do with this or that act, so that we get a principle that is applicable to a much larger scope or range of acts” (ToL 1899-1900: 546). The essential compenetration of theory and practice follows directly from Dewey’s attempt to find the principles of individualization of meaning. Dewey’s conception of practice has the same theoretical complexity of the notion of experience: in both cases, the problem is that of understanding the relationship between universal and particular meaning, meaning and existence, concepts and percepts.

²³ It would be undoubtedly exaggerated to state that in *The Study of Ethics* Dewey tried to sketch an ‘energetic’ explanation of the limits of thought similar to the one advanced in *Human Nature and Conduct*, in which it is argued that mind has a limited reserve of thought that an agent has to learn to use (MW14: 179; for a general discussion of the energetic perspective see Franzese 2008). Indeed,

The identification of thinking with the activity of judging paved the way for the complete functionalization of thought. Now, it is important to note that this theoretical move had consequences that extend far beyond the issue of determining the function carried out by judgment in the reconstruction of ethical conduct. Indeed, it represents the theoretical platform upon which Dewey attempted to build an unified theory of rationality – or, better said, to *reconstruct* it, since the conviction that reason is a unified whole was an idealistic assumption that he never questioned. To consider thought as a particular function of experience implies that reflection is entirely defined in terms of the role it plays in experience, independently from its specific content. Dewey argued that no distinction should be made between ethical and scientific judgments. Ethical and scientific judgments are structurally homogeneous: in both cases, theory prescribes what kinds of actions should be performed. Obviously, Dewey did not intend to deny that remarkable differences can be detected between them. Scientific judgments are committed to the definition of abstract regularities, expressed in the form of general hypotheses. Physical science, Dewey wrote in *Moral Theory and Practice*, deals with “the relations of conditions”, but does not reach “individuals”, that is, the level of concrete reality (EW3: 98). On the contrary, to be useful in a moral inquiry, ethical judgments should be as concrete and individualized as the act is. What an agent wants from a moral theory is not a set of rules stating in abstract terms what should be done, but a point of view from which it is possible to identify the meaningful aspects of a situation, in relation with the particular activity that is needed.

When the emphasis is put on theory as a body of settled knowledge, it is evident that no structural similarities can be detected between ethical and scientific judgments. At best, they represent two distinct, yet not contradictory ways of handling experience. However, Dewey became more and more convinced that these differences are merely apparent, and that they stem from an erroneous conception of the nature of judgment. His functionalist theory of judgment was precisely an attempt to think together the abstractness of scientific judgments and the concreteness of ethical judgments in the conviction that a sound theory of rationality could not prescind from either of these two aspects.

in *The Study of Ethics* the naturalization of thought is certainly present in the background, but is not explicitly thematized as problem. However, even though not with the finesse of his later works, in this text Dewey came for the first time close to formulate a satisfactory functionalist theory of reflection as the logical development of universal meaning, which was grounded on the biological theory of habitual meaning that he had already developed in his 1892 *Introduction to Philosophy*.

Again, the problem Dewey had to face was that of bringing together theory and practice without reducing one to the other. In *The Study of Ethics*, Dewey eventually managed to formulate a clear solution to the problem with which he had been concerned since the time he realized the untenability of his early account of knowledge as a process of idealization. The key to achieve the reconciliation of concreteness and abstraction is the realization that what scientific and ethical judgments have in common is the adoption of the experimental method. There is an analogy, Dewey observed, between the role of ethical theory in conduct and the place of theory in modern science. In both cases, theory is not actually conceived of as a system of “fixed and abstract truth”, but is used as a “standpoint and method for some activity” (EW4: 224). Theory is an attitude that is freely adopted by an agent, and the properties that a set of scientific truths possess are to be traced back to the processes from which they originated. Dewey’s statement that the theoretical value of a theory “comes out and is tested” in an activity directed by theory was the best way he found to express his radical experimentalism, that is, the view that the processes of construction and verification of knowledge are both sub-functions of the function of judging (EW4: 224).

In the light of what has been said so far there should be little doubt that *The Study of Ethics* represents a significant step forward toward the development of a consistent functionalist account of thought. The identification of thinking with judging; the distinction between habitual and reflective meaning; the defense of the unity of rationality; all these are tenets whose validity the mature Dewey never called into question. Nonetheless, the functionalism formulated in *The Study of Ethics* is far from being complete. Indeed, what is completely lacking in that text is an account of both the *motive* and the *mechanism* that make it possible for reflective thought to come to light. It is true that the reconstructive function played by reflection is highlighted, but what is the cause of the adoption of the reflective stance is not explained, apart from an important, yet general mention to the “demand for more systematic generalization” (EW4: 223). Consequently, immediately after the publication of the *Study of Ethics* Dewey plunged himself in the study of logic, with the aim of determining the origin and proper scope of the logical element of experience. Starting from 1895 he concentrated his efforts to develop a logical theory that could pave the way for the completion of the process of naturalization and functionalization of thought that he had undertaken about five years before. As is well known, the result of this complex

intellectual enterprise is the publication in 1903 of the *Studies in Logical Theory*, in which instrumentalism received for the first time a clear and comprehensive formulation. Far from representing a dramatic departure from his previous views on logical issues, the *Studies in Logical Theory* – to which Dewey contributed with four technical essays and a very short general introduction to the volume, written in his capacity as editor – should be viewed as the precipitate of the work brought forward by Dewey himself and other members of the Chicago Department of Philosophy, whose aim consisted in defining a theoretical platform upon which the attempt of redefining in a strictly functional way the fundamental notions of meaning and objectivity could rest.

2.2.2. *Logic and Psychology: The Psychological Basis of Judgment*

The new problem with which Dewey found himself to be confronted was that of reconciling the idea of the relative autonomy of thought with the thesis that reflection arises from practical needs and ends when the goal of reconstructing a problematic situation is successfully achieved. Dewey was not completely unprepared for the analysis of this aspect of the logical element of experience. Even if too undetermined, indeed, the provisional solution proposed in *The Study of Ethics* – the idea that judgment arises to meet the demand for a systematic generalization – pointed in the right direction. To say that thought is practical, in the sense of originating within conduct and having a bearing on (future) conduct, does not mean only that judgment has to be acknowledged as an effective factor of reconstruction of experience. It also means that reflection is a specific activity whose performance is caused by the occurrence of certain new conditions that cannot be handled by the customary means afforded by already formed habits of behavior.

In the lecture set entitled *Logic of Ethics*, delivered at the University of Chicago in 1895, Dewey identified with clarity – very likely for the first time – the notions of break and contradiction as the key concepts for understanding the direction of the movement of thought from a condition of need to a condition of rest. In the first part of these lectures, devoted to a general inquiry into the nature of judgment, the main features of this new account of the logical are clearly presented. The error of modern logicians, Dewey wrote, has been that of conceiving judgment as a logical unity that is completely self-contained. In

reality, judgment is a logical unity that has a structure rather than an essence, and this structure is historical. Judgment is a phase of “the development of conscious experience”: its unity therefore cannot be understood if attention is not paid to its antecedents and its consequents (LoE 1895: 439). The discovery of ‘temporality’ as the distinctive character of reflective thought – this is the sense of Dewey’s statement that judgment has a historical unity – had two remarkable consequences²⁴. Firstly, the realization of the essential relationship between time and judgment confirmed and supported the naturalization of experience that Dewey was looking for. When its historical nature is clearly acknowledged, reflection becomes an easily identifiable operation defined by its role within a concrete activity aiming at solving a difficulty. Secondly, Dewey’s insistence on the connections between judgment and its conditions (both of origin and of satisfaction) dynamicizes the process of reflection, thus bringing to the fore the issue of defining its place and role in the process of development of experience. The two aspects are strictly interwoven. Dewey defined judgment as a process of evaluation of experience, and clearly recognized that its function consists in transforming an already existing value into a new one that could better satisfy the needs of the agent. Logical process is the “middle stage” of experience: it is the process of construction of the meaning of experience that arises when habitual meanings reveal themselves to be unreliable rules of action (LoE 1895: 448).

In *The Study of Ethics* Dewey had already pointed out that reflection is a suspension of activity characterized by the fact that the mediation between impulse and its possible consequences is not given, but has to be pursued as the goal of an act of thought. In the 1895 lectures this point is further elaborated and clarified. Judgment is defined as “a process of mediation” in which the defects and shortcomings of previous experience are explicitly thematized as the subject of reflection (LoE 1895: 449). Reflection originates from “the defect or breakdown of some previous value” (LoE 1895: 439). In some particular cases, Dewey remarked, the activities that constitute the meaning of experience do not run smoothly: the relations holding between an action and its consequences are

²⁴ One should be very wary in using terms like ‘temporal’ and ‘temporality’ to define Dewey’s comprehension of the structure of the logical as formulated in the texts written during the 90’s. The point is that in these texts Dewey seems to attach to these words a very narrow meaning, intending with them the mere succession of events, in open contrast with the genetic approach typical of logical inquiry, which aims at showing the process of formation of a thing. So, even though I believe that the terms ‘temporal’ and ‘temporality’ may describe better than the term ‘historical’ the core of Dewey’s position, those terms will not be adopted.

interrupted, and contradiction becomes the distinctive trait of that particular experience.

Take for instance the case of an act of seeing a table of sugar. When stimulus and reactions are organically coordinated, the experience is unproblematic: the object is immediately identified as 'sweet sugar'. In conformity with the analysis of the processes of construction of meaning that he was carrying out in the same months, and whose results were presented in the articles on emotions, Dewey recognized that in primary experience the meaning of things is grasped without conscious mediation. The meaning of an object is entirely determined by the set of relations that link together the various acts constituting the experience of that object (seeing the table of sugar, pointing to it, reaching out the hand, swallowing, tasting, etc.). It is a natural biological event which results in the formation of a natural meaningful world. When the coordination amongst the different sub-activities that makes up the overall activity is no longer possible – because, for instance, the object is out of reach or it is impossible to taste it – primary experience fades and is substituted by an experience of resistance. The conflict amongst these sub-activities brings about a tension that can be properly resolved – that is, not simply put aside, but explicitly recognized as the subject-matter of the activity of thought – only by the judgment 'the sugar is sweet'. We will return later on the philosophical import of this thesis, which will allow to better clarify Dewey's theoretical debts with the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition. What is important to remark here is the identification of judgment with tension. "If without any tension or opposition", Dewey wrote, "the seeing could at once pass over to tasting, we would have a substitution of one experience for another and there would be no experience which would take the form of a judgment" (ToL 1895: 442). A few pages before, Dewey had expressed the very same idea in more Hegelian terms by saying that "until there is realization there is a contradiction" (ToL 1895: 440). This means that the logical is that phase of experience in which reality – conceived not statically as something which is opposed to the subject, but dynamically as the activity through which meanings are verified and realized – is not a fact, but a duty.

Consistently, Dewey saw judgment as nothing but the transposition on the logical level of the biological tensions arising among activities that were previously coordinated in a whole. Or – which is the same concept expressed in different words – when contradiction and resistance are recognized as defining the problem that has to be tackled, the elements that have caused the

contradictory experience – and that, for this reason, have a biological status – gain logical significance. Following these suggestions, Dewey was led to define judgment as “the transitional stage between one unified activity and another unified activity” (ToL 1895: 444). Contrary to what is usually believed, judgment cannot be boiled down to its final product, but rather consists in the whole process leading to its completion. When the judgment ‘the sugar is sweet’ is completed – which means that the predicate ‘sweet’ is verified to belong to the subject ‘sugar’ – the contradiction is solved, and experience loses its logical quality. Judgment is a suspension of activity. Being a tool for transforming conduct, judgment cannot be an end in itself; its function is that of being employed in order to reconstruct an experience. In this sense, the truth of judgment is to pass away and to pass into a more consistent and more meaningful experience. Dewey expressed this point with great clarity by saying that the completion of a judgment is not a judgment, but a certain value. The completion of a judgment is the attribution of a newly discovered (or constructed) property to a thing as a consequence of which that property becomes one of its distinctive features. The outcome of the activity of thinking is the constitution of a new object, whose fate is to be directly experienced – that is, without any conscious attempt to create a mediation – in concrete acts of enjoyment, use, aesthetic appreciation, and so on.

Before moving on to discussing the philosophical consequences of this approach to logical issues, a remark is needed in order to avoid an unfortunate impression that may follow from the statement that judgment is the logical transposition of the biological fact of conflict and tension. The discussion of this point will eventually shed some light on the mechanism which, according to Dewey, makes it possible the assumption of a reflective attitude towards primary experience. Obviously, from what has been said until now it should be evident that Dewey did not mean to say that reflection is somehow free from the rules that govern human behavior. Rather, the point that he wanted to highlight is that the *content* of reflective experience is different from the one that characterizes primary experience because, in the former case, the whole set of relations is made the object of a conscious analysis. Tensions can be either experienced as a fact of the world or analyzed in a systematic manner. In the latter case, biological tensions take the form of logical contradictions: the reflective attitude arises when the tension is “given to the self”, and the mind tries to “find out the tension, and state it properly” (LoE 1895: 449). Logic ‘supervenes’ on psychology

in the sense of being nothing but a well-defined set of functions performed by an organism in determinate situations. Dewey was very clear on this point: the historical structure of the logical must be expressed in psychological terms since only when the physiological processes lying at the basis of an act of reflection are brought to light a satisfactory explanation of that structure is provided. It is for this reason that, in almost all the texts composed during the 90's, Dewey spent great efforts to formulate a psychological and physiological account of logic. However, in order to achieve this goal, he had to rely on the results of the traditional associationist psychology, the new physiological psychology being concerned in the main with the study of the simplest psychical phenomena, like those of sensation and perception. More precisely, Dewey was aware that the only scientific method for treating mental phenomena was the one developed by experimental psychology, but he was also aware – and, at least on this point, he was confirmed in his impressions by the reading of James's *Principles of Psychology* – that the scope of psychological inquiry was broader than the one usually recognized by physiological psychologists.

The most natural solution to this problem was that of bringing together the two approaches without trying to reduce the language of psychology to the language of physiology. As is well known, Dewey was a naturalist but not a reductionist. Consequently, Dewey attempted to translate in more contemporary terms some suggestions that he found expressed in the works of British psychologists so as to give them a more solid scientific basis. In particular, he focused his attention on the analysis and explanation of the natural attitude of man towards its world formulated by Bain. According to the English psychologist, there is a 'natural credulity' in man – the expression is drawn from Bain's *Mental and Moral Science* – as a consequence of which human beings tend to act as if what has been in the past will also be in the future (Bain 1868a: 377). The source of this natural error is what Santayana called 'animal faith', that is, the fact that human beings are animals that are guided by their impulses. Far from being a dispassionate inquirer, indeed, man is a practical being who does not undertake an act of reflection unless he is forced to do it. In this sense, Bain wrote that "[t]he chief source of belief is unobstructed activity": if an activity is not hindered by obstacles, reflection and thought do not arise because human beings do not want to waste their limited resources of energy in useless activities (Bain 1868a: 382).

Dewey believed Bain's insight to be valuable and worthy of being preserved. In particular, once it is realized that the reference to the natural credulity of men does not amount to introducing an unverifiable hypothesis about the nature of human behavior, it is easy to see how this assumption paves the way for an account of the evenemential character of thought in purely biological terms. To speak of a natural credulity of man is nothing but a metaphorical way to say that meaningful experience is grounded upon a group of habits that rule human conduct in everyday affairs of life. Since habitual meanings are never questioned – they cannot be questioned precisely because they are habitual –, their persistence guarantees the persistence of the world in which those habits have been formed and whose meaning they contribute to determine. Existing habits provide the solid ground on which every rational activity is based. As Dewey concisely remarked, “coordination is the completed thing”, and such a coordination is possible only when the act of coordination “passes over into” the completed thing (LoE 1895: 444). An act of coordination does not support the distinction between subject and object since the coordinated activity is the encompassing whole within which only the contraposition between self and world, mind and matter acquires a determinate significance²⁵.

In some cases, however, habitual activities are impeded, and the coordination between sense organs and motor discharges – that is, the circle that makes it possible to read the latter into the former and to interpret the former as a sign of the latter, according to the model formulated in *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* – is disrupted. In these cases, the distinction between subject and object becomes ‘psychically real’, to use Dewey's own words: the agent clearly perceives that his ideas, images, suggestions, expectations, on the one hand, and his sensations, on the other hand, enter in contradiction. If the tension is accepted and developed, sense organs do not immediately pass into muscular reactions, but show themselves as unable to determine the course of action and,

²⁵ According to Dewey, even an act of recognition of an external thing cannot be explained on the basis of the assumption that the agent experiences an object as a distinct object; in reality, as long as the world supports the activities that constitute meaningful experience, no distinction can be detected in activity. Even though no one can deny that a table of sugar is physically distinct from the child who eats it, nonetheless if the child does not find any difficulty in his ‘transactions’ with the world – that is, whenever he wants to eat sugar he can eat it, and whatever is supposed to taste like sugar actually tastes like sugar – the child does not experience himself and the sugar as two distinct entities (LoE 1895: 444). What Dewey wanted to say is that the meanings that the child has in mind and the meanings of the objects are substantially identical – which is just a more refined way to say that the behavior of the agent and the behavior of the objects reciprocally support each other.

consequently, the meaning of the experience in question. Accordingly, the harmony of the experience is lost and the meaning of the situation is undetermined: different courses of actions are now possible because different consequences can be attached as possible outcomes to the same group of stimuli. The contradiction that produces the need of a conscious work of mediation stems precisely from the fact that the agent experiences a resistance in his activity that is caused by the rupture of already formed habits of behavior²⁶. Physiologically speaking, the contradiction is to be accounted for as the separation of the sensory from the motor side of activity. The discharge of the former into the latter is impeded: as a consequence of the break of existing coordinations sense organs and muscular reactions become functionally independent activities. On the one hand, the habits that are not questioned provide the subject-matter of judgment and reflection. Sense material is the relatively certain and indubitable aspect of experience: it is what an agent can safely rely on. On the other hand, the construction of an adequate motor discharge – adequate not in the sense of corresponding to an absolute criterion which, insofar as is absolute, is necessarily external to the situation, but in the sense of being able to realize all the potentialities that are implicit in the actually present sensory activities – is the relatively problematic issue. There is no predetermined path or channel in which the immediate activity can discharge. A new relation between stimuli and reactions is what has to be constructed in and by the process of reflection.

What is constitutive of the possibility of assuming a reflective stance is the fact that human organism is so complex that it can look the “negative factor” of experience in its face (ToL 1899-1900: 621; see, obviously, Hegel 1807/1977: 19). The brain, Dewey wrote, “represents the tension between the two acts”: it is a “centre” that has the power to coordinate different stimuli rather than simply to ratify and accept the strongest one (LoE 1895: 444). Just as the judgment is the ‘logical locus’ in which different predicates – that is, different plans of action – are evaluated and recomposed in a single decision, so the brain is the physical locus in which contradictory motor discharge are suspended and mediated into a more consistent coordination. The activity of the brain, Dewey seemed to suggest, is nothing but the power to maintain the contradictions unresolved as long as it is necessary to ‘squeeze’ as much meaning as possible from them.

²⁶ As Dewey was very careful to remark, the resistance is within the activity, not to the activity: “unless there is a comprehensive whole”, he noticed, “there can be no question of resistance” (LoE 1895: 446). The conflict between the activity of the hand and the activity of the eye is possible only because they belong to the same organism. See below 2.3.1. for an extended discussion of this point.

Previous considerations can be therefore summarized as follows: Dewey's logical theory revolves around the assumption that the entire significance of an act of judgment is the process through which a certain group of already existing habits of conduct is reconstructed so as to match with changed conditions of the environment. This process can be described at various levels – logical, psychological, physiological –, depending on what aspects one is interested in highlighting. In all the three cases, however, the essence of thought is traced back to the recognition and exploitation of the contradiction among the different meanings of a problematic situation – or, which is the same, of the conflict that arises amongst the various sub-activities that constitute experience. For all these reasons, it would be extremely reductive to read Dewey's logical theory as a variation on the traditional themes of the psychology of thinking. In reality, the originality of Dewey's treatment of the logical stems from his familiarity with Hegel's thought, and, in particular, from his critical appropriation of Hegel's notion of dialectic.

2.3. *Dialectic as the Structure of Reasoning*

2.3.1. *The Power of Negative: An Instrumentalist Reading of the Hegelian Dialectic*

The influence of Hegel's notion of dialectic on Dewey's comprehension of the nature of the logical is an aspect that needs to be investigated with thoroughness since it is the key to understanding the specificity of Dewey's conception of thinking²⁷. Dewey's logical investigations are dominated by the

²⁷ This point deserves the greatest attention because it sheds some important light on the relationship between Dewey and the pragmatist movement, and in particular between Dewey and Peirce. It has often been argued that Dewey's distinctive thesis that judgment (or inquiry) arises from the break of previously established habits represents a remarkable 'trait-d'union' with the pragmatist tradition. As is well known, in his *The Fixation of Belief* Peirce argued that it is the "irritation of doubt" that causes a "struggle to attain a state of belief" (Peirce 1877/1986: 247). Inquiry is the name that Peirce gave to this struggle, which he defined as that phase of mental life that begins with doubt and ends with its cessation. Now, since there are remarkable terminological similarities between Dewey's and Peirce's descriptions of the origin of inquiry; moreover, since

problem of framing a constructivist conception of thought that can explain the process through which the contradictory meanings of a situation are transformed into a consistent whole. His effort to naturalize and functionalize thought aimed precisely at tackling this issue, which took the form of a question about the possibility of the existence and effectiveness of thought.

As has been remarked above, this is a difficulty that – at least in Dewey’s eyes – British idealists did not manage to solve. The very possibility of the existence of a finite, reconstructive thought within a world formed once for all by an absolute mind became therefore a source of philosophical embarrassment. Now, since Dewey’s logical theory is a natural outgrowth of neo-Hegelian logics, one of the criteria to measure its soundness is its capacity to account for the assumption of a reflective stance. Dewey rightly believed that his instrumentalist approach to logical issues – and the consequent functionalist analysis of the logical element of experience – succeeded in explaining the fact that, in certain situations, experience brings about an act of thought as the necessary factor to correct its contradictions. Indeed, once it is excluded that thought constructs

Dewey dramatically changed his philosophical views around the middle of the 90’s; and, finally, since the mature Dewey credited Peirce with being the first to understand the importance of the principle of continuum of inquiry (LW12: 3); many interpreters have been led to conclude that the development of Dewey’s logical theory has to be explained in terms of the growing influence of Peirce on his thought. Intriguing as it may appear, this reading does not seem correct. It seems to be less a careful and detailed historical reconstruction than an attempt to rationalize a historical process that followed different and more complex paths. What is particularly unsatisfactory is the identification of Peirce’s doubt-belief theory of inquiry with Dewey’s instrumentalist and naturalistic logical theory. Indeed, the real problem that Dewey wanted to solve was that of understanding the relationship between reflection and its antecedent and consequents, conceived of in Hegelian terms as different phases of experience rather than as a series of successive moments of the mental life of an agent. This means that, differently from Peirce, Dewey was not interested in analyzing the process through which the subject acquires knowledge, but in understanding the process through which a problematic situation resolves itself through an act of self-reconstruction. This point has been recently recognized by Levi, who has paid great attention to the differences of approaches between the two philosophers (Levi 2010: 83ff.). All the theoretical and terminological similarities notwithstanding, therefore, Peirce’s and Dewey’s philosophical projects are not reducible one to the other. Dewey’s logical theory is much more holistic and constructivist than Peirce’s one, and much less ‘subjectivistic’: the goal of an act of inquiry is not to change beliefs or points of view, but to transform the entire situation in which the subject experiences his object as problematic. It is the very quality of the experience which is uncertain, and the mediating process that coincides with the process of inquiry ends with the construction and reorganization of a new experience in which previously contradictory meanings are harmonized in a richer whole. According to Dewey – who followed very closely the idealistic tradition on this point – all thought is objective in the technical sense of being the movement of reality itself, “the translation of fact into its real meaning”, as Dewey affirmed in his 1897 lecture on Hegel (JDLH 1897: 96; see also Good 2006: 191). Consistently, all the logical interest in the subjective aspects of experience is boiled down to their functional role in redirecting the course of experience.

meaningful experience *ex nihilo*, and it is held, on the contrary, that the synthetic act of drawing relations between the various phases of experience is made by organic habits of behavior, it becomes possible to understand the concrete 'conditions of possibility' of thought activity. Reflection arises because it may happen that the rules of actions embodied in habits of conduct cannot control in a satisfactory manner the relationship between the activity of the organism and the reactions that come from the environment.

This change of paradigm raised new problems. In particular, the redefinition of thought in instrumentalist terms brought to the fore the issue of understanding the role played by reflection in the process of formation and growth of experience. As has been hinted at above, the emergence of the instrumentalist theory of the concepts demanded a general account of thinking activity rich enough to pay due attention to the evenemential character of thought and to its differential function in the context of the evolution of experience. After outlining a reliable analysis of the logical element of experience, which is centered around the thesis that thought is an activity originating from some contradictions arisen in primary experience, Dewey therefore found himself confronted with the problem of combining those two elements in a consistent image which could explain – in both logical and psychological terms – the fact that an agent takes up a reflective attitude.

A heterodox interpretation of the Hegelian notion of dialectic provided the tools to achieve this goal. In the *Introduction* of the *Logic* of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel had remarked that "to see that thought in its very nature is dialectical [...] will form one of the main lessons of logic" (Hegel 1874: 18-19). Dewey progressively came to realize that Hegel was right: it is true that the understanding necessarily falls into contradiction, and that these contradictions can be sublated into a higher unity. It is also true that the dialectical stage is the moment in which the finite characterisations "supersede themselves, and pass into their opposite" (Hegel 1874: 147). This moment Dewey identified with the act of judgment. Following Hegel's thesis that "the Dialectical principle constitutes the life and soul of scientific progress", he maintained that tension is "the law of growth for evolution", thus unhesitatingly equating negativity with the motor force that drives the process of development of the meaning of experience (Hegel 1874: 147; LoE 1895: 447).

Dewey openly stated the similarity between his logical theory and Hegel's views by saying that the term 'dialectic', as Hegel used it, refers to "the agitation,

the opposing attitude”, and that this was precisely the sense in which he intended the critical moment proper of every act of reflection (ToL 1899-1900: 536). Even more explicitly, he argued that the greatest contribution of Hegel to philosophy – a lesson that he was willing to learn – was the acknowledgment of the “intrinsic significance of the negation in the development of experience” (ToL 1899-1900: 725). On Dewey’s reading, the real meaning of Hegel’s insistence on the notion of negation as the motor force of dialectic should be traced back to the realization that “wherever there is growth, evaluation, development of value, there must have been competition between various factors each of which *as* a factor, i.e., in its functional operation, is as good as the other, because it is intrinsic to the process of development” (ToL 1899-1900: 725).

It was Dewey himself, therefore, who highlighted the theoretical affinity between himself and Hegel on this point. However, as is evident from the terminology that he used in the works in which he discussed these issues, if the overall spirit of Hegel’s philosophy is preserved in his formulations, the letter is profoundly altered. In less metaphorical terms, Dewey agreed with Hegel that thought is essentially dialectic, but he radically modified the way in which the movement of thought should be intended. ‘Functional operation’, ‘experience’, ‘growth’; all these are terms which can be found in Hegel’s *Logic*, but to which Dewey attributed a new sense. This shift of sense is sign that a remarkable change took place, which enabled Dewey to actualize the Hegelian understanding of logic.

Contrary to Hegel, indeed, who argued that the three moments of what he called a logical entity are the side of understanding, the side of negative reason, and the side of positive reason, Dewey maintained that the first and the third moment of the dialectic movement are not cases of knowledge, but should be recognized as cases of primary experience. Indeed, the new experience that is brought about by an act of reflection is a unified state structurally and functionally identical to the one from which it arose, but distinguished from it by a much greater value or meaning (LoE 1895: 447). To say that the experience in which thought ends has not be treated as a case of knowledge means that it has to be recognized as functionally different from the reflective and reconstructive phase of experience. The failure to acknowledge this fact would amount to commit a curious version of the psychological fallacy, as a consequence of which the specificity of primary experience would be denied – the immediacy of meaning apprehension would be overintellectualized, and the biological

processes of construction of meaning would be traced back to, and explained in terms of, the logical processes of reconstruction of meaning. The dialectic moment is therefore to be identified with that phase of experience in which the immediacy of primary experience is suspended, and meanings constituting the objects of the original situation are seen in their relative independency and autonomy. The act of reflection is negative because it loosens the ties that link together existence and meaning in primary experience, thus laying the basis for the reconstructive action of thought. Moreover, it is negative in the sense of being a phase of experience that cannot be explained – or, in practical terms, cannot be handled – by exploiting available knowledge. The negativity of reflective experience consists in the fact that already existing habits do not support new transactions with the environment, and demand for a creative reconstruction of their own meaning. The realization of the lack of validity of habits can be properly described as the self coming to self-consciousness: the self realizes that reality is not adequately constructed by the rules that form its character, while the character is defined as a bundle of habits mediating impulses or ‘sensations’, thus transforming them into meaningful entities that direct ethical and cognitive behavior of the agent (for a general discussion of the notion of character EW3: 246 and EW4: 241; see also LoE 1895: 449 and especially ToL 1899-1900: 534-535). There is nothing metaphysical in these statements: they are to be read as meaning that coordinations that have proved reliable in the past do not succeed in controlling present and future conduct of the organism. The response of the environment to the actions of the organism is unexpected, and the discrepancy between mind and world generates the tension or break that causes reflection.

In his 1895 lectures on the logic of ethics, Dewey devoted great attention to discussing the issue of the nature of this ‘constructive failure’. What Dewey was eager to stress is that the coming to consciousness of the inadequacy of habits is not due to an external *Anstoß*, as a consequence of which the universal rule embodied in an organic habit shows itself to be false in its claim to be able to construct a meaningful situation. The resistance to activity is internal to that very activity, and it is only because it is internal to it that it can represent the principle of its development. Comparing Kant and Fichte’s conceptions of resistance, Dewey leaned strongly toward the latter since he believed that Kant’s view was too committed to dualistic presuppositions to be a satisfactory description of the rational process of growth of meaning of experience. On the contrary, Fichte had the merit of understanding that stimulus cannot be “outside the self” because, if

it were external, one should be compelled to abandon the idea that the self – or, in more naturalistic terms, the agent – can *solve* a problem rather than simply get rid of it (LoE 1895: 445). Were it not the case, indeed, the stimulus to action would be meaningless for the agent because it would represent a mere limit to its creative activity. In Dewey's words, "[t]here is no meaning in pure light unless there is something for it to break against" (LoE 1895: 445). What Dewey meant to say is that the negativity of break and resistance should not be intended as a pure negativity, as a brute reaction to an effort. The fact of negation is opposition, where opposition has to be conceived of as a limitation that the activity poses to itself and, in so doing, recognizes as an obstacle that has to be overcome. Stated in other words, the reconstructive activity of reflection cannot accept anything as given: judgment has to create its own material – and to create it in accordance with the needs that it is called to satisfy.

These issues will be discussed at length in the next sections, in which the logical structure of the judgment will be taken into account, so it is not necessary to dwell further upon them here. What is important to note for present purposes is the conclusions that Dewey drew from these assumptions. The point that he wanted to highlight is that a categorial confusion is made when the sensuous element of knowledge is considered as a factor that can be (even though only in principle) definitely overcome. The function of thought is not to eliminate sensation, but rather to show a) how the distinction between sense and reason, subject and object, originates within experience, and b) what is the function of these distinctions in the process of growth of meaning. Fichte's error was precisely that of understanding the "function of experience" as an effort to "minimize, eliminate, or assimilate sense", and of conceiving the self – that is, the complete subordination of sense to reason – as the goal that has to be achieved (LoE 1895: 446). From this point of view, Hegel came very close to a satisfactory conception when he maintained that "the limitations of the finite do not merely come from without": it is the nature of the finite that causes its "abrogation" (Hegel 1874: 148). Dewey read this and other similar Hegelian passages as meaning that finite and infinite, sense and reason, are both necessary factors in the construction of reality (see CJD Vol. I: 1891.05.06; J. Dewey to W. James; see chapter 2 1.1.). The idealistic apprenticeship made him aware that the resistance cannot be external to the "comprehensive whole", otherwise it would be impossible to reconcile the "resisting" and the "resister" in a higher unity (LoE 1895: 446). It also made him aware that the logical development of reality is a

continuous process of synthesis of sensation and conception. It is in this sense that Dewey was led to remark that reality, insofar as it is reached by a logical process, "is this process of distinguishing subject and predicate and of reuniting them into a single total value" (LoE 1895: 446).

This qualification is important because it testifies that Dewey was not interested in equating the movement of reality with the logical process of reconstruction of problematic meaning. At the time he delivered his lectures on the logic of ethics, Dewey was fully conscious that experience is richer and far more complex than thought. In the first part of the present chapter the rejection of the identification of primary and reflective experience has been identified as the essential aspect of Dewey's anti-intellectualism. A little attention to this aspect of Dewey's thought allows to shed new light on the irreducibility of his account of the dialectic of thought to Hegel's treatment of it. Differently from Hegel, indeed, Dewey intended the logical process as a distinctively 'temporal' process. Time is not a category of thought, but is rather the fundamental character of experience on which the very possibility of thought as a reconstructive activity is grounded (LoE 1895: 453). Experience is essentially temporal because life is a continuous interaction of the organism with the environment that alternates moments of rest with moments of tension. The negative factor from which thought originates is occasioned by an intrinsic limitation of the habits that constitute the character of the self. Such an intrinsic limitation is not a logical – least of all a metaphysical – quality of habits, but is a consequence of the fact that they are applied to, and tested in, new experiences whose complexity exceeds the limits established by the past knowledge. In more constructivist terms, such a limitation is due to the fact that new situations exceed the capacity of habits to link their elements in a meaningful and consistent whole.

Dewey contended that the intrinsic limitation of habitual meanings has to be explained by reference to the process of evolution of reality: the reach of a new equilibrium entails the liberation of previously subordinated activities, as a consequence of which new possibilities of action are created. Consequently, the establishment of a general rule or concept goes hand in hand with the becoming unconscious and mechanical of those very operations that were previously made under conscious control (LoE 1895: 446-447). As a consequence of their becoming habitual, these operations can be employed in new activities that enlarge the number of aspects of the world that the organism has to take into consideration,

and consequently enhance the meaning of the objects constituting its environment²⁸. However, the increased complexity of the activities performed by the organism implies the inefficiency of past habits. Habits formed to handle simpler conditions are useless to tackle a more complex situation. Indeed, the rules of behavior that they embody are unable to control the course of action because objects have acquired a new and greater significance. Stated in logical terms, the evolution of reality can be read as the history of the continuous transformation and substitution of the concepts that constitute human world as meaningful. It is this temporal process which gives to concepts their intrinsic negativity, and that grounds the dialectic of the activity of thinking. And it is for this very reason that Dewey insisted on the situational embeddedness of thought. Thought originates at a given moment, and its whole significance is exhausted by its capacity of contributing to the dialectic movement of thought that ends in the reconstruction of the problematic situation. This means that there can be no thought outside a problematic situation since it is the particular contradiction at stake that defines the direction of thinking activity and its conditions of satisfaction. It is in the light of this consideration that Dewey was led to argue that every goal is "local and temporary": there is no need to admit an absolute goal because it is the activity itself that produces its own contradictions and, in so doing, establishes from time to time the goals that have to be achieved (LoE 1895:

²⁸ Since every established meaning is a particular habit formed in past interactions with environment, Dewey was led to conclude that a genetic approach like the one sketched here is universally valid, and that it can be profitably adopted to analyze the reason why the enrichment of meanings necessarily stems from the revision of previously existing habits. To illustrate the evolution of meaning, Dewey gave a simple example drawn from the evolution of human beings. The process of human evolution points to the acquisition of more and more complex habits of behavior. The effort to combine the activities of the different organs that compose the body in a harmonic whole has brought about, among many other things, the formation of habits of vision: thanks to this long process of reciprocal adaptation, the eye has "taken into its activities the result of previous activities of the hand" (LoE 1895: 447). Critically referring to the notion of unconscious inference that he had accepted in his early works, Dewey explicitly argued that it is because of the existence of these habits that it is possible to affirm that a table is smooth from just looking at it. In a second moment, these habits of vision can be further refined through a continuous application of them to the inquiry into the meaning of things. It is the attention to the meaning of things, indeed, that controls the process of growth and development of habits. The distinction of colors would be impossible from an evolutionary point of view if different colors were not reliable signs of different lines of conduct. The plasticity of habits supports the possibility of an almost unlimited increase of the relations between the visual data and future lines of action that may be prompted by the appearance of those data. An iron-worker can discriminate amongst many shades of red because he makes use of them: "each one", Dewey wrote, "means something to do, to him", while they are completely meaningless to normal people who are used to contemplate colors rather than to employ them as a sign of possible actions (LoE 1895: 448).

446). The dialectic of thought becomes in Dewey's hands a way to correct the subjectivism characteristic of the psychological analysis of thinking, and to replace it with a conception largely indebted to Hegel's view of thought as the very movement of reality itself²⁹.

The identification of thought with the negative is the point of greatest proximity between Hegel and Dewey – and the reason why Dewey sided with Hegel against Kant and Fichte. At the same time, however, it is the point in which the distance between the two approaches comes most clearly to the fore. The transformation of the Hegelian logic in a logic of the process of growth of experience enabled Dewey to go beyond Hegel's idealistic account of the

²⁹ A remarkable evidence of the importance of Hegel for Dewey's logical theory is provided by the following quotation: "What happens when an ideal is set up which is not the movement of the facts themselves? Taken out of the facts, it has no leverage in the facts, and is helpless. If the movement is radically wrong it is impossible to get any leverage on it to make it revolve. Nothing but a supernatural miracle would effect any change. When the idea is isolated and abstracted there is this impotency, the self-contradiction of abrupt revolution. There construction of the past is in some sense a revolution. Every reform, social or industrial, involves such a revolution. But the catastrophic revolution, e.g., the French, is an oscillation and not a revolution. The parts of the revolution which succeeded were those in the direction of which society was already moving. The others failed. The concept is simply a method of reconstruction. It is not an object to be realized. It is a method of activity and not a thing. The image of the ideal as something to be realized has a strong hold on the human mind, because ethics is now in the condition in which science was in mediaeval times. Reality is always a moving state of things. The ideal is of no more value than the actual. When the ideal is isolated, it is not only impotent, but harmful; it leads to the attempt of impossible things, and brings evil, as in the French Revolution" (LoE 1895: 470). As is well known, the interpretation of the French Revolution as the moment in which universal ideals are separated from the real movement of the world – "the facts themselves" – is a distinctively Hegelian thesis. So, one seems entitled to conclude that Dewey had Hegel in mind when he tried to develop his objective conception of thought and inquiry. This conclusion is supported by some passages in Dewey's writings. So, for instance, in the lectures on Hegel's *Philosophy of Spirit* Dewey maintained that one of Hegel's main concerns was that of understanding "how the idea of freedom, individuality, the principle, that is, of the Enlightenment, could be reconciled with the substantial value of history and of social relations" (JDLH 1897: 105). In the context of this analysis, he remarked that "[t]he excess of the French Revolution seems to be the logical outcome of the principle of freedom" (JDLH 1897: 105). A similar observation can be found in Dewey's exposition of Hegel's idea of "historic nationalities" (JDLH 1897: 124; see Hegel 1894: 16). Referring to the distinctive features of the French attitude of mind, Dewey wrote: "[t]he French, [Hegel] says, show both fixity of thought and mobility of wit or emotion. They are a people who delight in general views, in abstract principles; who carry out their general principles in detail regardless of particular consequences. This same fixity and firmness of their understanding gives them a great taste for clearness and definiteness, both of thought and expression. They dislike mystery. But this very attitude of mind is necessarily very one-sided. The logical understanding is abstract, picking out now this side of the thing, now that, and so the French, in feeling out their ideas, fail to get the whole out of life. An illustration is the time of the Revolution and immediately afterward, when all factors of political thought were carried out, not in their union, but separately, one after the other" (JDLH 1897: 124; see also JDLH 1897: 170).

structure of logical entity and to give a distinctively instrumentalist and naturalistic significance to the notion of dialectic. The idea of activity as a movement that sets a limit to itself in order to overcome its intrinsic limitations becomes *truly* understandable – that is, understandable from the experimental point of view that Dewey was trying to elaborate – only when these notions are declined in biological terms. The activity that Dewey had in mind is the natural activity of an organism that strives to adapt to its environment. Similarly, he conceived tension as grounded on the physiological opposition amongst different channels of discharge (LoE 1895: 443). Far from being a secondary and relatively unimportant distinction, Dewey’s willingness to emphasize the natural root of the logical responded to a genuine demand of highlighting the functional nature of the reflective phase of experience. To say that the dialectic moment coincides with the assumption of a reflective stance means that thought is totally identified with the function of fostering the development of the meaning of experience. It also means that any remnants of intellectualism is eliminated, and that the immediacy of experience is preserved in its integrity from any intrusion of any constructivist act of thought.

The key to achieve this goal is Dewey’s particular interpretation of the concept of realization, and, in particular, the acknowledgment that scientific process is completed only when the experience is realized, that is, when the distinctions created in judgment are brought back into the “qualitative consciousness” (LoE 1895: 448). In more explicit terms, Dewey maintained that the intellectual experience “carries within itself a movement which will carry it beyond itself” (LoE 1895: 451). The intellectual interest – that is, the deliberate assumption of a reflective attitude aiming at creating new methods with which to tackle the problems from which thought originates – is an abstraction whose only reason is to “lead up to the concrete whole” (LoE 1895: 450). This means that the negative side of experience – that is, the process of elaboration of methods to solve the contradictions encountered in primary experience – is destined to bring about a new experience in which the meanings produced through reflection are transformed into natural properties of the objects – natural in the sense of being experienced as belonging to the object as some of its constitutive qualities³⁰ (LoE

³⁰ As Good has correctly pointed out, Dewey was persuaded that the embodiment of concepts in experience – which represents the conclusion of an act judgment – should be treated as a paradigmatic case of learning (Good 2006: 207). When a child learns to play piano, he learns how to coordinate visual and motor activities. When the coordination is completed, the eye takes into itself a greater meaning, as a consequence of the fact that visual sensations are associated with the

1895: 447-448; but for the clearest exposition of this view, see *The Experimental Theory of Knowledge* (1906) in MW3: 113).

Dewey put great emphasis on the relationship between realization and verification. The dialectic moment is that phase of experience in which general plans of action are elaborated, thanks to which the immediacy of meaning can be recovered. However, no one can be certain that a plan of action is valid until it is tested in experience: it is only at this level that its truth can be ascertained. Indeed, the validity of a plan of action consists in the fact that it can meet the commitments that it has undertaken. So, unless they can show in concrete that they can solve the problems from which they arose, the validity of concepts and theories is only hypothetical. Concepts and theories are general rules that express a relation between an action and its consequences: from the functionalist perspective endorsed by Dewey, everything which has logical value can be formulated as a statement of connections. Being hypothetical, the universal judgments used in the process of reconstruction of primary experience cannot and should not be categorical. When an agent starts inquiring about the actions to take, he looks for a statement regarding existence that is lacking at present. If it were not lacking, the whole inquiry would be completely meaningless since it would be useless. Consequently, judgments are attempts to find a way to produce a categorical judgment that can grasp reality. So, for instance, a judgment of the form 'All A is B' – if correctly understood – states only that if an object is A, then is also B, but it does not say anything definitive about the existence of such an object (LoE 1895: 433). The verification of a judgment is the process through which the content of the judgment is adopted as a rule of action, and the outcome of the conduct controlled by that rule satisfies the needs that originated reflection. As Dewey concisely remarked in an important passage drawn from the 1899 lectures on the theory of logic, "[t]he only thing that is completely and finally categorical is the final act of experience itself, e.g, the blacksmith hitting the iron" (ToL 1899-1900: 666). This because the action that

movements of the fingers. The same holds true for the activity of thought: the new coordination that is brought about by reflection establishes new relations amongst different elements, thus transforming previously unrelated things into signs semantically meaningful. In both cases, the mechanism is the same: the activity falls out of focus – which means no attention is paid to the movements that have to be performed in order to complete the action – but its value is "broadened and intensified in consciousness", that is in the immediate experience in which objects are unreflectively used and contemplated (LoE 1895: 449). The only difference between the act of learning and the act of reconstructing experience through reflection is that the latter is a controlled process of mediation which needs a further verification in order to be accepted as valid, while an act of learning may be brought to term in a unconscious way.

concludes the act of reflection is a concrete whole in which the relations between stimuli and responses are successfully reconstructed, and the immediate activity finds fixed and established channels in which to discharge. The absence of resistance is the sign that a new equilibrium has been reached, and that the objects of the world are now ready again to be enjoyed or immediately used in an unreflective experience³¹.

From what has been said until now it follows that many different strains of thought contributed to the formation of Dewey's views on dialectic – a plurality of perspectives that Dewey did not always succeed in fusing together. As has been highlighted above, Dewey's functional interpretation of the dialectic of thought was intended to answer a great number of questions: what is the origin of reflection? what is the end of a process of inquiry? how is it possible that the results of an act of thought get embodied in habits of conduct? which are the signs that a new equilibrium has been attained? All these questions concern the place and the role played by judgment within the whole process of experience. However, Dewey believed that the fundamental insight at the basis of Hegel's emphasis on the negativity of thought could be exploited as a tool to inquire not only into the structure of the *act* of judgment, but also into the structure of the *content* of judgment.

Judgment is the process of reconstruction of primary experience. Being a particular type of experience, it is essentially temporal: as every other action, indeed, an act of reflection needs time to be completed. The completion of an act of reflection – that is, the successful reconstruction of the problematic situation

³¹ It is for these reasons – both logical and psychological – that Dewey maintained that the verification that realizes the activity of thinking is a primary experience which possesses a higher degree of complexity and, consequently, a greater meaning than the one from which thought has originated (for a similar conclusion, see Royce 1901-05: 457). From a dialectical point of view as the one adopted by Dewey the two aspects are obviously strictly interwoven: it is only because the outcome of a process of reflection bears in itself the different moments that have led to its production that the conclusion of the act of thinking can be more significant than its initial moment. Dewey agreed with Hegel that it is the capacity of 'remembering' the history of the process that makes possible the enhancement of meaning. At the very same time, it is only because of this possibility of remembering the work that has been done that the reached conclusion reveals itself as the conclusion of that particular process of reflection from which it derives. It is true that the outcome of a process can be conceived without paying attention to the process that has generated it. In this sense, the conclusion is an aesthetic experience – an expression with which Dewey intended to refer to the final phase of the process of experience when this is taken in isolation from the process from which it arose, as well as from the process into which it passes (LoE 1895: 453). However, aesthetic experience so understood is only an abstraction from the whole experience from which it originates: what is concretely real is the process of construction and reconstruction of an experience.

that evoked thought – is the conclusion of a period of uncertainty, which is devoted to the creation and refinement of plans of action that seem promising in helping to solve the problem at stake. Trying to understand the intrinsic dynamism of thought, Dewey became more and more convinced that the process of formulation and verification of hypotheses is a dialectic process, and has therefore to be described in strictly dialectic terms. In so doing, he substantially equated dialectic with thought, and emphasized the activity and spontaneity of the act of reflection. Dialectic is not only the movement that leads from the acknowledgment that primary experience is contradictory to the assumption of a reflective attitude, but represents also the structure of the process of growth of the *content* of thought, which consists in the creation of data and the elaboration of general hypotheses that can relate the former into a meaningful whole. When the activity of experience is interrupted and the reflective process is called up, “the concrete whole” splits up into “the relatively fixed and certain”, on the one hand, and “the relatively fleeting and uncertain or hypothetical”, on the other hand (ToL 1899-1900: 532). The thesis that judgment is the union of two elements or factors – represented in judgment by the subject and the predicate – was far from being original, even though it was not as uncontroversial as it may be expected (on this point, see below 3.2). What is really new and original in Dewey’s position is rather his conviction that there is a tension between the two necessary elements of thought, and that this tension is a dialectic movement from facts or existences to ideas or meanings and back again. Facts and ideas are reciprocally constructed in judgment, and their reciprocal and dialectic codetermination entails the denial of any residue of givenness that judgment should passively accept rather than spontaneously produced³². This is nothing

³² The richness and complexity of Dewey’s conception of dialectic emerges very clearly in a set of unpublished lectures entitled *Commentary on Hegel’s Logic*, delivered at the University of Chicago in 1896, in which an attempt is made to present a new and consistent interpretation of Hegel’s logic. For present purposes, particularly relevant are Dewey’s opening remarks in which the general point of view and the underlying assumptions of his naturalistic reading of Hegel’s logic are clearly formulated. At the beginning of the lectures, indeed, it is stated that “Hegel’s meaning” should be restated in “psychological terms”, and in so doing the main lines of the whole interpretative enterprise are concisely indicated (CLH 1897: 3). What Dewey intended to say with this statement is that the logical triad Being, Nothing, and Becoming can be translated without loss in the psychological triad focus, background, attention. Even though Dewey did not devote sufficient attention to justify the possibility of this shift from logic to psychology – which he believed unproblematic in the light of his naturalistic conception of thought as a natural event that can be accounted for in biological terms –, the overall sense of the remark is clear: attention stands to focus and background as becoming to being and nothing. This means that focus and background are abstractions, and that their truth is only the unity of the two, or the “passing from nothing to

but the logical transposition of the Hegelian correction of Kantianism that was formulated by British idealists.

Consequently, two are problems that Dewey subsumed under the general label of theory of logic: the first one is the issue of explaining both the possibility of a functional autonomy of thought and its capacity of constructing new meanings that are irreducible to the meanings encountered in primary experience; the other is the question of highlighting the structure of the dialectic of the content of thought in order to shed some light on the logical consequences of Dewey's instrumentalist approach. These two issues will form the content of the third section of the present chapter, in which the main outlines of Dewey's logical theory as formulated in the 1899-1900 lectures on the theory of logic and in *The Studies in Logical Theory* will be discussed and analyzed. Before that, however, some considerations will be devoted to Dewey's confrontation with William James's theory of reasoning, with the aim of highlighting the way in which Dewey used Hegelian insights to correct the shortcomings of a psychological account of thought and thinking activity.

2.3.2. *A Hegelian Criticism of James's Teleological Conception of Thought*

The conclusion that can be drawn from previous analyses is that Dewey spent many years and great efforts to find a way to frame all the various suggestions that he considered valuable – naturalism, functionalism, Hegelian dialectic, etc. – in an unified and consistent theory. His problem was that of understanding the relationships between primary and reflective experience, and between reflective experience and the reconstructed experience that realizes the process of thought arising from contradictions within the original experience. Now, it should not appear particularly strange that in order to achieve a satisfactory comprehension of the nature of reflective experience, Dewey naturally exploited the theoretical resources that he had already developed in his previous texts, or that he turned to the works of those authors that he was

something" (CLH 1897: 3; see also Hegel 1874: 163). What is real is therefore the construction of the stimulus in an attentive act of reconstruction of experience: being and nothing are the two moments of the reflective process originating from a break of previously established habits (CLH 1897: 6; Dalton 2002: 52-53).

studying at that time. Rather, what is truly remarkable is the reason why he felt compelled to draw so many themes from Hegel – that is, from an author whose philosophical viewpoint was not immediately compatible with the standards set by the most advanced scientific research of the time. In my reading, the rediscovery of the notion of dialectic was due to the fact that Dewey did not find any ready-made solution to the problems he was trying to face in the contemporary literature on the subject.

Relying on Jane Dewey's biography of her father, in which it is said that Dewey had been deeply impressed by the chapters of James's *The Principles of Psychology* dedicated to conception, discrimination and comparison, and reasoning – respectively, the chapters 12, 13, and 22 of the book –, Dewey scholars have usually insisted on the influence of William James on Dewey's theory of logic, and have been therefore led to underestimate the importance of other theoretical sources that actually played a fundamental role in shaping his views (J. Dewey 1939: 23; see also Tiles 1990: 34-35 and Shook 2000: 16). I think that this interpretation is unilateral, and the conclusion that has been usually drawn from it is incorrect. It is not true that Dewey's instrumentalist account of reasoning stems entirely from James's work. Paradoxically as it may seem in the light of the traditional canons of Deweyan scholarship, Dewey revolved to Hegel's dialectic precisely because he was convinced that James's conception of rationality did not represent a reliable ground for an objective theory of thought.

Dewey credited James with having understood the teleological character of rationality, but he charged him with not having inquired into the reason why rationality is essentially teleological. James is right, Dewey wrote, in showing that the goal of thought is to bring about an "avenue to the future"; nonetheless, his analysis is incomplete because he did not manage to deal with the fact that the origin of any act of rationalization is "for the sake of this unity in the presence of a diversity or discontinuity which appears to thwart it" (ToL 1899-1900: 848). Dewey was very careful in identifying the source of James's shortcomings because he was aware that a correct comprehension of them was fundamental for the formulation of his own position. According to Dewey's reading, James's error was not that of overlooking that there are "discontinuities in things", but rather the incapacity of seeing the correlativeness between unity and diversity³³ (ToL 1899-1900: 848).

³³ In the preface of *The Will to Believe*, James put the problem in terms of whether the world is one or many, whether monism or pluralism is true (James 1896: viii; see also ToL 1899-1900: 848). In so

What Dewey intended to show with his criticism of James is that the bivalent logic usually adopted in both metaphysical and logical inquiries – and that James had employed without even attempting to account for its validity – cannot grasp the movement of experience and its process of growth. James maintained that the world of perception and the world of conception are structurally different. It is true that the former – conceived as a brute and unorganized mass of material – can be translated in the latter, thus being transformed into an ordered and consistent world of meanings, but its defects and limitations are not overcome in the passage from perceptual to conceptual knowledge. It is not entirely clear how James meant to tackle the issue of the relation between perceptions and conceptions – a problem that haunted his reflections for many years and that played a no small role in prompting him to develop his doctrine of radical empiricism. Dewey read James as saying that there are two “independent and parallel things”: the universe of conceptions, which is completely rationalized, and the universe of perceptions, which is “brute and unorganized” (ToL 1899-1900: 848). As a consequence of the introduction of a sharp distinction amongst these two different phases of experience, however, the possibility of conceiving rationality as teleological seems to be excluded. Indeed, contrary to what James seemed to believe, it is not enough to call attention to the “connected character of rationality [...] with teleology” to develop a consistent teleological account of reasoning (ToL 1899-1900: 849). It is also necessary to emphasize the continuity between perceptual and conceptual knowledge, along the lines that were sketched by Dewey himself in *How Do Concepts Arise from Percepts?*, where the idealistic thesis of a strong continuity amongst perceptions and conceptions was clearly formulated in logical terms – even though within an expressivist framework. Such a continuity is possible if and only if reflection and primary experience – conception and perception, to use James’s terminology – are seen as “strictly correlative”, in the sense of being conceived as “arising out of the same conditions and functioning with reference to the same end” (ToL 1899-1900: 850).

doing, Dewey argued, his interest in metaphysical questions prevented him from understanding that the problem at stake concerned the logical rather than the metaphysical status of concepts. If James had realized that unity and diversity are logical notions, he would have been able to see that there is no contradiction in holding that the world is both one and many. In reality, the sense of unity and the quest for unity cannot be separated from the consciousness of the discrepancy amongst the elements that constitute a whole. In Dewey’s eyes, therefore, James’s opposition between pluralism and monism appears as a false alternative: the world is discrepant only because it resists to an activity aiming at introducing a higher degree of unity amongst its contradictory elements.

The direction of reasoning, whose function consists in bringing unity into a mass of contradictory courses of action, becomes fully understandable if and only if it is seen in the light of the problem from which it originates. The movement of thought is the passing of a state of experience over into another one characterized by a greater degree of internal harmony and connection: the enhancement of meaning that concludes the movement is the result of the movement itself³⁴.

Dewey's dissatisfaction with James's theory of rationality can be better understood if attention is paid to the motives that led him to reject the account of concepts formulated in *The Principles of Psychology*. In the chapter 12 of this book, devoted to the analysis of the nature of conceptions, James embraced a conceptualist account of concepts. According to this view, concept is the product of the power to think some aspect of experience abstracted from the total experience in which it appears. In open contrast with the "Hegelizers in philosophy", James explained that concepts are unchangeable because they are identified by the function that relates the mental state to the particular thing that is signified by them (James 1890: Vol. I, 464). Evidently, James was trying to answer the same question that troubled Dewey and Bradley: what is the relationship between a mental state and the universal meaning that that mental state expresses or conveys? James's solution was that of emphasizing the objectivity of concepts, and of conceiving objectivity in terms of eternity and immutability: something is objective if and only if it is not subjected to change. In this sense, the sense of sameness – that is, the fact that it is possible for the mind to think the same, and to be aware that it is thinking the same – is "the very keel and backbone of our thinking" (James 1890: Vol. I, 460). The logic that rules the life of meanings is the logic of identity³⁵.

³⁴ In this sense, Dewey wrote: "[i]t is not that the world as directly given is plural and then we try to rationalize it and unify it, but that as directly given it is neither one nor many, or, if you like, it is both one and many. But as ends emerge the consciousness of unity emerges on the one side, and on the side of means pluralism begins to show itself" (ToL 1899-1900: 859). And a few lines below it is possible to read: "He [James] takes the empirical order of space and time world as if somehow given and then thought as coming in to organize that and conceives the latter as superimposed into the cracks so to speak of the former; this is one-sided. In his insistence that the conception as such is unchangeable and that the conception never develops (that we may substitute or combine conceptions, but that they never develop; the conception as such is eternal and unchangeable), he is off" (ToL 1899-1900: 850). Dewey's criticism of James's conceptualism is just another way of expressing the rejection of every form of dualism.

³⁵ In 'genetic' terms, the act of abstraction through which attention selects something from the continuum of felt experience establishes a relation that cannot be modified since even the most slight change would entail the destruction of the concept. The function represents the criterion of identity of concept, and the realization that concept is completely defined by the corresponding

The core of Dewey's objection to James can be therefore formulated as follows: how is it possible to account for the essential teleology of thought if it is excluded that concepts can grow and self-develop? Or, put in other terms, how is it possible to account for the fact of learning if it is maintained that concepts form an eternal system that cannot be modified, but only ceased to be when the concepts that compound it are no more used? Dewey believed that James's theory of rationality presents an interesting mixture of valuable insights and unfortunate misunderstandings. Contrary to many other empirical logicians, who tended to deny the very possibility that experience can be in itself contradictory, James had the merit of recognizing that perceptual experience is loaded with errors and limitations (ToL 1899-1900: 621). To quote a famous Hegelian expression, James was not affected by an "excess of tenderness for the things of the world" (Hegel 1874: 98). Unfortunately, James did not realize that the negative element is the force that moves the life of meaning. More precisely, Dewey charged James with not having understood that the sense of sameness – which, according to his account of mentality, is the *psychological* condition of possibility of the constitution of an order of meaning – implies contradiction as its necessary moment. "It is because of the very fact that the concept does change and grow", Dewey wrote, "that it can 'mean the same'" (ToL 1899-1900: 850). If concept were unchangeable, there would be no sense of sameness, but rather the bare perception of an eternal identity. It is the dynamism of the notion of sameness that James had completely overlooked.

However, James's theory of conceptions as functions relating a mental state to an universal meaning is compatible with a different solution. Dewey thought that James came very close to a correct understanding of the nature of meaning. The notion of fringe was precisely an attempt to formulate in psychological terms the idea of a movement towards an end. James had defined the fringe as the consciousness of the halo of relations around the image that define its context

function provides the theoretical justification of the idea that each concept remains eternally what it is, and that it can never become another conception. Consequently, James was led to conclude that while the mind can change its states, and drop one meaning in favor of another, it is absolutely meaningless to say that the first concept changes into its successor. If this were possible, the world would lose its stability and would become a meaningless flux of unique states with no internal consistency. With this sort of transcendental argument James believed he could prove that it is the sense of sameness that constitutes the world as we know it. Therefore, the Hegelian insistence on a supposed power of the ideas to self-develop is nothing but the statement of an impossibility. As James remarked, concepts form a system of entities essentially discontinuous, whose function in the general process of thinking consists in translating the "process of perceptual experience" into a "set of stagnant and petrified terms" (James 1890: Vol I, 468).

and its line of future development (James 1890: Vol. I, 256; on James's notion of fringe see Lamberth 1999: 91ff.; Rosenthal 1986: 86ff.). James was very clear in highlighting its dynamical character: the most important element of the fringe, he remarked, is "the mere feeling of harmony or discord, of a right or wrong direction in thought" (James 1890: Vol. I, 262). The direction of thought made possible by fringes of consciousness seems to involve that particular identity of unity and diversity that is the distinctive mark of dialectical movement.

Following James' insight, Dewey went one step further and explicitly identified fringe with the identity of a general attitude, which in turn he identified with the structure of the concept. In so doing, he managed to bring to light the essential coextensiveness of the notions of fringe and meaning. The fringe is the operating power of a certain concept (or image), its capacity of referring to other concepts (or images), thus establishing new relations and enhancing the meaning of experience (ToL 1899-1900: 644). When correctly conceived, the notion of fringe reveals itself to be the key to a satisfactory explanation of the psychological mechanism that makes it possible the logical movement of a concept from a stage of relative indeterminateness to a stage of greater development and clarity (ToL 1899-1900: 850). In logical terms, this amounts to saying that the general reference of a concept remains the same, but its meaning changes and acquires a new and more definite significance. In psychological terms, the very same fact can be described as a standard case of habitual association. An image naturally suggests or evokes other images to which is related: the passage from an image to another is due to a shift of the focus of attention, as a consequence of which the first image becomes part of the fringe that constitutes the meaning of the second (ToL 1899-1900: 810). Consequently, the image that is left behind does not disappear, but continues to affect the associated images and to be, in turn, affected by them. There is a "continuous movement" that goes back and forth between focus and background, and thus defines a whole of which attention and fringes are its parts and motor forces³⁶ (ToL 1899-1900: 811).

³⁶ Strangely as it may seem – since Dewey explicitly acknowledged that his dialectical theory of reasoning was "essentially, or essentially congruous with, James's doctrine" – James did not see the continuity that is at work in any act of thinking (ToL 1899-1900: 811; see also ToL 1899-1900: 851). In particular, he did not understand the dialectical nature of the process through which an identity of attitude is maintained and continuously applied to different phases of the flux of experience. Universal meaning represents the "permanence in change" that warrants the possibility of achieving new knowledge about things that are already known, even though only in an incomplete and imperfect way (ToL 1899-1900: 850). Far from being eternal, conceptions are continually used,

The process of reasoning is therefore dialectical because it moves from a whole which is relatively undeveloped to another whole which presents a higher degree of internal coordination, passing through a phase in which the tensions amongst the various moments of the original whole – that is, the various habits that constitute its meaning – are exploited as the source for the growth of experience³⁷. The initial and the final states of this dialectical movement are aesthetical: they are phases in which meanings are used in a direct and immediate way. It is only the mediating phase which is distinctively logical, being the moment in which the development of universal meanings is taken as the proper goal of a specific activity. Moreover, the process of reasoning is clearly teleological, in the double sense of originating from the need of solving a problem and of being directed towards an end that only creates the unity. The process of reasoning is teleological even in a third sense: the teleology of thought is a consequence of the functional character of concepts. It is only because the nature of the concepts is to be used rather than contemplated than thought has a teleological character. This conclusion follows directly from the thesis that every possible concept is a working concept (LoE 1895: 457). There is no mystery in the fact that universal meanings “happen to be of any use” in the struggle for transforming the world in accordance to the need of the organism, as James had

tested, and transformed in experience, and their validity as meanings depends on their capacity of changing and developing into richer and more complex general habits of behavior.

³⁷ This point is clearly formulate in *The Knowledge Experience again* (1905), in which Dewey openly admitted the influence exerted by Hegel on his instrumentalism in the context of a heated debate on the nature of pragmatism that involved almost all the leading American philosophers of the time. “I am enough of a Hegelian”, he wrote, “to believe that ‘perfect’ knowledge is not knowledge (in its intellectual or logical) at all, but such a thing as religionists and practical people have in mind; an attitude of possession and of satisfaction, – the peace that *passes* understanding. It means control of self, because control of the object on which the status of the self contemporaneously depends” (MW3: 179). It is very likely that James did not appreciate this reference to Hegel. But by emphasizing his relationship to Hegel Dewey was probably interested in taking distance from James’s version of pragmatism and radical empiricism since he was not convinced of their theoretical soundness. See, for instance, Dewey’s highly critical remarks to James psychological philosophy expressed in a letter to Webster Moore: “I . . . read James ch on the stream of cons. recently, and was impressed as never before with the inconsistencies” (CJD Vol. 1: 1908.04.29?, J. Dewey to A. W. Moore). But see also the apparently contradictory statement contained in a letter to William James in which, referring to a “possible divergence between Schiller yourself & myself”, Dewey expressed his dissatisfaction with Schiller’s humanism, motivating it with the latter’s commitment to “an idealistic metaphysics” (CJD Vol. 1: 1907.11.28, J. Dewey to W. James). These considerations are important because they shed some light on the complexity of the intellectual relationship between James and Dewey, as well as on the internal articulateness of the pragmatist movement. On Dewey’s role in the debate among realists, pragmatists and idealists see Shook 1995 and, in particular, Hildebrand 2003 (chapters 2 and 3). On James’s provocative influence on American philosophy, see Bordogna 2010.

unfortunately believed. If concepts are tools, Dewey remarked, then they must be applicable: their applicability is “the recognition of the teleological or instrumental character of the general” (ToL 1899-1900: 852). Evidently, to argue for the view that universal meanings exist only for the sake of being used is another way of expressing the fundamental idealistic thesis that the truth of the concept is to pass into the judgment, and that, in turn, the truth of the judgment consists in passing into the inference. In this case, however, it is the natural activity of an organism the hinge upon which the movement from concepts to inquiry turns. In so doing, by emphasizing the activity that pervades every manifestation of the organism, Dewey managed to find a point of conjunction between the instrumentalist theory of concepts originating from his reflections on the Kantian theory of concept and the instrumentalist theory of reasoning stemming from his rethinking of the Hegelian notion of dialectic.

In conclusion, it emerges that the problem that Dewey had to face in his quest for a new account of thinking activity was – once again – that of bringing together Hegel and James in order to find a way to harmonize objective idealism and functionalist psychology. Dewey’s aim was not that of substituting an idealistic account of reasoning with a psychological explanation of the processes of reflection through which the meanings of a contradictory experience are reconstructed, but rather to use the former to correct those aspects of the latter that were committed to a mechanistic, dualistic and reductionist view of the processes of growth of the meaning of experience. As has been pointed out in the previous chapter, Dewey was convinced that scientific psychology tends to be materialistic, in the technical sense that it naturally looks for an explanation of mental facts that prescind from any reference to the end that rules and controls the mechanism. His continuous insistence on the truth of the Hegelian conception of thought should be therefore viewed as an attempt to remain faithful not only to the idea that meaning cannot be accounted for unless the constitutive *telos* of activity is taken into explicit consideration, but also to the stronger thesis that reflection, insofar as it is conceived as the objective process through which meaning acquires greater depth and definition, can be explained only in the light of its role in the development of the whole experience within which it originates and ends.

3. Judgment and the Life of Meaning

3.1. From Metaphysics to Logic: the Autonomy of Thought

3.1.1. Instrumentalism and Autonomy

It has been argued above that the complete functionalization of thought was the result of the identification of the act of thinking with the act of judging. It has also been argued that the realization that the movement of thought should be intended as a dialectical process enabled Dewey to better understand the relationship between primary and reflective experience. What remains unaccounted for is the nature of the relationship between the dialectic of thinking and the dialectic of thought content. Or, stated in other words, what remains unaccounted for is the status of the concepts used in an act of judgment aiming at reconstructing a problematic experience.

The problem that troubles Dewey's instrumentalism is how to defend the autonomy of thought – or, to use Dewey's own words, the possibility of a “dislocation from the local, circumstantial, personal” (ToL 1899-1900: 551). If the value of the activity of thinking is traced back to the capacity of solving problems encountered in primary experience, it seems natural to conclude that thought is a tool in the hand of an organism that can assume a distinctively reflective attitude when such an attitude is needed. Obviously, no one can deny that – at least in a certain sense – this conclusion is correct: there is no doubt, for instance, that Dewey himself would have subscribed it without hesitation, as is clearly manifested by his conception of concepts and theories. Nonetheless, the doctrine of instrumentalism can also be read as implying that reflection should not be pursued as an end in itself, but only as a tool to bring about a new experience that could supplant the previous one that has proved itself to be an unreliable standpoint for further activity. In this sense, the value of reflection is traced back to its immediate applicability to the problems of life. According to this approach, Dewey's identification of experience with activity has to be read as supporting the conclusion that the essence of man is to act rather than to think³⁸.

³⁸ Undoubtedly, this reading has some plausibility. Among the other things, it seems to be the only possible view wholly consistent with the thesis that thought arises from an objective state of contradiction. In psychological terms, a state of tension can be described as a state of doubt that

However, while it can be left unquestioned whether or not the practical man prefers to act than to reflect upon action, it is important to note that an unilateral insistence on activity is not what Dewey had in mind. Dewey did not want to argue for a strong formulation of instrumentalism as the one sketched above because he realized that, were it adopted, the possibility of explaining the rise and growth of natural sciences would be undermined. Dewey was well aware that the most refined concepts of natural sciences are the result of a long process of observation and inquiry. Consequently, the fact of scientific knowledge shows that – no matter how convincing may be the theoretical arguments in favor of the strong version of instrumentalism – the reduction of the activity of thinking to the search for solution of the concrete problems encountered in every-day life or scientific practice is false.

But the thesis of the autonomy of thought has to be defended for another reason, not wholly unrelated from the previous one. Indeed, the assumption of the autonomy of thought is necessary to account for the enhancement of the meaning of immediate experience, which depends on the possibility of reconstructing already existing habits of behavior through the application of concepts and theories. The distinctive trait of Dewey's theory of experience is that no meaning is too complex or abstract to become embodied in an immediate experience. The continuous growth of experience proves that objects acquire new meaning as a consequence of their entering into new interactions with the organism. Now, if the refinement of conceptual tools were performed only in those moments in which an actual contradiction is experienced, the meaning of the original situation would be enriched only in a extremely limited and partial way because there would be no room for an independent development of universal meaning. The primacy of reason over nature – an idea that Dewey defended in his articles on the theory of emotions and in his account of meaning as a biological construction – would be denied if nature did not provide the conditions for the activity of creation and refinement of concepts.

From what has been said it is evident that nobody would be willing to endorse a view that openly contradicts the commonest facts of experience and

impedes the natural activity of the organism. Since the reserve of energy that a living being possesses is limited, the organism tends to minimize the effort of thinking about the possible solutions of a certain difficulty. So, the argument goes on, it would be a biological absurdity for an animal to waste his energies in useless activities. Dewey partially admitted the validity of this remark by arguing that in everyday experience the process of mediation is "dropped out as soon as possible" (LoE 1895: 449).

science. However, Dewey was compelled to face it with the utmost seriousness, and precisely because of its absurdity. Dewey realized that such a conclusion may be drawn from his theory of experience as activity, and consequently felt compelled to explain why that view should not be treated as an objection to his position. This (apparent) contradiction was formulated by Dewey in the following terms: it is not possible to maintain both that the intellectual process is one of mediation and that it has a value in itself (LoE 1895: 448). The insistence on mediation seems to exclude the possibility of conceiving reflection as an activity that is worthy of being pursued for itself. If thought is instrumental, then the value of an act of thinking resides entirely in the end that is brought about.

In reality, Dewey countered, the contradiction stems from the conflation of two different theses: on the one hand, the thesis that the entire value of an act of reflection consists in its effectiveness as a tool to reconstruct an unsatisfactory experience; on the other hand, the thesis that reflection is a wholly natural activity that has to be practiced and refined continually in order to be truly effective. It is only as a consequence of a training directing to improving his habits that the subject acquires a logical expertise which enables him to rationally deal with the problems encountered in experience. "It is the purpose which is mediate", Dewey wrote, not the fact itself – which means that there is a distinctive intellectual interest that characterize a certain kind of activities performed by an organism (LoE 1895: 449). The same concept can be expressed in less technical terms by saying that since reflection is a determinate phase of experience, it is a process of mediation that is itself immediate (LoE 1895: 449). The idea that experience is mediated immediacy is obviously Hegelian, as Dewey himself was willing to recognize in an important article written in the mid of the first decade of the 20th century (MW3: 181ff.). What is different and original in Dewey's treatment of the traditional notion of mediated immediacy is the articulated conception of mediation taken as constitutive of meaning: mediation may be conscious (as in reflective experience) or unconscious (as in primary experience); in both cases, however, experience taken as a whole is a primary experience. The recognition of this fact is not without consequence on the logical level. Indeed, it is only because reflective experience partakes of the nature of primary experience that the activity of thought is possible. Were it not for the unquestioned validity of the concepts employed in thought – a continuity which is grounded on the physiological persistence of the general habits of behavior

that constitute the object of experience –, reflection would not have a solid basis on which to rely (see below 3.2.2).

Previous remarks are important because they bring to the fore the issue concerning the theoretical status of concepts created in the activity of judging over experience. This problem can be divided into two distinct sub-questions. On the one hand, what concepts are allowed to be used in the process of reflection? On the other hand, what is the role played by concepts in the development of experience? The first question raises the issue of what may be called the 'ontology of thought', the problem being not that of determining what is the nature of concepts – a problem that is not difficult to solve in the light of Dewey's instrumentalist approach – but rather that of clarifying the proper structure of the universal meanings that are elaborated as plausible plans of action. The second question concerns instead the function of the concepts, and, more in general, the theoretical function of the logical phase of experience. As has been pointed out, Dewey maintained that the ultimate goal of reflection is to reconstruct a problematic situation. However, he was also aware that every act of thought necessarily implies the refinement of the concepts used in the judging process. Through the continuous improvement of the conceptual apparatus at hand, it becomes possible to acquire a more comprehensive knowledge of the nature of the contradictions and problems that have to be dealt with in thought. The effort to refine old concepts in the light of new needs brings about a set of reliable notions that structure and construct a world of scientific objects – where scientific should be intended in a broad sense, including all the concepts or objects that integrate the reference to immediate activity with the reference to other possible activities, thus enhancing the meaning of the things of the common-sense world (ToL 1899-1900: 567) – thanks to which the problem is identified and effectively formulated. It is to the fact of the construction of scientific objects as a mean to bring to light the potential meaning of the objects of primary experience that the expression 'theoretical function of the logical phase of experience' refers.

We will begin with the second point, since it has already been discussed at some length in the previous pages, and then we will move on to tackling the first one. The analysis of the ontology of thought will eventually lead to the identification of the fundamental presupposition of Dewey's notion of autonomy: the idea that judgment is the logical space in which meaningful objects are constructed.

3.1.2. *The Theoretical Constitution of the Object*

There is no doubt that Dewey saw the autonomy of thought as grounded on the productive spontaneity of judgment. His entire functionalist theory of reflection revolves around the tenet that judgment can be a truly effective factor in the reconstruction of experience only because it can actually suspend the immediacy of activity in order to rise above the concreteness of the problematic experience from which it arises. Were not reflective experience autonomous and functionally independent from primary experience, it would be a mere reduplication of the same contradictions that have originated it. If this were true, thought would be completely useless: consequently, from a naturalistic and evolutionary point of view as the one adopted by Dewey, it would be impossible to account for its survival. As James before him, Dewey believed that the only reason why thought – consciousness, in James' argument – has not perished in the struggle for existence is because of its capacity of producing real effects in the world (MW2: 309-310; James 1890: Vol. I, 140-141). Far from being a faithful representation of the things in the world, indeed, judgment is an act through which the relevant features of primary experience – relevant in the light of a certain purposes – are selected and systematized, with the aim of making the conduct of the agent more rational.

Dewey gave a few example of the power of judgment to create a system of concepts that enables the agent to formulate a reliable plan of action. In particular, he had in mind the theoretical fertility of mathematical and physical knowledge. Dewey was convinced that no refined analysis of experience can be made unless on the postulate that the particular experience in question can be satisfactorily translated in mathematical and physical terms. Through the application of the categories and mathematics and physical sciences it is possible to “perform [the] necessary eliminations” and “to isolate a given fact” (ToL 1899-1900: 767). These acts of abstraction are controlled by the reference to a common feature selected as relevant for a determinate purpose. They make it possible to bring about a material that, being simpler than the original one, is easier to handle. Space, time, number, quantity, all these categories – which Dewey took, rather classically, as constitutive of the scientificity of mathematics and, a fortiori, of every possible science, since the scientificity of a discipline is dependent on the adoption of purely quantitative categories of construction of objectivity (ToL 1899-1900: 625) – provide the tools to transform a thing encountered in

immediate experience into a refined object whose nature is entirely determined by the relations defined within the conceptual framework chosen as a guide for reflection (biological, physiological, zoological, etc.). This transformation is “qualitative”, not merely quantitative: it is a “radical transformation” of the meaning of the fact (ToL 1899-1900: 763).

Scientific concepts are extremely useful tools precisely because they are the result of an act of creative and spontaneous selection – creative and spontaneous in the sense that it depends on the interest of the agent – through which new objects are constituted whose behavior responds to general laws that are known by the agent. Being tools, the theoretical validity of scientific concepts consists in their effectiveness in securing “the greatest probability of getting data which will be fruitful” (ToL 1899-1900: 625-626). But the possibility of achieving this goal relies in the fact that scientific concepts are created by human beings in their efforts to cope with the world. They are general model representing the standard behavior of the objects belonging to a certain class. The relative simplicity of scientific concepts is therefore the key to understanding their explanatory and predictive power. As is evident, such simplicity has to be intended in two different yet interwoven senses. On the one hand, scientific objects are *structurally* simpler than the objects of primary experience. Since they are abstraction, they are the product of an act of selection that excludes as irrelevant the greatest part of their actual qualities. So, for instance, the chair on which I am now sitting has a color, a certain degree of comfort, a history that explains why it is in this room. Nonetheless, all these aspects are meaningless from the point of view of physics. As Dewey wrote in *The Postulate of Immediate Experience* (1905) referring to the different ways in which the various interests of agents contribute to the constitution of the meaning of an object, “[i]f it is a horse that is to be described”, “the horse-trader, or the jockey, or the timid family man who wants a ‘safe driver’, or the zoologist or the paleontologist” will give different description of what a horse is (MW3: 158-159).

On the other hand, scientific objects are *epistemically* simpler than the objects of primary experience. This statement may appear surprising: indeed, it seems natural to assume that the knowledge of common sense objects is far more direct and immediate than the knowledge of refined objects of science³⁹. Obviously,

³⁹ This impression is partially corroborated by a technical consideration. Dewey’s theory of meaning revolves around the fundamental premise that the meaning of a thing consists entirely of the relations linking that thing or event to other possible things or events that are brought to existence by the actions performed by the agent. In this sense, the relations that structure the objects

Dewey did not intend to deny the fact that our familiarity with objects – which is grounded upon the habitual ‘knowledge’ of their consequences in a standard context – is the basic level of meaning. The very idea of the immediacy of primary experience points in this direction. However, the criterion to evaluate what has been named here ‘epistemic simplicity’ is not that of the immediacy of relations. To use a Hegelian distinction, common sense objects are familiar but are not known (see also Peirce’s distinction between the three degrees of clarity in *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*, Peirce 1878/1986: 257ff.). Human beings are acquainted with things compounding their environment, they can easily predict the normal behavior of the objects they use, but their whole interest is addressed to things in their concreteness. Commonsensical ‘knowledge’ is knowledge of the thing in its particularity, of the particular qualities that determine the particular nature of that particular object. Consequently, the richness of the object of common sense denies the possibility of paying attention to the rule that is constitutive of the object insofar as it is an object, that is, insofar as it is taken as a thing having a meaning. Commonsense objects are meaningful, but since they are not consciously constructed the ultimate reason of their meaning remains unknown and unexplained⁴⁰.

By abstracting from the concreteness of the particular case, scientific concepts bring to light the universal rule of construction of the object and indicate how to treat the problematic event as a paradigmatic instance of a general law. “The whole meaning” of the theory is “used to give meaning” to that particular event (ToL 1899-1900: 874). Take for instance a case of typhoid fever. “[t]he total experience is there” since the complexity of the experience is

of common sense are undoubtedly simpler than the net of relations that constitute scientific objects because they are more immediate. Their immediacy is due to the fact that they are the activities the organism is the most familiar with. So, for instance, drinkability and liquidity are a significant part of the meaning of the concept of water only because human beings had used water to quench their thirst and to clean themselves and their clothes. More technically speaking, there are various levels of meaning. Dewey made the example of the botanist who can *see* in a plant all the botanic knowledge that he has accumulated (ToL 1899-1900: 876). In this sense, the botanist’s plant is far more complicated than the plant experience by a person who has little knowledge of botany (see chapter 2, 3.2.).

⁴⁰ Obviously, this does not mean that primary experience should be conceived of as a lower stage of reality, as idealists argued. As has been pointed out above, Dewey’s anti-intellectualism was, in the last analysis, nothing but an effort to undermine the validity of this conclusion. Besides, given Dewey’s conception of experience as activity it is evident that commonsense concepts have practical dignity and validity, which depend upon their being useful tools for acting successfully in the world. The insistence on the intrinsic limits of commonsense concepts aims merely at highlighting the fact that they do not have in themselves the principle of their own reconstruction.

the cause of its ambiguity and epistemic opacity. Differently from the uneducated man, however, a physician has the intellectual means to rationally tackle the problem. The development of medical knowledge has provided a set of useful instruments that enable the agent “to come nearer” to the idea of “observation free from interpretation” (ToL 1899-1900: 766). In the case of the typhoid fever, the already formed concept of germ supplies the “scientific basis for observation of the fact and elimination of the sources of error” (ToL 1899-1900: 766). So, Dewey argued, when a physician infers that some traits of the present situation are symptoms of typhoid fever, he takes “the whole science of medicine as true” (ToL 1899-1900: 757). It is only in the light of the existing body of scientific knowledge that a raw and undetermined event is constructed as a meaningful object. Indeed, it is only in the light of a universal net of concepts that a particular element can be related to other elements in accordance with a general rule⁴¹.

Dewey’s 1899 lectures on logical theory are very clear on this point. The goal of reflective experience is “the determination of the individual, of the particular experience or system of experiences or individual object” (ToL 1899-1900: 760). There is a moment in every problematic experience in which the “nature of the particular case” can be determined only “mediately” (ToL 1899-1900: 760). The task of reflective experience is that of finding out what is the nature of the presented object. This is possible if and only if the problematic object is

⁴¹ It has been argued in the previous chapters that Dewey never questioned the fundamental idea that meaning is individual. In the Hegelian terminology that Dewey employed at that time, the individuality of meaning consists in the capacity of a universal to get embodied in the particular. As a consequence of this struggle for actualization, the particular element becomes a sign of the universal meaning: in so doing, the latter realizes the conceptual import of the latter. As a consequence of this struggle for actualization, moreover, both the particular and the universal undergo a ‘semantic’ change: on the one hand, the conceptual determinations of the universal meaning become part of the natural properties of the particular; on the other hand, the application and test of the set of universal meanings involves a transformation of their conceptual content that can be more or less radical depending on the novelty of the problem that has originated the act of reflection in which those meanings are used. The dialectic of particular and universal is therefore the key to understanding Dewey’s conception of the instrumental role played by scientific concepts in the construction of an experience. Dewey put great emphasis on the fact that, contrary to what has been argued by empirical logicians, the task of thinking is not to subsume a given particular under a given universal. The supporters of this narrow conception of thought seem to believe that “reality is always particular”, so that what exists is a “certain number of isolated particulars”, and that concepts or universal meanings have “no reality” because they are subjective modes of apprehension of the material (ToL 1899-1900: 435). In this sense, Dewey remarked, idealist logicians come nearer to the truth since they give due weight to the creative power of the universal meaning (ToL 1899-1900: 693).

constructed in conformity with a set of general rules that provide the theoretical background knowledge in the light of which the deviations that have caused the agent to adopt a reflective stance acquire a determinate meaning (ToL 1899-1900: 769). The dialectic between particular and universal is therefore historical and instrumental through and through. The construction of the individual needs time to be accomplished: time is needed because the conceptual framework in which the particular case is translated has to prove its validity in the actual process of reconstruction of problematic experience. To return to the previous example, even though the typhoid fever is a concrete, individual experience, it is more useful to treat it as a variable since the goal of reflection is to formulate a plan of action that can construct a harmonic situation in which typhoid fever is eliminated. This is possible if and only if the present situation of which typhoid fever is the problematic factor contains in itself the potentialities to overcome its own contradictions. Consistently, a certain phase of the situation is taken as known – that is, the agent assumes that its consequences are easily predictable – while another phase is considered as problematic. The very possibility of determining a phase of experience as problematic depends on the possibility of referring to a body of knowledge that is not controversial. Stated in other words, Dewey's relational theory of meaning implies that the perception of the variation is made possible by the persistence of the whole system of concepts elaborated in the history of science and human experience. Once the reconstruction of immediate experience is made – which means that some features of the present situation are selected and constructed in conformity with the universal rules and concepts that constitute the 'regional ontology' deemed as relevant for present purposes – scientific objects can be employed to solve the problems that compelled the adoption of the reflective stance.

It follows therefore that what has been called the epistemic simplicity of scientific concepts is a direct consequence of their being tools for the reconstruction of experience. The validity and effectiveness of a tool consists in its capacity of bringing about the effects that are expected to result from its application. Scientific concepts are nothing but a set of selected and controlled ways of translating a problematic situation into a simpler and more familiar problem – where the relative simplicity of the new problematic situation is a consequence of the transformation of a common sense things into scientific objects, thanks to which some general plan of action can be provisionally formulated. The definition of typhoid fever in terms of germs immediately

indicates the series of actions that have to be performed in order to get rid of the problem – take a sample of blood from the patient, analyze the sample under the microscope, etc. What is relevant to note for present purposes is the conclusion about the theoretical status of scientific objects that can be drawn from these observations. In particular, it is worth noting that Dewey’s instrumental account of concepts – both scientific and commonsense – prevents from seeing scientific objects as more real and more true than commonsense objects. In open contrast to what has usually been held by the advocates of scientific realism, Dewey’s view is that scientific concepts merely state the conditions of possibility of the objects that are encountered in primary experience. They are universal rules that explain and predict the behavior of things insofar as they are treated as objects of a certain kind (ToL 1899-1900: 626). Their effectiveness is a consequence of their simplicity, which in turn is a consequence of the fact that they do not aim at exhausting the complexity of reality. “The world of tables and chairs”, Dewey remarked, “is not the physical world constructed by the physical scientist, a construction of matter and motion, of atoms and molecules”⁴² (ToL 1899-1900: 576).

3.1.3. *The ‘Ontology of Thought’*

Previous conclusions help us to shed some light on the second major issue concerning Dewey’s theory of reflection that has been mentioned above, that is, what kinds of concepts one is entitled to use in an act of reconstruction of experience. Dewey’s functionalism denies that the validity of a concept depends upon its capacity of faithfully representing things as they are in themselves. As has been pointed out in previous sections, according to the instrumentalist perspective embraced by Dewey the essence of a concept is that of being a

⁴² Consequently, it is impossible that a contradiction can arise between two different and wholly legitimate modes of coping with the environment since they respond to different logics and different needs. As there is no open contradiction between what is seen under the microscope and what is visible to the naked eye, similarly the commonsense concepts – which are indispensable in the everyday transactions with the environment – are not in contradiction with scientific concepts – which are useful in those contexts in which commonsense concepts fail to construct a meaningful object. The same holds true of the difference between scientific and moral accounts of reality. They are not in contradiction because the former is interested in the study of means to achieve a goal, while the latter takes into account the whole of action. On this point, see in particular LoE 1895: 428-429.

working concept, a tool whose nature is realized when it is used as a guide to control and direct conduct (LoE 1895: 457). Being tools, the validity of concepts – no matter whether refined or not – is relative to their effectiveness as rules of action. Consequently, a preliminary answer to the question about the ‘ontology of thought’ goes as follows: every concept that is useful to the effort of reconstructing a problematic situation is valid. This is just another way of expressing the thesis that since thought is autonomous, the concepts employed in an act of reflection are relatively independent from the actual state of the world. They do not respond to a logic of representation, but to a logic of production.

The philosophical bearings of this consideration are remarkable. Indeed, when the focus of attention is shifted from the particular concepts employed in reflective experience to the general categories that structure that type of experience, the radicality of Dewey’s approach comes clearly to the fore. Heir of the idealistic tradition, Dewey was convinced that the goal of philosophical reflection was to provide an unified theory of meaning and reason that could account for the fact of meaning in its entirety. In the previous pages, it has been argued that the notion of habit or second nature represents the way in which the mature Dewey managed to explain how it is possible that the things encountered in the everyday and unproblematic interactions with the environment can be experienced as meaningful objects. However, his project of formulating an unified theory of rationality was not exhausted by this consideration. Indeed, it was of the utmost importance for Dewey to show that the instrumental account of concepts as working tools can be extended to hold for every concept possible, included those that refer to the essential nature of thought. In other words, Dewey’s instrumentalist conception of thought was programmatically concerned with avoiding any conflict between the analysis of the concepts used in common sense and science and the analysis of the concepts employed in philosophy⁴³. In

⁴³ This means that there is no room in Dewey’s constructive naturalism for a transcendental approach such as the one formulated by Kant in the *Introduction* of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. From a naturalistic point of view, philosophy cannot be attributed any kind of superiority – neither methodological nor ontological – over sciences. Philosophy differs from sciences only because it aims at providing “a more comprehensive organization of hypothesis” and “a more interrelated statement of the working concepts that we use” (ToL 1899-1900: 884). If, on the one hand, the idea of an unified theory of meaning and reason enabled Dewey to get rid of all the difficulties about the problem of verification – as for instance those that characterized the history of logical positivism; on the other hand, it compelled him to be extremely cautious about using the traditional concepts forged by philosophers. In particular, Dewey had in mind the epistemological treatment of the logical relation between subject and object, which revolves around the metaphysical assumption that mind and world are two wholly separate entities – or, as Dewey remarked, that the genuine

particular, two are the general concepts that Dewey believed to be in need of revision: the modal concept of necessity and the concept of premises as logical rather than metaphysical assumptions⁴⁴.

In 1892 Peirce published in *The Monist* an important article entitled *The Doctrine of Necessity Examined*. In this text, Peirce outlined a metaphysical conception of necessity grounded on what he called a “cosmical theory” of the universe (Peirce 1892/2010: 111). Rejecting the ‘doctrine of necessity’ – the thesis according to which the idea that universe is determined by law is only a presupposition or a postulate of scientific reasoning – Peirce argued that necessity should be recognized as a property of reality in a continuous process of growth. One year later, in 1893, Dewey published in the pages of the same journal an article entitled *The Superstition of Necessity* in which the very same problems that had concerned Peirce were tackled from a different point of view. Even though Dewey openly declared that his intention was not to criticize Peirce’s proposal, nonetheless the theory of necessity to which Dewey subscribed is extremely different from Peirce’s one. The difference between the two approaches consists in the fact that, contrary to his former teacher at Johns Hopkins University, Dewey conceived of necessity as a logical rather than as a metaphysical category, and traced its entire value back to the role it played within the activity of judgment. According to Dewey, Peirce was right in highlighting the theoretical untenability of the doctrine of necessity. Dewey agreed with him that the standard understanding of the concept of necessity is to be substituted with a less naïve conception. However, Dewey believed that this revision should be conformed to the spirit of the post-Kantian idealism, with its awareness of the relativity of knowledge, and not inspired by the desire of reinstating a pre-Kantian metaphysics of being grounded upon a logic of science that had not yet assimilated the lesson of the theory of evolution.

Dewey explicitly maintained that the notion of necessity represents a modal aspect of the judgment about fact, and not a property of the fact itself. “The

problem of philosophy is to tackle the question of the “relation of thought at large to reality at large” (MW2: 303). This kind of dualistic approach to logical issues should be rejected in favor of an instrumentalist perspective that could yield an account of thought compatible with a radical naturalism.

⁴⁴ A third notion with which Dewey was profoundly dissatisfied is the concept of cause and effect. Indeed, Dewey could not accept the standard analysis of cause and effects as two distinct elements independent one from the other and only externally related. Garrison and Good have called attention to this point in their important article *Dewey, Hegel, and Causation* where it is highlighted the similarity between Dewey’s and Hegel’s accounts of causation (see Garrison and Good 2010: 106ff.).

judgment of necessity”, he wrote, “is exactly and solely the transition in our knowledge from unconnected judgments to a more comprehensive synthesis” (EW4: 20). The process of inquiry starts with a set of disconnected judgments, their disconnectedness being a direct consequence of the contradictions of primary experience. Its task is to bring them into unity and harmony so as to overcome the difficulties from which thought has originated. The judgment of necessity is the way in which the disconnected judgments can be related together. The objects that are the content of judgments are initially taken as “the baldest and solidest of hard facts” (EW4: 23). The plurality of judgments presents the agent with a plurality of seemingly irreducible objects that cannot be reconstructed in an unified whole. An object represents a settled way of acting on the environment, but in a problematic situation all these different ways of acting cannot find a satisfactory synthesis in a consistent course of action. Now, since thought is for the sake of activity, and since action is defined by a specific purpose, the function of thinking is not to list and register the plurality of facts. Rather, its function is to discover which of those objects can be used as means to reach a desired end. Relying on an instrumentalist interpretation of the Kantian theory of the objectivity of judgment, Dewey held that this goal can be achieved if and only if the relation between means and ends is conceived as a necessary connection of the form “If we are to reach an end we *must* take certain means” (EW4: 30). The necessity of this connection is the guarantee that the relation drawn between the protasis and apodosis of a hypothetical judgment is objective – that is, that the hypothetical judgment expresses not an accidental (and therefore useless) relation of concomitance, but a real bond between those two elements. In a judgment of necessity, two objects previously experienced as unrelated are brought together and declared to be dependent one from the other. A relation is necessary if and only if a certain set of actions is recognized as the necessary condition for the achievement of a certain goal. As is evident, this kind of necessity is *functional*. Being functional, it is also temporally determined: the value of judgments of necessity consists in the role it plays in the development of experience from a state of uncertainty and problematicity to a condition of harmony and unity. A judgment of necessity is nothing but the provisional formulation of a rule of behavior indicating a possible way to bring about that specific state of affairs that the agent is looking for. From this point of view, a general rule formulated in the form of a hypothetical judgment is to be considered provisional because it is impossible to say whether this prescription is

valid or not before the action is performed. The discrepancy between universality and individuality is therefore to be traced back to the ever possible discrepancy between the envisaged future and the enjoyed present. The judgment of necessity is the 'device' thanks to which it is possible to recover the ground of individuality that is abandoned when an act of reflection is undertaken.

According to Dewey's constructivist perspective, such 'recovery' of individuality is to be conceived of as the result of an act of production: the individuality in which the universal rules are actualized is a new experience created by an agent whose conduct is directed by the rules of action made available by scientific and commonsensical concepts. Consequently, the final experience in which the act of reflection realizes itself does not bear any trace of the necessary relation between means and ends that has been established for practical purposes. Necessity does not indicate a particular force acting in the world: it is a logical category that characterizes reflective experience, that is, that phase of experience in which the unity of means and end has not yet been attained. When unity is reached, their separateness is definitely overcome. Indeed, the conclusion to which the judgment of necessity leads is a new primary experience in which necessity has disappeared: reality, the world concretely experienced, is not a world of necessity, but a world of actuality. As Dewey concisely remarked, we experience how things are, not how they must be⁴⁵ (EW4: 31).

Even though in *The Superstition of Necessity* these views are formulated in a language that was still committed to an expressivist conception of thought – for instance, it is stated that the ultimate goal of science is to “describe, to completely state, the reality” (EW4: 20) –, Dewey succeeded in outlining an instrumentalist and functionalist account of the notion of necessity centered around the assumption that the categories of modality are to be explained as forms of judgment. This way of formulating the issue has two remarkable consequences.

⁴⁵ This is just another way to express the idea that the end of a process of reflection is not itself a case of knowledge. In an unified experience the relation of means and end is so 'internalized' that it becomes a part of the definition of the object. Once the child experiences that fire burns, the capacity of the latter to cause a burn becomes a relevant aspect of its meaning. Similarly, once a problematic situation is reconstructed, the means that have enabled the agent to achieve the goal are 'absorbed' and embodied in it. The meaning of the hammer that has been used to break a glass is thus enriched: hammer becomes the-thing-that-can-break-a-glass. The same holds true for the glass that has to be broken: its meaning becomes that-object-that-can-be-broken-with-a-hammer. But for this reason it would be reductive to maintain that the selection of means leaves unaltered the meaning of the desired end. The idea of an external relation between means and ends belongs to a not fully developed stage of thinking.

Firstly, it explains away the illusion that the ultimate ground of the concept of necessity has to be sought in the metaphysical structure of reality. As has been remarked above, Dewey's instrumentalism is rooted in the idea that there is nothing outside judgment that its elements should mirror: the value of a notion consists exclusively of its capacity of bringing forth reflection. Judgments of necessity are highly refined tools whose experimentally detectable meaning consists in the particular form of synthesis they can bring about. Their meaning is their role: they introduce a partial unity among different and distinct judgments – a unity that is completed and realized only in the final reconstructed experience. Secondly, as a consequence of this shift from metaphysics to logic, Dewey managed to preserve – even though in an extremely modified form – the idealistic notion of the unity of reason: rationality is a whole because the structure of the concepts that compound it is always the same. Every possible concept – from the simplest empirical concepts to the most complex categories of modality – is a particular function that connects two or more elements according to a general rule.

Dewey's rejection of any metaphysical mortgage that could prevent from seeing the functional 'absoluteness' of thought – taken in the etymological sense of the term, as the absence of external constraints apart from the reference to the end that thought must bring about – is even more evident if attention is paid to Dewey's conception of the theoretical status of the premises of reasoning. Traditionally, philosophers have been unanimous in arguing that the simplest and most evident premises from which thought moves cannot be taken as the result of another act of thinking. The reason of such a denial is obvious: if every premise is a conclusion of a previous argument, one is compelled to accept an infinite regress that undermines the very idea of a solid foundation of the conclusion in its premises. Consistently, philosophers have been led to maintain that reasoning "postulates" a small set of truths that are not questioned because they are considered "immediate", "self-evident", and "intuitive" (ToL 1899-1900: 536). Their immediacy and self-evidence is the mark of their correctness, which in turn is the ultimate warrant of the truth – not simply of the logical validity – of the conclusions drawn from the premises. This form of logical intuitionism was precisely what Dewey wanted to criticize.

Dewey remarked that there is a conflict among logicians and philosophers about the nature of these supposed ultimate truths. The latter believe that the fundamental premises of reasoning are really ultimate, and that logicians must

accept them. On the contrary, logicians emphasize the theoretical untenability of this approach. Evidently, Dewey ranked himself among the logicians. According to the instrumentalist account of thought, thinking is a function that has the power to create its own objects. If one assumes that the premises of thought are logically ultimate – being impossible to deduce them from further premises – he is also compelled to hold that the logical process “ends in them”, and consequently that logical process necessarily “passes over into metaphysics” (ToL 1899-1900: 536). It follows therefore that the ultimate ground of logic is to be found in the metaphysical structure of things that can be apprehended only by an act of intuition. But this means that the most fundamental among the logical objects are not constructed, but are discovered as something wholly independent from the creative and spontaneous activity of thought. In other words, if philosophers were right on this point, the truth of logical inferences would depend on a not-logical fact, i.e., the fact that certain propositions are metaphysically true.

Dewey believed not only that a mature logical perspective should oppose any attempt to provide a metaphysical foundation of logic, but also that concepts were now available which permitted to formulate a different account of what a sound foundations should be. Dewey was convinced that the traditional explanation of the character of the ultimate truths of thought was made appealing by the lack of alternatives to the deductive model of reasoning. The rise of natural sciences dramatically changed the situation, the task of modern science being not to bring about a classification, but rather to experimentally discover new entities that could “unify the detail, the diversity into a whole” (ToL 1899-1900: 537). What a scientist tries to do in his laboratory investigations is not to search for the premises of his reasoning; rather, he looks for new data and for possible explanations of them. To be satisfactory, Dewey argued, these explanations must be circular: “the parts [should be explained] in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of the parts” (ToL 1899-1900: 537). The circularity is due to the fact that scientists exploit universal concepts to interpret particular facts that are not fixed, but change continuously during the process of inquiry. The transformation of facts causes a transformation of concepts, which in turn determines a change of the way in which those facts have to be conceived and explained. The new logic – the logic that takes inspiration from the successes of the natural sciences – has to accept the circularity of particular facts and universal hypotheses as its starting point. It has to move from the assumption that there is

nothing fixed in thought: there is not a predetermined end that prescribes to thought what should be done since the end itself has to be determined within the course of reflection as a response to the specific difficulties encountered.

For these reasons, Dewey was led to argue for the thesis that the ultimate standard of the process of reflective thinking coincides with the whole “system of truths” rather than with a small set of premises (ToL 1899-1900: 537). It is the entire net of concepts that is involved in the explanation of a particular event. In this sense, the use that Dewey made of the idealistic terminology to express the circular nature of modern science pointed to a holistic conception of validity and truth that rejected any form of foundationalism – in particular the one grounded upon the idea that the most basic concepts employed in reflection and inquiry are of an extra-logical nature. Judgment establishes its own standards of validity, as well as the criteria that concepts have to satisfy. Nothing can be accepted in judgment that is not produced by the functional spontaneity of the act of reflection. However, Dewey did not draw relativistic conclusions from his holistic and creative conception of thought activity. As a Hegelian, he was convinced that the pure universality of meanings is not sufficient, if taken separately and in isolation, to determine what a thing is. Even a well-established and well-confirmed physical law cannot be said to be true or false before it is actualized – that is, before it is used a tool to reconstruct a problematic situation. So, Dewey argued, at least in a certain sense it is perfectly correct to say that in a true judgment particular existences and universal meanings, facts and ideas, correspond. The reason why he did not find any difficulty in combining together those seemingly contradictory perspectives is that he did not embrace the epistemological view of knowledge on which the traditional correspondence theory of truth relies: the correspondence of meanings and existences is not something that has to be discovered, a fact of the world that thought has to limit itself to depicting in the most faithful way possible. The correspondence between facts and ideas is a task that the activity of thinking has to perform.

3.2. *The Objectivity of Judgment*

Previous discussions have been devoted to shed light on the fact that the functional autonomy of thought upon which Dewey put such a great emphasis is

a logical and not a metaphysical thesis. Nothing could have been more distant from Dewey's mind than the idea that thought is a separate realm of reality. Indeed, his adhesion to a dialectic conception of thinking prevented him from conceiving the act of judging as a subjective and private event. Thought does not belong to a sphere of being essentially different from reality, but rather is the locus in which reality acquires logical determinations as a means to reconstruct its own meaning. The process of inquiry consists in what has been named the dialectic of content – the reciprocal determination of the subject and object of judgment. The final judgment in which the unity between subject and object is eventually reached is the construction of a new object of experience. The objectivity of judgment is therefore a consequence of the constructive power of thought: the object of thought is its *objective*, the goal that it aims at achieving and in which it realizes itself. It is the final result in which thought can rest satisfied.

It is important to understand the 'polemical use' that Dewey made of this thesis. To say that the objectivity of judgment relies upon the constructive power of thought was a way to distance himself both from the empiricist and the rationalist traditions. It is not surprising therefore that Dewey's logical reflections often began with a criticism of standard conceptions of judgment. So, for instance, in the opening pages of the 1895 lectures on the logic of ethics, Dewey maintained that empiricists and rationalists agreed in holding that judgment has to reflect an already formed reality (LoE 1895: 430). There is an object out there, and the degree of truth of a judgment depends upon its capacity to faithfully represent the properties of its object. At a first glance, this view seems completely reasonable, and its plausibility is undoubtedly the reason of its success. However, the assumption that judgment is static rather than creative and dynamic entails an undesired consequences for the theory of logic.

Traditionally, judgment has been defined as the act of attributing a predicate to a subject, as a consequence of which the object expressed by the subject is qualified by the predicate expressed by the predicate. Dewey did not intend to criticize the form of this definition. He rather wanted to bring to light what is implicitly contained in it. Judgment is the activity of unifying a subject and a predicate. Consequently, judgment – which is the totality of the act, and it is represented by the copula – can be seen from the side two sides of subject and predicate. Two are therefore the movements that characterize it. On the one hand, if the subject is the perspective point from which judgment is looked at, judgment reveals itself to be an act of discrimination. Take for instance the

judgment 'this is an envelope'. Everything in the world, Dewey remarked, is a 'this'; the predicate 'envelope' thus intervenes and discriminates a particular section of reality. As a consequence of this work of discrimination, the subject is limited and identified as a thing of a certain kind. On the other hand, the act of discrimination turns into an act of unification when looked at from the side of the predicate. In this case, indeed, the predicate is what is given from the very beginning, and the subject is the point in which the movement ends. Taken in itself – that is, without reference to a concrete subject – the predicate represents only an abstract relation, an universal meaning, the pure structure of a connection between an element and its consequences translated from an existential to a logical plane. So, a subject is needed in order for a predicate to be unified and become concretely meaningful. As Dewey summarized this point, without the reference to a particular subject, "one might intelligently know table, but not concrete table" (LoE 1895: 429).

The aspect to which Dewey wanted to call attention is that it is impossible for both empiricists and rationalists to conceive the two movements – that of differentiation and that of unification – as the essential trait of an act of judgment without resulting in contradiction. A correct view of judgment emphasizes the fact that the "office of the copula" is to "discriminate the subject and identify the predicate": differentiation and unification are moments of a more complex activity, whose aim is to construct an individual object in which both the particular and universal elements – respectively, the subject and the object of judgment – find their realization (LoE 1895: 429). However, if the object is assumed as "something fixed outside of the judgment itself", the act of judging enters in conflict with the givenness of the object (LoE 1895: 430). The unity of judgment therefore falls apart. As a consequence of such break, instead of being conceived of as two moments of a higher unity the two movements of identification and discrimination are perceived as two different types of judgment. The movement of identification is hypostatized in the form of the analytic judgment while the movement of discrimination is hypostatized in the form of the synthetic judgment. Following the criticism of the distinction between a priori and a posteriori judgments formulated by British idealists, Dewey traced back the traditional distinction between synthetic and analytic judgments to an erroneous conception of the nature of the unity produced by the act of judging.

The real problem of logical theory is therefore that of thinking together the synthetic and the analytic sides of the judgment as two moments of the very same process, so as to avoid the contradictions that follow from their separation. Indeed, were the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments correct, the acquisition of knowledge and, a fortiori, the fact of learning would be impossible. Analytic judgments are by definition incapable of producing new knowledge: contrary to what the rationalist school seemed to believe, the mere analysis of concepts yields only “trifling propositions” (LoE 1895: 430). Kant was perfectly right on this point. On the contrary, synthetic judgments claim to be able to enhance our knowledge of the world. Nonetheless, the very idea of their productiveness turns out to be contradictory on the basis of the thesis of the absolute pre-logical completeness of the object of thought. The function of a synthetic judgment is to add to the subject a predicate that is not contained in its concept. But if the object is complete and formed independently from the act of judging, the attribution of a new predicate to the subject is an indubitable evidence that the judgment is false. “All knowledge implies discrimination”, Dewey observed, “but all knowledge changes your subject-matter” (LoE 1895: 430). What the upholders of empiricism did not understand is the abiding truth of idealism, that is, the fact that “the real world is changed by the process” of thought (LoE 1895: 430). So, they did not realize that synthetic judgments are impossible, and that their impossibility is due precisely to the aim of achieving what cannot be reached. Contrary to what empiricists had argued, every attempt to add new determinations to an already formed object does not lead to an enrichment of pre-existing knowledge of it but rather to the destruction of the unity of its meanings.

The way out from all these difficulties, Dewey maintained, is to go back to the Kantian idea of judgment as the “synthesis of percepts [...] in or through concepts”, and to recognize it as the “starting point of modern logic” (LoE 1895: 436). As is well known, in section 19 of the Transcendental Deduction of the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* Kant remarked that he could not rest satisfied with standard definitions of judgment. Logicians maintain that judgment is “the representation of a relation between two concepts”, but they do not say a word about the nature of this relation, which is therefore left completely undetermined (Kant 1781/87: B 141). However, Kant argued, a proper understanding of what judgment is cannot be achieved unless this issue is properly addressed. Trying to meet this demand, the definition that he advanced

centers around the objectivity of judgment. The aim of the copula is to “distinguish the objective unity of given representations from the subjective” (Kant 1781/87: B 142). Consequently, the necessary unity of the relation of representations is the distinctive character of judgment: judgment is “a relation that is objectively valid” (Kant 1781/87: B 142).

According to Dewey’s interpretation of Kantian thought and of its place in the history of logic, Kant has shown with great clarity that in a judgment a concept is used as a rule to construct a percept. The objectivity of the act of construction consists precisely in its effectiveness in bringing about the unification of the heterogeneous elements that make up the content of the judgment (LoE 1895: 435). This is the sense of Kant’s famous maxim “conceptions without perceptions are empty, perception without conception is blind” (Kant 1781/87: A 51/B 75; see also Caird 1877: 224 and Caird 1889: 321; for this idiosyncratic way of translating the passage see above chapter 1). As has been pointed out in previous pages, these are the aspects of Kant’s thought from which Dewey drew his instrumentalist theory of concepts. These are also the aspects on which he based his analysis of judgment, and in particular his constructivist account of the objective character of the copula⁴⁶. So, in open contrast to both the empiricist and the rationalist tradition, Dewey followed Kant in holding that knowledge is obtained neither through the analysis of concepts – as deductive logicians believed – nor through the collection of particulars – as empirical logicians were tempted to argue. Giving to Kantian views a holistic twist, Dewey maintained that the process of construction is the reciprocal determination of concept and percept which coincides with the process of reconstruction of a problematic experience: analysis and synthesis are the two sub-processes that yield, respectively, the identification of the relevant conditions

⁴⁶ The theoretical proximity of Dewey to Kant has to be emphasized also in another sense. With the conception of the objectivity of judgment Dewey aimed at stressing the fact that the connection between conception and perception, subject and object in a judgment should not be intended as a *psychological* relation. There is an underlying assumption that Dewey never questioned in his logical investigations on the nature of judgment: the idea that the act of unification performed by the copula is objective, where objectivity should be intended as belonging to the object as a consequence of an act of construction. Dewey categorically rejected the view according to which the act of predication has to do with the person’s knowledge of the world, as well as the idea that a change of knowledge is a fact in the intellectual biography of a person, but has nothing to do with the objective state of the world. The connections instituted in and by judgment do not concern the way in which the world is conceived by the individual, but are structures of the object itself. Dewey was very clear on this point: “[t]he copula gives the statement of being, asserts the reality, and should not be treated as a mere representation of an act of mental predication” (LoE 1895: 432).

of a situation, through which the problematic experience is analyzed in its components, and the constitution of objects in accordance to a general rule. Analysis and synthesis are therefore essentially interwoven and mutually dependent one on the other: "so far as it is made accurate, precise, concrete", Dewey observed, analysis passes into synthesis (ToL 1899-1900: 568). This essential interwovenness of analysis and synthesis, as well as the functional nature of the distinction between perception and conception, Kant did not see. To go back to Kant meant therefore for Dewey to go back to the ultimate source of the modern logic in order to rediscover the full philosophical significance of the constructivist nature of judgment. It did not mean to be compelled to accept Kant's thought in its entirety.

Dewey was too much of an idealist not to see that perception and conception stem from a common root, and that distinctions such as the one between analytic and synthetic, a priori and a posteriori, are only moments of a more complex process or activity. Dewey had already made these critical remarks in the couple of articles published in *Mind* in 1886 – *The Psychological Standpoint* and *Psychology as Philosophic Method* – in which he confronted himself with the idealistic tradition from Hegel to Caird. It is not surprising therefore that in order to criticize Kant's logical shortcoming Dewey referred once again to the arguments that he himself and his fellow idealists had put forward in previous years. However, an important difference should not go unnoticed. In his early texts Dewey criticized Kantian philosophy for not providing an adequate explanation of the processes through which experience acquires self-knowledge, thus reaching a stage of self-consciousness. The point with which the early Dewey was concerned was the analysis of the activities of mind that bring about meaningful experience. From this point of view, Kant's error has been that of believing that the task of reason is not to create its own material, but to assume the deliverances of sense as a given that has to be synthesized. As a consequence of the adoption of this empiricist principle, he has been compelled to embrace a form of 'subjectivism' concerning the status of human knowledge and experience. In this context, Kant's dualism was considered an unwarranted assumption that impeded the development of an absolute form of idealism that did not involve any break between mind and world, thought and reality. At the very same time, however, the young Dewey praised Kant for understanding the importance of adopting the psychological approach: his insistence on the concreteness of the activity was read by Dewey as a necessary move aiming at

counterbalancing Hegel's tendency toward a panlogistic reductionism of reality to thought.

In his lectures on logic Dewey dramatically changed the angle of vision from which to understand Kant's project. No reference is made here to the menace of panlogicism and to the importance of adopting a psychological standpoint as a corrective to the distortions caused by a logical interpretation of experience. As has been pointed out in the first part of the present chapter, Dewey abandoned his anti-logical bias as a consequence of his realization that the continuity between logic and the methodology of sciences made available a different conception of the former. Furthermore, the distinction between perception and conception is now traced back to the distinction between the subject and the predicate of a judgment, and its theoretical insufficiency is explained in terms of its incapacity to account for the essential dynamism of thought.

This shift of attention from the construction of immediate experience to the logical reconstruction of it – which was a consequence of Dewey's realization of the necessity of distinguishing the biological processes through which meanings unreflectively apprehended in immediate experience are constructed from conscious activities performed by a subject who aims at reconstructing a problematic experience by adopting a logical attitude – has many relevant consequences. First of all, Dewey eventually succeeded in fully appreciating the significance of the logical problems at the center of Kant's thought, and in so doing he came closer to a more appropriate understanding of Kantian philosophy. Moreover, he also succeeded in recovering the spirit of Kantian constructivism: this new understanding of Kantianism enabled him to better define the problems that he had to face. More precisely, Dewey realized that it is of fundamental importance to keep separate the language through which immediate experience is analyzed and the language used to inquire into the structure of reflective experience. At the level of the biological constitution of meaning, indeed, there is no reason to draw any distinction between perception and conception: these notions are not adequate to describe natural processes characterized by a continuity of movement as the ones that bring about meanings directly experienced⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ In the 1895 lectures there are some traces of this use of the terms since Dewey was still committed to the idea of unconscious inference, but in the following years he progressively abandoned this bad habit of expressing himself. Percept and concept are refined concepts that are the result of a controlled inquiry. The same holds true for the notion of sensation and image that Dewey sometimes used in his lectures on the theory of logic with the aim of stressing the relationships

In their logical sense, on the contrary, conception and perception (sensation and image) are names that indicate, respectively, the process of elaboration of interpretative hypotheses and the process of collection of material (LoE 1895: 440). The first one is the construction of universal rules of conduct that can guide the course of inquiry; the second is the construction of data that can confirm the validity of the general hypotheses. Starting from the 1898 lectures on logic, and with more thoroughness in *The Studies in Logical Theory*, Dewey substituted the two couples percept/concept and sensation/image with the notions of fact and idea (see ToL 1899-1900: 644 for a clear statement of the equivalence of the different notions). Being less associated with philosophical convictions than the other conceptual couples, 'fact' and 'idea' are undoubtedly the most proper terms to express the metaphysical neutralism that is characteristic of Dewey's position. Contrary to percept and concept, indeed, ideas and fact do not suggest any reference to the psychological or physiological processes that happen in a person's mind (or brain), neither do they suggest any reference to a private and subjective realm ontologically distinct from the objective world. However, it is important to bear in mind the origin and genesis of these concepts. It should not be forgotten that the functional tension between facts and ideas is the standard way in which the mature Dewey expressed the transcendental distinction between perception and conception – or intuition and understanding, in more orthodox terms – formulated by Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

Once these qualifications are made, it does not seem rash to see Dewey's instrumental logic as deriving from Kant's transcendental logic. After all, it was Dewey himself who tried to argue for the continuity between the two approaches. Exploiting the historiographical model developed by British idealists, Dewey defended the traditional thesis that Kant's philosophy found its natural completion in the Hegelian tradition, in which the dualism Kant inherited from his empiricist sources is definitely corrected and pruned off. According to Dewey's historical reconstruction, it was Caird who understood how to properly deal with the distinction between perception and conception. Contrary to Kant, Caird rejected the dogmatic view that perception and conception are "essentially opposed to each other" (LoE 1895: 437). At the very same time, however, he was not attracted by Green's idealistic solution, which

between psychology and logic and of securing a sound scientific explanation to the logical process of reconstruction of problematic experience (see for instance ToL 1899-1900: 600). All these concepts belong to the level of the conscious reconstruction of meaning, that is, at this level in which the agent develops the tools through which to solve the problem that originated thought.

consisted in maintaining that perception and conception are not essentially opposed to each other: according to Green, in the eternal consciousness they are brought into unity; they are “permanently opposed to each other in our experience” (LoE 1895: 437). Caird realized that this way of tackling the problem was too formalistic, and therefore looked for a different solution. In reality, Caird argued – or, at least, Caird read through Dewey’s spectacles –, sensation and conception are only “temporally opposed to each other” since they stem from a “common substratum of feeling” and meet “in the self which manifests itself” (LoE 1895: 437-438). In Dewey’s eyes, Caird’s greatest merit was that of realizing the functional and temporal character of that distinction.

However, Dewey was convinced that Caird’s conclusions were not the last word on the subject: even though they are not contradictory, Dewey argued, they are nevertheless incomplete. First of all, Caird does not explain why the unity of feeling breaks up into perception and sensation, and why the broken unity is subsequently restored. Secondly, he does not explain *where* this differentiation occurs – that is, “on account of judgment” (LoE 1895: 438). So, a further modification of logical theory is required, whose goal is to bring to completion the functionalization of logical concepts that started with Kant. As has been pointed out above, Dewey maintained that this step could be made by combining the Hegelian conception of dialectic with the psychological analysis of the continuum belief-doubt-belief formulated by Bain. Consequently, he believed to have successfully accomplished the final step that Caird did not manage to do⁴⁸.

What Dewey was looking for was a way to explain the fact that a problematic experience can be reconstructed through an act of thought. Better, he was concerned with explaining the fact that problematic experience reconstructs itself through a process of reflection because the adoption of a logical stance –

⁴⁸ Dewey was very sensitive to the historicity of philosophy: he knew that every new philosophy draws heavily from previous theoretical formulations. It is this continuity that establishes a tradition of thought. So, when Dewey represented his instrumental account of thinking activity as the coronation of the long process of revision of Kant’s transcendental logic that coincides with the history of British idealism, what he aimed to do was to rank himself in the idealistic school. This may be surprising – especially if one is convinced that Dewey’s philosophical development has to be read as an effort to break away from idealism –, but in the light of what has been said until now it should not be difficult to see why Dewey was so eager to stress the continuity between his functionalist approach and the constructivism of the post-Kantian idealistic tradition. The idea that the synthesis of perception and conception in judgment is objective, and the concomitant thesis that the object of thought is the result of thinking rather than its starting point, are two of the main tenets of Dewey’s instrumentalist account of thought that he derived from Kant – a Kant mediated through the reading of Hegel and of the British idealists.

what has been called the logical – is not an arbitrary choice made by the subject, but an ‘objective possibility’ that is determined by the very process of development of experience. In this sense, the idealistic emphasis on the capacity of thought to create its object was the needed corrective to the epistemological conception of knowledge as representation of something that is formed independently of the activity of reflection. Dewey expressed this idea in his own language by saying that the copula is “the act of attention itself, the movement in the reconstruction of the experience” (ToL 1899-1900: 600). The point that Dewey was eager to stress is that the act of attention that is identified with the copula is not a synthesis imposed from without upon a set of elements in themselves indifferent with regard to it. If this were the case, indeed, the unity of perception and conception achieved in judgment would not be objective because the material upon which the activity of judging is exerted would not be a product of thought, but would be found to be already there, so to say, as a limit to its activity. To assume that objectivity is the givenness of the data is the error made by the traditional philosophies – both empiricism and rationalism –, an error that even Kant did not manage to completely overcome. As will be remembered, Dewey had already criticized this position in a letter to William James, where he distinguished Green’s neo-Kantianism from Caird’s absolute idealism precisely on the basis of their different conception of the relationship between the unity of the self and its material (see chapter 2, 1.1; see also chapter 1, 2.1.1). Dewey never changed his view on this point: thought is a phase of experience, and the objectivity of the synthesis of perception and conception in judgment is dependent upon the objectivity of thought. It is the latter that warrants the validity of the process of reflection and that establishes the limits of the functional autonomy of thought. It is with this idea in mind that Dewey wrote that the copula “is not an activity which is performed upon certain contents, but is the active tendency to a certain development of content in the content” (ToL 1899-1900: 713). And this is also the sense of the famous passage of the preface of *The Studies of Logical Theory*, in which Dewey remarked that “since Reality must be defined in terms of experience, judgment appears accordingly as the medium through which the consciously effected evolution of Reality goes on” (MW2: 296).

The thesis that the objectivity of the content of judgment is functionally dependent on the objectivity of the process of thought is therefore of the utmost importance in the economy of Dewey’s instrumental account of reasoning. This may sound unconvincing. Taken in itself, indeed, this thesis is not particularly

original: Dewey had already formulated it in his *The Present Position of Logical Theory*, where he had argued that Hegel's philosophy represents the "quintessence of the scientific spirit" because it refuses to separate thought and reality (EW3: 138). What is new, therefore, is not the content of the thesis, but the way in which Dewey used it in order to account for the validity of reflective experience. First of all, while in *The Present Position of Logical Theory* Dewey relied on an expressivist conception of thought, holding that the 'objectivity' of the latter – he did not use this term in that article – was a consequence of its being a moment in the movement of the fact in which the limits and defects of a lower stage of development are brought to light and corrected, at the time he delivered his lectures of logic the idea of the objectivity of thought had taken another significance. From an instrumentalist point of view, the task of reflective experience is to correct the defects of a contradictory experience, but such a correction cannot be achieved through the expression of what is only implicitly present in primary experience, but rather through a creative construction of new concepts that open new possibilities. The insistence on the creativity and originality of reflection is a direct consequence of the concept of autonomy of logic. Since the distinctive features of the logical attitude toward experience is a suspension from the immediate concern of action, the result of the adoption of that approach cannot be a mere reduplication or a mere refinement of the original conditions. In order to be successful, it must be a new tool that enables the primary problematic experience to overcome its contradictions.

This remark leads directly to the second point of difference, which has to do with Dewey's rejection of his early intellectualism and with his acceptance of a naturalistic view of the self and of its activities. The starting point of Dewey's analysis is the observation that in every experience there are forces acting toward a goal. Already formed habits, which have shown themselves to be reliable guides to action, provide the meaning of the situation. In the case of a problematic experience, habits enter in conflict: as a consequence of their being in contradiction, the self breaks up and the unified meaning – which warrants the possibility of a unified course of action – goes lost. This means that even though they cannot harmonize themselves in a unified whole, habits are still present and active: it is their persistence that causes the confusion experience by the agent when he cannot grasp the meaning of his world. However, it would be unilateral to treat existing habits – which are undoubtedly inadequate to meet the challenges advanced by the altered conditions of the environment – merely as a

cause of confusion. Retrospectively considered they are so; but prospectively considered they represent the only possible resources that can be used to effect the reconstruction of contradictory experience. The self relies upon those habits which an act of reflection has shown to be reliable rules of action. In so doing, the actions made by an agent are expression of the self as well as of the world in which the habits of that self have formed. Consequently, the creativity of thought is grounded on the continuity of the self. In this sense, Dewey was legitimate to say that the copula – that is, the act of judgment in its wholeness – is the very development of the content of the judgment, even though he had now completely abandon the expressivist conception of thought that had been at the basis of his idealistic account of reasoning.

This new conception of thought as a creative expression of primary experience had remarkable consequences on Dewey's concept of objectivity. It has been argued above that Dewey agreed with Kant in conceiving of the objectivity of the synthesis of perception and conception as the distinctive feature of judgment. For both the philosophers, judgment is the objective connection of two contents, through which a quality is objectively predicated of a subject – at least in the categorical affirmative judgment. But what does objectivity mean in the light of the instrumentalist view of logic that Dewey defended? In particular, what does it mean that a certain concept is objectively valid? Obviously, it cannot mean the brute fact of compulsoriness. Dewey was clear in stating that a conception of objectivity along these lines is totally unsatisfactory. The fact that something is "forced upon us" does not entail that it has objective validity (ToL 1899-1900: 556). So, for instance, the appearance of a ghost is – metaphysically speaking – an 'objective' event, but is wholly devoid of logical validity and objectivity. Every mental state, Dewey argued, no matter how illusory and deceptive it may be, is a natural event which is accountable in physiological and psychological terms (ToL 1899-1900: 556). From the point of view of their conditions of existence, therefore, no difference can be detected between an illusion and a perception: both are the natural product of biological processes. The only difference between them consists in the different ways in which perception and illusion are used. Consequently, a naïve account of objectivity that does not pay attention to the conditions of the use of the 'deliverances of sense' is incapable to explain the logical import of the notion of objectivity. What is meaningful is the function, and function is precisely what the holders of the

naïve account – Spencer is the author mentioned in the text – forget to take into account (ToL 1899-1900: 556; see above 3.1.2).

As is well known, a different and more critical account of objectivity has been provided by Kant. According to Kant, the objective validity of the categories has to do with their being the necessary conditions of possibility of experience. Categories of understanding are constitutive of their objects: it is their capacity to determine the minimal condition of objectivity that makes possible to refer to an object. It is true that Dewey did not explicitly mention Kant in reference to this particular issue, but the Kantian conception of objectivity is undoubtedly very close to what he had in mind. First of all, Kant had the merit of shifting the attention from the analysis of the objective as something which lies “beyond or outside experience” to the analysis of it in terms of what can be encountered in experience (ToL 1899-1900: 554). Secondly, Kant’s insistence on the universal conditions of possibility of experience highlighted the fact that objectivity is of the nature of law. The coercive theory draws a line between fact and law, and ascribes objectivity only to the former. Indeed, it is evident that if objective is what has the (physical) power to “exercise the force to compel a certain state of consciousness upon us” the only entities that can be correctly conceived to be objective are the particular things (ToL 1899-1900: 558). However, the practice of science shows that the comprehension of the meaning of things is enhanced by the understanding of the laws that describe their behavior. “The working principle of science”, Dewey wrote, “is that law is something more objective than mere things”: this because objectivity is “deeper in the law than in the particular thing” (ToL 1899-1900: 559).

One of the main defects of the naïve interpretation of objectivity is therefore that of not having realized that meaning – of which objectivity is one of the defining features – is relation, and that relation necessarily entails an universal element that has to be expressed in the form of general laws. Aware of this problem, Dewey maintained that objectivity had to be defined in terms of validity rather than in terms of pure presence⁴⁹. “Ours”, he remarked, “is a

⁴⁹ As is evident, this conception of objectivity, which revolves around the assumption that object is of the nature of the tool, is genuinely Kantian in spirit. The object is not a *Gegenstand*, something that is opposed to the self as external to the net of meanings through which experience is constructed. As Dewey remarked, it is an error to assume that objectivity means “something lying over against” the activity of the self. Rather, the etymological significance of the term shows that the real meaning of that concept is “something thrown out with reference” to that activity (LoE 1895: 455). Obviously, Dewey did not intend to deny that the world of objects may be an obstacle to the activity of the self, especially in those situations in which responses from the environment do

regulative or functional instead of a physical or existential sense of control" (ToL 1899-1900: 555). Objective is what is valid as a rule of conduct: it is the body of knowledge that the agent is entitled to use as a reliable tool or instrument in his efforts to cope with his environment. This functional account of objectivity was advanced in the context of a discussion of the logical processes through which an agent succeeds in selecting those aspects of the situation that can be effective in reconstructing a problematic experience. However, it seems possible to argue that Dewey believed it was general enough to hold both for primary and reflective experience. Better said, it holds for both the phases of experience – irrespectively of their logical difference – because Dewey was willing to admit a continuity between them, as a consequence of which it becomes possible to explain the embodiment of the refined concepts developed in the process of inquiry in the habits of conduct that control both perception and action.

In so doing, Dewey managed to formulate a general theory of objectivity that centers around the thesis that an object is whatever can be taken as a reliable rule of action. It is not by chance therefore that Dewey observed that "the reality or objectivity of an experience [is] that experience taken in such a way as to lend itself to the organization of further experience" (ToL 1899-1900: 557). I read this passage as saying that since every experience is an action that needs time to be accomplished, and since every action which is not purely mechanical is goal-directed, every meaningful experience is dependent upon the possibility of

not match with the expectations codified in its habits and concepts. The abiding truth of realism consists precisely in the emphasis on the givenness of the things that make up the world with which the organism has to do. Consistently, Dewey tried to explain the fact of their givenness in a way that did not compel him to embrace a metaphysical account of objectivity. His solution was centered on the realization that the externality of objects is a consequence of their being the result of previous operations that have been crowned with success. "We have produced these tools", Dewey wrote, "and now cannot get away from them": every possible activity must start with the exploitation of the already formed concepts and habits (LoE 1895: 455). The fact that every act of an agent is conditioned by what has been done until that moment is the entire import of the notion of the externality of the world. So, Dewey was led to conclude, the only reason why a world of objects appears to an agent as a world that is "over against" its activity is because of "the principle of continuity or habit in action itself" (LoE 1895: 455). Again, the recognition of the temporal character of experience represented for Dewey the means to avoid any commitment to metaphysical views that hypostatize functional distinctions into ontological distinctions. Habit is second nature, Hegel had remarked in his *Philosophy of Mind* (Hegel 1894: 41ff.; see JDLH 1897: 130-131; see also Good 2010: 198). Dewey learned the Hegelian lesson, and used the idea of habit or second nature to explain how it is possible that a product of activity gets a relative independence from the agent that has created it. The nature of self is to realize itself in the world, and when activity has completed its work it gives the object it has brought about "a certain relative independence of any particular purpose" (LoE 1895: 457). From an instrumentalist perspective, objectivity is universality, and universality is usability in different context.

selecting and constituting a system of objects as a firm basis for “the organization of further experience”. It is the homogeneous account of the nature of objectivity that enabled Dewey to emphasize the structural similarities between habits and concepts. Habits and concepts are the two ways in which the relations that constitute the whole meaning of an object can be expressed and used. So, if there is a difference between things and laws, habits and concepts, Dewey argued, it has to be functionally articulated.

In the text under consideration, Dewey traced it back to the different extension of their predictive capacity: while “[t]he thing is a mode of control under limitations, a particular mode of control”, the law is “the control stated in general form” (ToL 1899-1900: 558). However, it is worth remembering that the difference of predictive power is, in turn, grounded on a difference in use. Stated in Hegelian terms, habits are *individual* meanings: their function consists in anticipating the particular reactions that an object will produce in response to an action performed by the agent. Consequently, the intended relations are extremely limited in scope and related to the distinctive features of the particular situation. On the contrary, concepts are *universal* meanings: they are abstractions used in inquiry in order to correct the predictive errors caused by a change in the objective conditions – a change that necessarily invalidates the predictive power of habits. The function of a set of concepts is to draw new relations among the various objects of experience: these connections have subsequently to be tested in experience, and only after they have succeeded in reconstructing the problematic experience they become part of the meaning of the object (ToL 1899-1900: 644). The fate of concepts is therefore to become habits; their success as universal meanings depends on their capacity of going beyond the limits established by already existing habits, and to extend as far as possible the scope of the possible relations in which the object may enter.

The definition of objectivity in terms of logical validity is the evidence that Dewey managed to bring his instrumentalist views to their logical conclusion. The idea that thought constructs and shapes reality is the last word of Dewey’s naturalistic constructivism and the most precious result of his radical rethinking of the fundamental tenets of idealism. The continuity between nature and reason that warrants the possibility of learning new meanings and enhancing the significance of primary or immediate experience is now expressed in logical terms as the power of reflection to reconstruct a problematic situation which sets the limits of the activity of thought. As is evident, this is just another way to

formulate the contextualist conception of meaning that represents the distinctive trait of Dewey's philosophy of experience. By focusing the attention on the proper context of reflection, Dewey not only emphasized the *functional* and *temporal* difference between the logical and reconstructive phase of experience and the immediate apprehension of the meanings of the objects that form the world of everyday activities. He also succeeded in reaching the absolute standpoint that – at least from the idealistic and anti-dogmatic point of view that Dewey took as the departure point of his theoretical work – makes philosophy possible. All the distinctions that are normally used to understand reality and predict the behavior of the objects that may support or hinder our acts are traced back to their role and place within inquiry, the prominence of the latter being due to the fact that it is the only rational way – here rational means controlled – to face the problems that the environment poses to the organism. In so doing, the 'deduction' of the categories that make it possible to have a meaningful world in view is completed since both the mechanism of their production and the intrinsic rationality that guides the process of their creation and refinement are discovered and highlighted.

Far from being a wholesale rejection of idealism, Dewey's constructivist and naturalistic account of meaning represents therefore an attempt to preserve as much of that approach as possible. In the last analysis, the outcome of Dewey's reconstruction of post-Kantian idealism amounts to this: there is nothing outside the natural activity of an organism that constructs a meaningful world and enjoys and exploits the products of its work. This thesis – around which Dewey built the "naturalistic humanism" outlined in *Experience and Nature* and further developed in his later texts (LW1: 10) – is the thread that runs through Dewey's philosophy and assures its continuity across different times and different formulations.

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