

John Dewey. An Outlook on His Conception of Truth¹

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Abstract: Rorty advances his vision as the legacy of pragmatism and, among pragmatists, especially John Dewey; underscoring that it springs, foremostly, from a pragmatic conception of truth. In opposing several of Rorty's ideas, I intend to expose some of the capstones of J.Dewey's philosophy, notably when it comes to discussing some lines concerning his conception of truth from a certain vantage. My purpose is to demonstrate that Dewey's pragmatism incorporates some of the features of our quotidian notion of truth as linked to correspondence and that this in no way implies a commitment to a staunch notion of truth. At the same time, I believe that the acceptance of such features, even as it fails to presuppose a definition or a clear explanation of the "content" of truth, is enough to allow it to preserve the difference between the normative aspects implied by the notion of truth as regards any justificationist conception working as an epistemic backup to knowledge.

Key words: Pragmatism, Dewey, truth, justification

The skirmishes historically registered in the realm of philosophical reflection, as regards both the determination of its contents (that is, the establishment of the relevancy of certain problems) and its methods, seems to form part of its very constitution as a discipline committed to contrasting arguments, so that it should not surprise us too greatly. However, and maybe even more than ever, we are currently advised to look beyond these ancient battles, and pressed to try and reconstruct a cannon of authors and issues that serve as beacons and help set into context what might be known as "the philosophical task". We are, indeed, invited to discard the "honorific degree" that confers the boundaries of what a labor is unto itself, and with it, all that we consider as comprising its "methods", "problems" or specific styles of "analysis".

¹ I am indebted to Angel Faerna for the useful observations which allowed me to improve on this paper. I also wish to thank the careful reading and recommendations made by one of the internal evaluators of this essay: whatever errors may persist in it, are of my full responsibility.

Some of the authors who subscribe to this notion proclaim it to be an adequate version (that is to say, refined of its old philosophical vices and commitments) of pragmatism, especially as espoused by W. James y J. Dewey; and the possibly paradigmatic example of this is R. Rorty, who, in writing quite explicitly in this vein, sustains that: “According to the notion I am presenting of these matters, arguments against the theory of truth as correspondence, for example, or against the idea of an intrinsic nature for reality, should not be requested of philosophers... According to my own precepts, I should offer no arguments against the lexicon I am venturing to replace. Instead of that, I shall strive to make the lexicon that I prefer attractive, showing the way in which it can be used to describe a diversity of issues”².

This perception of the philosophical task is in stark contrast to that of H. Putnam, whom R. intriguingly intends to use as a conceptual basis for some of his claims. In his “Dewey Lectures” of 1994³, Putnam provides us with a description of what he considers is the current landscape of the humanities: “Today, the humanities are polarized as never before, with the majority of the ‘new wave’ thinkers in literature departments celebrating deconstruction *cum marxism cum feminism*... and the majority of the analytic philosophers celebrating materialism *cum cognitive science cum the metaphysical mysteries just mentioned*. And no issue polarizes the humanities –and, increasingly, the arts as well– as much as realism, described as ‘logocentricism’ by one side and as the ‘defence of the idea of objective knowledge’ by the other. If, as I believe, there is a way to do justice to our sense that knowledge claims are responsible to reality without recoiling into metaphysical fantasy, then it is important that we find that way”⁴.

I believe we may accept Putnam’s reflection and seek a middle-path on which to set our responsible and critical commitment of our knowledge’s claims to objectivity without lapsing into a gleeful, reckless metaphysics. Furthermore, this need not counter an idea that is *dear* to pragmatism: “the insistence that what matters in our lives should also matter to philosophy”.

It is in this spirit, which I believe it to be kindred to J. Dewey’s –and opposed to several of Rorty’s own ideas– that I intend to expose some no-

² Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Spanish version: *Contingencia, ironía y solidaridad*, Barcelona: Paidós, 1991, pp. 28-29.

³ These conferences were read on March 22, 24 and 29 of 1994 at the University of Columbia and collected in: Putnam, Hilary, “The Dewey Lectures 1994. Sense, Non-sense, and the Senses: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind”, in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, XCI (1994), pp. 445-517.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 446

tions I consider to be central to J. Dewey's philosophy, notably when it comes to discussing some lines on his concept of truth from a certain vantage. My purpose is to demonstrate that Dewey's pragmatism incorporates some of the features of our quotidian notion of truth as linked to correspondence and that this in no way implies a commitment to a staunch notion of truth. At the same time, I believe that the acceptance of such features, even as it fails to presuppose a definition or a clear explanation of the "content" of truth, is enough to allow it to preserve the difference between the normative aspects implied by the notion of truth as regards any justificationist conception working as an epistemic backup to knowledge.

I

Although Dewey never wrote a history of philosophy, he did examine philosophical problems from an historical angle. This does not mean that philosophical problems are solved or reduced to their historic conception, but that they can be studied in the light of an evolutionary outline that is similar to that displayed by natural history. In this manner, knowledge is conceived of as part of an organic unit wherein past experiences and future outlooks are modified through continuous action within a determined environment, quite like the development and evolution of natural species, thence his approach having been termed as "naturalist".

The core or key to this outlook is found in his early notion of "experience" (which in itself is almost and frequently synonymous to evolution and, in his later works, to "culture"), as referring to an experience *of* and *in* nature, the reason for which a highly specialized organism, such as our own (that is, as human beings partaking of that very nature) interacts with its environment, taking over the features of nature.

Experience is experience of nature, the *features* of nature are incorporated through the interaction of human agents in an environment that allows them to establish stable relations and connective principles, not as features of the "experienced" in a phenomenic or psychological sense, but rather as the "controlled transformation of an indeterminate situation into another that is determinate in its constitutional distinctions and relations, converting the elements of the original situation into a unified whole"⁵.

⁵ Dewey, John, *Logic. The Theory of Inquiry*, Nueva York: Henry Holt & Co, Inc., 1938. Spanish version: *Lógica. Teoría de la Investigación*, México: FCE, 1950, p. 123, as of now, *Logic*.

Even as this presentation may appear to be somewhat paradoxical, we must firstly understand it as Dewey's attempt to break and override all dualisms, old and new alike, between appearance and reality, phenomena and things unto themselves, experience and nature; dualisms which, if presented in the traditional way in which problems in the theory of knowledge were being faced, did pose an insurmountable rift between sense data, as represented in the mind, and a world of things the nature of which was entirely different.

For Dewey, instead, things interacting *in a certain manner* are experience. Without a doubt, expressions in this vein have guided, and will yet continue to inspire, a great many scholars to interpret this byproduct of the interaction with experience as a "manifestation of nature" unto itself, finding in it an idealized version of Dewey sprinkled with an unmistakably Hegelian air that may have been inherited, perhaps, from his teacher G. Sylvester Morris. This is an outlook that may be found already in his earliest works *Is Logic a Dualistic Science* (1890), and in *The Present Position of Logical Theory* (1891)⁶. But it is also clear that his efforts in later decades were directed at the gradual overcoming of this stance, through the assumption of a naturalistic and evolutionist approach to them.

This naturalistic perspective considers that knowledge, just as in the development of natural species, is the product of the interrelatedness of organisms with their environment; that is, knowledge is an adaptive behavior of the organism to its environmental conditions, as much as it is an active restructuration of those very conditions.

The development of this issue will trail well into his later works. Looking beyond whether it corresponds to a more or less fortunate interpretation of his thought, what seems clear is that his conception of experience *of and within* nature summarizes his desire to upkeep the continuity between experience and nature, phenomena and reality, thus overriding the contradictions such dualistic approaches imply.

According to these schismatic outlooks, the myriad objects and events with which we are involved through our cognitive activity become used, manhandled things; things over which one acts and which act on us, too: they are thus suffered, enjoyed, etc⁷. It is in this sense that the notion

⁶ Both are found in: Dewey, John, *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882-1898*, vol. 3, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975.

⁷ "Known objects exist as the consequences of directed *operations* and not because of the conformity of thought or from observation with some sort of antecedent" (Dewey, John, *La búsqueda de la certeza*, México: FCE, 1952, p. 175, the italics are mine). The concept of "operation" has to be distinguished from that of process: operations,

of *action* within which the interaction is perpetrated conforms to both its cognitive and intellectual aspects, as well as to its material determination, evolving into a capstone category. This also contributes, however, to the misinterpretations of Dewey, which often become synonymous with the “practical”, the “operational” or the “instrumental, and even with the notion of “experience” itself.

It is, however, true, that when we strive to look deeper into his notion of experience, we find that the different expressions through which the delimitation of the concept is attempted succeed less in doing so than in establishing different and related features, such as continuity, process, situation, event and context, all of which are the results of a *transaction* – a term that’s featured in his later works– among the diverse constituents of this experience, which goes above and beyond that of an “interaction”. But it is precisely this notion of transaction which suggests that experience in itself is a product that becomes cognitive according to the progressive elaboration of an *activity* that is *directed* and controlled towards obtaining certain practical results, wherein resides the unit for human knowledge and action. This is why knowledge is a mode of action.

Is a conception of “experience” capable of commanding itself, and having a structure or connective principles which emerge spontaneously, and hail back to the classical empiricism of the “given” or to some sort of pan-psychic idealism, thus assumed?

I believe this is not the best place for me to extend on this matter. However, if we were to take the suggestion of transaction seriously, and its product as an *agreement in the action* of a variety of human agents that are mutually compelled to adjust their actions by virtue of public and communicable features in their environment, then we should not have to accept Dewey’s conception of thought in some of these extremes.⁸

Beyond the adequate concern for the exegesis of Deweyan thought, the seeming indication of an attempt to present a holistic conception of

like connective interactions, are uniform and universal relations between the means and the consequences, whereas processes are temporally determined particulars. The example afforded us by Dewey for this difference is the one between the process whereby a machine produces this or that object (a particular process) and the purpose for which that same machine has been designed (the operation). “[The operation as relation] is thus invariant. It is eternal, albeit not in the sense of lasting through time or of being perennial... bur rather in the sense in which an operation, insofar as it is a relation captured by thought, is independent from the cases which exemplify it expressly, even if its sense is to be found uniquely in the possibility of these actualizations” (*ibid.*, p. 142).

⁸ We shall return to this point later, when we try to address some objections to R. Rorty.

knowledge and meaning (wherein the unit of meaning is the totality of knowledge, which is why we should place the determination of a sector of knowledge in terms of the rest of it), based on a biological and evolutionary analogy from which the traditional problems of philosophy seek to renovate themselves on the ground of an operative focus, can be recognized.

Knowledge would emerge as the byproduct of a problematic environment in which hypotheses functioned as guides for action which would prove successful provided they could finally lead to a solution of the situation, by way of incorporating earlier experiences and projecting this resolution as an articulation in terms of the rest of the realm of experience. Thus, the different issues and their resolution, as well as the very concepts they involve, would not be imposed on us by the outside, whether by force of mere human arbitrariness or through the discovery of categories (*meanings*) in Platonic styling. Quite contrarily, they would emerge within an investigative operation which, insofar as it is equally a cognitive one, submits to control by the investigation, supplying it with the conditions which allow for *warranted assertability*.

In his *Logic. The Theory of Inquiry*, where the purpose of logic is phrased as being the “investigation of investigation”, he writes –with regard to logic forms⁹-- that: “Such an idea [emerging within the investigative operation] implies far more than merely affirming that the logical forms are discovered or brought to light when we reflect on the investigative procedures we have at hand. It means this, of course, but it also intends for these forms to *originate* in the course of the investigative operations”¹⁰.

I think that, in this case, where the discussion revolves around the methodology of scientific investigation and its relations as pertains to a certain way of understanding the purpose of logic, given its generality; we are allowed to chart our course through the realm of Dewey’s philosophy from a general perspective. In his opinion, progress in investigation is owed to a self-correcting process operated by an immanent critique of past approaches and experiences.

If any investigation starts with disquiet and doubt, as the products of an activity which involves me and which calls for resolution, the end of the controlled investigation determines the conditions (insofar as these “originate in the course of the investigative operations”) through which we conform a belief and acquire knowledge (or, in Dewey’s terms, *warranted as-*

⁹ I furthermore believe that this is valid for the rest of categories and species which share our way of organizing experience.

¹⁰ Dewey, John, *Logic*, p. 16. The italics are in the original.

sertability). This is why the claim that they “originate” can be understood in the sense of a theory of action and its link with the fixation of a certain belief which, albeit not completely developed by Dewey, gives us an alternative to readings which only seem able to choose between radical empiricism on the one hand, or a pan-psychic idealism on the other.

Now then, amongst others, a first line of objection that can be posed to this sort of suggestion has to do with the conceptually interdependent nature of the new methods and concepts which originate in –and depend on– the action itself, presupposing both prior conceptualizations, as well as ties to other realms of actual experience.

Furthermore, this conceptual interdependence is of such that the notion of experience cannot be finally reduced to more basic concepts that help determine or establish both the idea of experience itself, as well as the concepts involved which arise in the process of organizing new experiences, together with their respective analyses (action, meaning, belief, knowledge, etc.).

If we were to consider conceptual interdependence through simple examples such as *husband and wife*, *parent and child*, or even slightly more involved ones, such as *cause and effect*, or *means and ends*, these allow us to see the interdependence of concepts as an interdefinability, even as an extremely conventional dependence is suggested to us in the introduction of the terms themselves. But I believe this case should not be applied to Dewey, even if sometimes he makes show of this sort of examples. What he tries to prove, instead, is that knowledge and the meaning obtained by experience must be conceived as a whole. In recurring to some of our practices with the purpose of reflectively clarifying their articulation, we cannot exit our routine and prior conceptual customs, which is why the philosophical task has to do with the display of these dependencies in its articulation, rather than with reducing said articulation to its more elemental workings¹¹. In other words, we cannot get an uninvolved or cleansed perspective,

¹¹ In his *Logic*, when referring specifically to language, he says: “...no sound, trace or product of art is, in itself, just a word or part of language. Any word or phrase has a sense of its own only insofar as it partakes of a constellation of related meanings” (*Ibid.*, p. 64). A bit further ahead, he adds that, in not being bound to any representative isomorphic function, linguistic symbols can relate “meanings” to other, seemingly unrelated, ones. Thus, for example, the sense of “smoke” relates to that of friction, changes in temperature, oxygen, molecular makeup and, by way of intermediary symbols-meanings, to the laws of thermodynamics themselves (*Ibid.*, p. 68). This is a first indication of the role language plays in Dewey’s conception of knowledge. As the symbolic means allowing for reasoning, and thus, for knowledge, it connects the holism of meaning and knowledge (here mentioned) to that of action, which is why they are presented in a conceptual constellation that demands to be displayed in its connection (see footnote 16, *infra*).

or attain a thorough or complete exteriority. Explaining cognitive production is not independent from the set of practices held by a community of individuals sharing a language, who need to articulate and mutually adjust their actions in a public and joint realm.

But does this not lead us into a vicious circle? I believe the answer will depend on the ideal of analysis that we set forward. If we consider the philosophical task consists in reducing certain concepts to other more basic and clear ones, then this ideal of philosophical “clarity”, conjoined to a definitional perspective on analysis, will tell us that the answer is yes. On the other hand, if we consider that the ideas (concepts or contents), words or actions in which they are expressed become richer and more meaningful in the measure in which they are able to insert themselves in wider contexts, and that this broadening of meaning¹² shows the “transactions” and interdependency of the different ideas involved, thus enhancing our perspective, then the circle would be broken –at least in its vicious aspect–.

To put it differently, considering the interdependency of the meanings at stake and their production through action as a circular explanation will depend more on our ideal of conceptual clarification than on the nature of the problem we are engaged with. Hence, and from this second vantage – which we assume to be Dewey’s– the answer is not that we are deadlocked in a circular explanatory frame, but rather, that we find ourselves immersed within a new methodological perspective (which we could anachronically term as a connective outlook on analysis¹³).

This outlook depends or derives from his holistic conception of meaning and knowledge, as well as from his critique to formal logicism as a metaphysical and substantialist tradition underlying the dated (Aristotelian) logic, a critique that is most famously essayed in his logics of investigation.

Methodology must, in any case, advance a logic as a theory of investigation. The latter, proposed as total unit, must lead us to determine the genetic features of existence through a continuous process of self-amendment, wherein solutions come to acquire a relative stability in the continuum of investigation.

Having expounded on these general lines, which I believe help frame Dewey’s ideas on the theory of knowledge, we can briefly return to the no-

¹² Dewey distinguishes between the meaning of actions (*significance*) and the meaning of linguistic symbols (*meaning*), even if both are connected in a sense that I hope to make clear later.

¹³ For a clear exposition of this analytical perspective, refer to: Strawson, Peter, *Análisis y Metafísica*, Barcelona: Paidós, 1997.

tion of experience and to the different forms of dualism it entails, as well as to the Deweyan attempt to overcome them.

One of the clues to this is found, as we already said, in the attempt to overcome the discontinuity such dualisms imply, together with the supposition underlying them: to knowledge, the existence of two worlds, i) that of appearances, phenomena, the interior, the subjective, the immaterial and the mental, and, ii) the real, material, exterior and objective world.

In terms of these dualisms, the problem of knowledge in its classical and modern versions presents us with the typical sphere of issues involved in determining the nature of ideas (idea-representations, as modernly understood), which is why knowledge is not considered to be part and parcel of the physical world; but at best –and with an inexplicable good fortune– it is perceived as a sort of facsimile of the natural world, whose reliability can never be entirely assured.

Already in the versions involving mental images or representations given to the conscience, these imply a private realm, although we suspect that, in their better cases, they are caused or induced by external stimuli, and are of a nature both completely different and distinct to that of things.

The effort made to improve on this conception of knowledge, both in its classical and modern manifestations, by way of Dewey's "experientialist" perspective, leads us to consider that the search for continuity amongst cognitive and non-cognitive ideas, or between the un-propositional and the propositional, is not to be found in some idea relating to the "self-organization of experience" as a structure of the "given" or of some sort of an *a priori* granted by the mind, but rather in some conception of action and its relation to the production of meaning. Hence, revising how the problem of truth and its relation to action and meaning came to be framed in this particular scenario seems extremely relevant to me.

In brief, the "investigation of the investigation" that functions as the logic of investigation, the idea of the continuous and self-regulated process wherein knowledge acquires its condition as such within controlled processes (scientific knowledge), the operability and interdependency of the conceptual production, the constitution of belief as a controlled activity that's aimed at solving problems, the final result of cognitive activity as satisfying conditions that render warranted assertability possible, frame Deweyan pragmatism. This is why, despite the myriad criticisms it has garnered, I think the notion of warranted assertability (a synonym of knowledge and belief) and the notion of truth that relates to it are vital when it comes to evaluating his thought. And for this very reason, I shall dedicate the rest of this essay to them.

II

As has already been seen, Dewey's take on knowledge strives to overcome dualism and the rift between thinking (knowledge) and its object, the problem of the relationship between the constitutive material of experience and its final product, conceived and ensured as knowledge; his position struggles to make no cutting separations between the empiric and the rational. For Dewey, to conceive experience adequately, on one hand, and inference, reasoning and conceptual structures, on the other, is determined both by the empiric and by observation; but the separation that has become fixed between the latter and the former offers no more sustenance than being an episode within the history of culture.

Given his evolutionary brand of naturalism, Dewey suggests that the matter be posited in compliance with the following question: "How is it that when developing within a controlled investigation, organic behavior effects the differentiation and cooperation of observational and conceptual operations?"¹⁴

An adequate clue towards presenting a basis for this answer –one that is offered us by Dewey himself– directs us to examine the role of language. Indeed, and slightly before reaching the previous quotation, he tells us that: "The conception we will develop...intends for the unraveling of language (in its broadest sense), as based on previous biological activities and when connected to broader cultural forces, to conform the capstone to this transformation"¹⁵.

Language is presented as a necessary and sufficient condition for the existence and transmission of activities, because, albeit it is a natural activity –insofar as it demands a biological substrate, and requires that the individual adopt a point of view on others– it must be constituted in the guise of a participant within a linguistic community that assumes it as a collective endeavor.

Language as a common enterprise must, in turn, be conceived from the vantage of a participant who, in being focused to communicate with others, constitutes an *agreement in action*. It is this agreement in action which allows us to think that language should not be conceived of as a merely conventional activity. Even if sounds or different particular writings are conventional things, they do partake of language when the function as

¹⁴ Dewey, John, *Logic*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

media from which to stir other, diverse, activities performed by different people, who in turn produce controlled *consequences* as an adjustment of their actions in search of an end that constitutes itself as a part of what it means to participate in such a common enterprise. The determination of “meaning” and the reference that language allows us need be conceived as a sharing of actions, with the same applying to the modifications or consequences produced by these very actions. (For Dewey, the “situation” does not designate a single object or event or any isolated series of objects or events, but their connection with and within a contextual whole).

It is the vantage of communication, in terms of action, that allows us to test and produce such consequences, which ensure our participation in a same community of meaning, and help us achieve an agreement through action. On the other hand, the relationship between language and action is so extreme that it is thanks to this bond, precisely, that language is deemed to be “the agency by virtue of which other institutions and acquired habits are shared, impregnating both the forms and the contents of all and any other cultural activities”¹⁶.

These considerations with relation to language draw Dewey close to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*; where language is conceived within the frame of action and as part of the meaning that must be understood as “use” inside a language game or form of life¹⁷.

If we were to explore this line of kinships, insisting on the idea of the uses of language as related to a therapeutic conception of the philosophical task, then surely we should find our path cleared by the reading that is suggested to us by R. Rorty, who, in considering himself a legitimate heir to the pragmatic tradition, compels us to include both Dewey and the second Wittgenstein in his interpretation of it. If this were really the case, it might rapidly lead us to see the philosophical problem of truth being assimilated, as in Rorty, to the idea of justification, and we should find ourselves, in any case, being restricted to voicing our discontent with an insistence rooted in

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65. Dewey states that: “in common language, their meanings match, but not by virtue of their examined reciprocal relationship, but rather because they are currents in the same scheme of group expectations and habits. They are interdependent in light of group activities, group interests, group customs and group institutions”. A little bit further ahead he adds that: “The meanings of the correlated symbols constituting the language of a group introduce...new types of attitudes and thus, of manners of responding” (*Ibid.*, p. 76). This common language must be understood as the backdrop in continuity with the production of scientific knowledge; “scientific objects and procedures arise from the problems and direct methods of common sense, of practical uses and enjoyments...scientific objects have a genetic and functional relationship with those of common sense” (*Ibid.*, p. 82).

common sense and in the metaphysical consequences to which it is related. As Rorty says: “The difference between justification and truth is no such difference, other than for the reminder that justification before an auditorium does not mean justification before another”.

But this statement of his that I mentioned at the beginning has not said enough yet. There is another, further, difference, namely, that justification does not require a metaphysical activism, while truth, as understood by contemporary –and representational– common sense, does. The pragmatist regrets the prevalence of this representational image and of the ‘realist’ institutions that escort it, but it cannot get rid of these unfortunate cultural facts through more refined analyses of contemporary common sense¹⁸.

But the intent with which I underline this proximity between Dewey and Wittgenstein has no comparative ends, at least in the sense of placing both within a same tradition, and even less when it comes to accepting the consequences of the Rortyan reading. What I want is to locate a philosophical nucleus which I consider is still relevant and which, beyond the traditions to which it might belong, has become consolidated with contemporary philosophy: I refer, of course, to how the traditional problems of philosophy can be dealt with from a linguistic vantage, and in some instances, hand in hand with a theory of actions, as I have suggested all along (a case in point being Davidson’s “Toward a Unified Theory of Meaning and Action”¹⁹).

In other words, the problem of knowledge and the classical take on it, which pinpointed the nature of ideas and their link to extramental contents, has shifted into a perspective which asks itself about the nature of meaning (with all of the ambiguity this notion implies) as much as for its nexus to the notion of truth, and that these points are explicitly addressed by Dewey, despite Rorty’s designs.

Furthermore, and most particularly, Rorty’s call to eliminate the problem of truth from the philosophical agenda (and with it, the whole set of the traditional problems of philosophy), because he deems it as nothing but an aftertaste of a metaphysic past, does not seem to adjust to Dewey’s stance. What he proposes is far less in the line of its suppression than in

¹⁸ Rorty, Richard, “¿Is truth a goal of inquiry?” in: *Truth and Progress*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Spanish version: *Verdad y Progreso*, Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2000, p. 45.

¹⁹ Davidson, Donald, “Toward a Unified Theory of Meaning and Action”, in: *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 11(1980). Refer also to: “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”, in: Grandy, R.E. & R. Warner (eds.), *An Offspring from Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions, Categories, Ends*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986. For the link with the notion of truth, see “The Structure and Content of Truth”, in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXXVII (1990).

the need for this problem to be adequately grasped, as seems to follow from the following quotation: "I hope the above statement of the difficulty [*in the theory of truth as correspondence*] however inadequate, will serve at least to indicate that a functional logic inherits the problem in question and does not create it; that it has never for a moment denied the *prima facie* working distinction between 'ideas', 'thoughts', and 'facts', 'existences', 'the environment', nor the necessity of a control of meaning by facts. *It is concerned not with denying, but with understanding. What is denied is not the genuineness of the problem* of the terms in which it is stated, but the reality and value of the orthodox interpretation"²⁰.

We can readily see that it is not the problem that is being denied, but rather the reification of the distinctions (ideas, thoughts, facts, existences and the environment as "situation") entailed by its traditional interpretation. The Deweyan direction suggests that these should all be scrutinized in their operational character.

As has already been shown, that we take distinctions in their operational character means that these should be considered as connective interactions generated by experience, making it a form of knowledge; or as uniform and universal relationships between means and consequences and, hence, as invariants, insofar as they are independent of the cases that exemplify them openly, albeit their *meaning* can only be found in the possibility of their actualizations.

This is but another way to say that we can only produce certain categories that are involved in the discussion of truth (as well as in the rest of philosophical problems) within the frames of a controlled investigation, where the meaning that we grant them depends on an investigative direction tending to resolve certain problems. In this way, when we speak of ideas or thoughts that adjust (or agree) with the facts or the controls of meaning by the facts, the problem does not arise from having to explain how entities of diverse ontological condition finally adjust amongst themselves (meanings/facts; thoughts/facts), as suggested by the "orthodox" interpretation. On the contrary, this orthodox form of posing the problem *presupposes* this heterogeneity, which is basically a dualism lurking behind our operative categories, rendering the question in an insoluble form. Once we eliminate this supposition, the kind of justification required to account for this issue does not need to spring from something different than the

²⁰ Dewey, John, in: *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, selection and edition by Joseph Ratner, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1929, pp. 194-195. The italics are mine.

human social practices which lead to the resolution of a problematic situation.

Because of this, if these distinctions are operative, our problem, when it comes to explaining this adjustment or agreement, is transformed; now we are met with the problem of putting a course of action to the test, and evaluating its consequences according to the knowledge we already have and to the projections that these consequences come to incorporate.

Perhaps the best way to shed further light on the matter is by analyzing an example that is afforded us by Dewey himself, regarding how to conceive the issue of truth.

The example Dewey advances is that of a man lost in the woods²¹. This case is proposed as a typical situation, quite kindred to a reflective one; as we are met with the individual who:

- i. Finds himself in a somewhat indeterminate, perplexing situation (being disoriented in the forest; the problem).
- ii. The situation is correctly solved if the individual succeeds in finding his way (this purpose applies to this particular situation, expectations are cast as desirable consequences to modify said situation, and a clear determination of the statement of the problem is provided).
- iii. The problem is solved if we manage to find a correct direction to return home (development of an idea or course of action).
- iv. Corroboration or verification of the course of action (for which the *test* of adequacy, adjustment or agreement will be the successful realization of the objective or purpose).

Now then, how is previous knowledge conjoined to the determination of the situation and its successful resolution, and how does this example shed light on the “correspondentist” features that relate to the concept of truth?

It seems clear to me that the lost individual has a previous knowledge, ideas that might express themselves in propositional contents which – if conveyed – would be affirmed by the individual²² as ideational contents of

²¹ Dewey, John, *Essays in Experimental Logic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916, pp. 236-241.

²² It is likely that here, the linguistic terminology that the current approach of philosophy affords and that Dewey himself applies can prove helpful when it comes to determining certain expressions. Dewey tells the difference between the *judgment* and the *proposition*, with the former being understood as the established result of a determined investigation, relating to the objects to which we commit as products arising from the investigation, and thus refurbishing them with an existential meaning. We could say that the content of the judgment entails a referential commitment

his beliefs. Some of these beliefs must include contents that the current situation fails to register (otherwise our man would not be lost), and this previous knowledge (earlier resolutions, guidance criteria, object recognition and priorly experienced situations), coupled to the particular characteristics of his current environment (trees, stones, sunlight, etc.), are what will help him to elaborate a course of action (ideas, thoughts that must operate as a guiding map). Thus, ideas (representations, thoughts and “responsive attitudes” in Dewey’s terms) must not be conceived as a “little psychical entity or piece of consciousness-stuff, but is *the interpretation of the locally present environment in reference to its absent portion*, that part to which it is referred as another part so as to give a view of a whole”²³.

Given this characterization of ideas²⁴ and the fact that they comprise the ideational content of our beliefs as a part of thought, and thus having a content that may be propositionally expressed, it is possible to establish systematic connections between propositions. This entails a certain holistic notion of meaning and knowledge, since the possibility of referring to a certain totality that is not entirely present proceeds from the inherent condition of systematicity that is afforded us by meanings which allow for the production of hypotheses (that is, the projection of meanings) and ultimately abet the fixing or the constitution of a new belief.

with whichever entities satisfy these expressions (in Dewey’s terms, expressions in a judgment are *signs* invested with existential meanings –namely, *significance*– and which are available for or because of individuals and events, or sets of individuals and events). He considers this characteristic or existential commitment to be registered within the judgment insofar as we are willing to *warrant* its *assertability*. The proposition, on the other hand, is an representative middling element with a functional and hypothetical (possible) meaning, which is why it does not imply an existential commitment and works functionally as a *symbolic* retention from which to fix the conditions of possible inferences, according to the regulation of logical principles. It may not be too farfetched to surmise this conception of meaning, as opposed to existential significance, as the first approximation to a verificationist conception of the meaning of a sentence understood as its “conditions of assertability”. In any case, the difference recorded by Dewey is that judgment is asserted whereas propositions are affirmed; thus, and without doing Dewey any violence, we can consider the contents of thoughts as propositional attitudes, such as affirming, desiring, etc. Refer to Dewey, John, *Logic*, pp. 139-157 and pp. 315-344.

²³Dewey, John, in: *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, p. 196.

²⁴ It should be remembered that when Dewey wrote about language he considered that it was thanks to language that an “ordered” discourse or reasoning was even possible; ideas or hypotheses would not exist as such if it were not for linguistic symbols and *meanings* (cf. *Logic*, pp. 68-69). Furthermore, expressions such as “ideas”, “meaning”, “hypothesis”, “course of action” and “categories”, while not strictly synonymous, are used in such a way that they conform a constellation, and in some contexts can be used interchangeably, entailing the characteristic of the “possible”, as opposed to the existential meaning (refer to footnote 21).

This totality, portrayed as possibility, functions as a situational map for practical testing. Thus, one could say that “my idea (that is, my ideational contents or beliefs, my thoughts) is correct, insofar as it agrees with the facts and with reality”.

In Dewey’s own words: “The agreement, correspondence, is between purpose, plan, and its own execution, fulfilment; between a map of a course constructed for the sake of guiding behaviour and the result attained in acting upon the indications of the map”²⁵.

This is how, and through the action of a controlled situation (implying both practices and established criteria) on behalf of agents comprising a community of meaning to which they should adjust their present actions and projections (discrimination and logical principles allowing for interferences), the constitution and reorganization of beliefs –which, in their judicative manifestation, we are willing to assert justifiably– comes to arise.

In turn, the “facts” of the case are operative, insofar as they need not be self-sufficient and complete unto themselves: rather, they are selected and described, as has been seen, with a specific purpose, and then tested in accordance to their evidential function.

What is thus suggested is that verification (that is, the adjustment test), in being conceived as a practical action, is relevant to the truth of our judgments, insofar as its ideational content (beliefs) is itself relevant to action.

The agreement or adjustment of correspondence does not occur between heterogeneous realms, since facts are determined by obstacles and operative conditions and thought (beliefs, ideas, meaning) is understood as a plan or course of action.

Of course, the validity of these results is by no means an absolute warranty and hence lets us into a process of necessary fallibilist scruple and reserve which helps direct the ulterior possibility of correction. This is why, and in order to avoid an equivocal (psychological) vocabulary, Dewey chooses the term “warranted assertability” for the product of this process, instead of using knowledge or belief. It follows that what we obtain is an attitude that concerns a certain content’s exposition in the form of a judgment.

It seems quite obvious that, in this sense, “warranted assertability” is the expression of a normative, justificationist and verificationist conception, the conveyance of epistemic approval of the content of a judgment. But does this imply that “warranted assertability” should become identified or come to be suggested as a *surrogate* for the concept of truth?

²⁵ *Ibid.*, footnote 22, p. 197.

To phrase it differently, does the explanation of the notion of “correspondence” or “agreement” in operative or instrumental terms imply the normative epistemic support that we are willing to lend judgment, insofar as warranted assertability is conceived of as a loss-free, normative substitute for the concept of truth?

If, in a sense –which Dewey suggests we abandon– we were to understand that the judgment at hand “corresponds or is in agreement with the facts”, insofar as such entities are self-subsistent and independent from all human activity; then not only Dewey’s explanation of correspondence would lack sense, but the whole pragmatic effort to shed new light on the theory of knowledge would want for it. This is, therefore, not the road we should pursue.

Now then, we know that Dewey’s attempt to overcome the vetuste dualisms between appearance and reality do not bode well for the notion of truth as correspondence as classically understood, since in its classic version, it seems to imply a commitment to the facts or to “brute” reality *per se*, independently of all human action. But then we must insist: is it being insinuated that we replace the notion of truth for that of warranted assertability?

The answer, in light of all of the above, is no²⁶, if for only two reasons, one of which caters to Dewey’s own intentions and another which, if held up with the first, we shall incorporate as a commentary of our own:

²⁶ It is important to remember that B. Russell specifically accused Dewey of replacing “truth” for “warranted assertability” (see “Truth and Verification” and especially “Warranted Assertability”, in: *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Middlesex: Penguin University Book Ltd., 1973). This provoked Dewey’s retort in “Propositions, Warranted Assertability, and Truth”, collected in his *Problems of Men*, New York: The Philosophical Library, 1941; Spanish version: *El hombre y sus problemas*, Buenos Aires: Paidós, pp. 289-308. Dewey’s reply is that “warranted assertability” does not “substitute” the concept of truth, but that under certain conditions he would accept that the relationship between “warranted assertability” and truth resides in the definition of the nature of knowledge since, “in an honorific sense”, only *true* beliefs constitute knowledge (*Ibid.*, p. 290). The discussion is centered on the manners of considering what should be understood as a “proposition” and the nature of the assertion, as well as the proof of its link to the investigation. In brief, it must be considered if propositions inherently have a self-evident truth value (as in the case of elemental or simple propositions) or should just be considered as an intermediate operative product that does not imply any existential commitments (which is how Dewey sees it; refer to footnote 21 above). The “convenience or efficacy” posed by propositions as a means or hypothesis for investigation need not be identified, according to Dewey, with the truth or falsehood of a determined judgment as the end of it. Dewey tells us, in the text we have been quoting so far, that: “These observations have the purpose of showing that I sustain a theory of truth as *correspondence*... [in a] sense that seems to me to be exempt of the fundamental difficulty the Russellian doctrine of truth can neither surmount nor evade” (*Ibid.*, p. 299).

- i. The notion of truth as correspondence, in Dewey's own terms, does not have to commit to any conception implying a "reality unto itself that is independent of any human activity as a basis; we can interpret it from this implied feature in the assertion of a judgment, from which it follows that asserting is presenting what's asserted as true, and in adjusting to the facts. (This being the operative version described above). Furthermore, and even if Dewey's fallibilistic caution precludes an abstract definition of the truth that fails to contemplate the means with which to decide, for *every given case*, what means should be used to verify or prove the content of the judgment that is being asserted –in the vein of Peirce–, he considers that truth might be seen as that agreement of an abstract formulation with an ideal limit towards which an endless investigation would lead to scientific belief. Tending towards an ideal end safeguards fallibilism and preserves the continual perfecting of evidence, even as it allows us to establish (if only in an abstract or ideal sense) a normative difference between justification (whether it be particular, historically grounded, and so forth) and truth.
- ii. In light of the above, we could be led to think that the normative power of truth is different to that of any justificatonist criterion, if only for the simple reason that the best criteria, when it comes to justifying something, can prove adequate –but false–. In a yet more simple sense, there is a basic difference between justifiably believing that things are as they are or in some particular way, and their effectively being so. This is a difference that allows us to grasp the possibility of the self-rectification of knowledge which fallibilism implies, from which it follows that the reorganization of the evidence on which we rest our justified judgments is deployed on a continuum which, we could think, is that of the concept of truth.

In this sense, the acknowledgement of this continuity and the possibility of rectifying its content (believing that something is in such or such a way and realizing that it is different to how we believed it to be) entails the idea that this content was, indeed, a "warranted assertability", although a false one, which seems to introduce a normative consideration inherent to the very possibility of belief into its very evaluation and acknowledgement; a consideration that is required in order to have beliefs and to ascribe them unto others, and which we normally identify with the normative aspect relating to the concept of objective truth. Even if the notion of belief were to

find itself narrowly linked to notions such as justification, evidence and trustworthiness, it is essential –when it comes to constituting a belief, having one, or ascribing one to others– that the bearer of this belief take or evaluate it (or the expression of its content) in terms of truth²⁷.

As Putnam would say²⁸, the truth and determination of objectivity, even as they depend on operative standards of rational acceptability (justification) and cogency, are not identified with them, amongst other things because the truth is fixed in time and not a matter of degree subject to circumstances or evidences that allow us to eventually assure the contents of our beliefs in a determined time (in other words, the justification can be lost).

Now, if this position is defensible –and I believe it is– how are we to tackle R..Rorty’s “pragmatic” statements concerning the concept of truth in Dewey, which he somewhere (and sometimes) conveys as “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin”²⁹? This is where Rorty laments some of the pragmatist formulations of truth, whether in Dewey or James (and he always finds examples of bad formulations in W. James), claiming them to have “meddled in the garden of radical empiricism”.

If I understand Rorty’s outlook correctly, his complaint is based on two extremely controvertible presuppositions; the first of which involves a commitment acquired in his early work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where he intends to unmask and decree epistemology’s obituary as a philosophical venture. Because of all that we have said so far, Dewey’s reformist intention cannot be aptly reconciled with that vision, from which it follows that the notion of “experience” as the core to his philosophy can only succeed in appalling Rorty, who wishes to suppress and substitute any and all vocabularies which as much as dare to insinuate such an endeavor. We

²⁷ It is important to observe that the notion of belief itself presupposes the possibility of granting states of belief *unto others*, that is to say, of understanding others as having and expressing states of belief. This means that social interactions and our interpretative practices of the actions of other human beings, generally, can be evaluated in terms of truth; that is to say, we interpret them as having or expressing a conceptual content allowing for inferences and a series of commitments and justifications that might be conveyed by an agent to whom we attribute belief. This is why at least some of our successes in communication are owed to the fact that we can attribute and evaluate the behavior of other human beings in terms of truth. This outlook is further developed in: Davidson, Donald, “Three Varieties of Knowledge”, in: Phillips Griffiths A. (ed.), *A.J. Ayer Memorial Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 153-166.

²⁸ Putnam, Hilary, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Spanish version: *Razón, Verdad e Historia*, Madrid: Tecnos, 1988.

²⁹ Rorty, R., “Dewey entre Hegel y Darwin”, in: *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Spanish version: *Verdad y Progreso*, pp. 319-340.

are told, on the aforesaid article on Dewey, that: “The efforts made by James and Dewey when it comes to offering an explanation of an experience that was ‘more concrete’, more holistic and less charged with dualism, would have been unnecessary had they not tried to make of ‘true’ a predication of experience, and if they had instead left it as a predicate for sentences. If this had been the case, they should never have come to think that “the ideas” (which are not unto themselves but rather, part of our experience) can become true or be made true. Nor would they have asked themselves this bad question: ‘Granting that the truth is in some way the agreement or correspondence or reality to the experience of reality, what must experience and reality be, so that they can both be in this kind of a relationship?’”³⁰

As regards whether ‘true’ is the predicate of experiences or ideas, and not of sentences, it is Rorty’s prerogative to desire for the bearer of truth be sentences. Other philosophers have opted for enunciations, propositions, beliefs, etc., none of which comport, *prima facie*, an objection. But even if this were the case, they might be pose an objection for a W. James, but not at all for Dewey. Firstly (and as we have seen above), ideas are not “little psychical entity or piece of consciousness-stuff”. For Dewey, “ideas (*judgments and reasonings being included for convenience in this term*) are attitudes of response taken toward extra-ideal, extra-mental things. Instinct and habit express, for instance, modes of response, but modes inadequate for a progressive being, or for adaptation to an environment presenting novel and unmastered features. Under such conditions, ideas are their surrogates”³¹

Yet more so, and in the very text we have just quoted and which Rorty quotes himself in his own article, the bearers of truth are clearly beliefs or judgments, that is, certain propositional contents (let us recall the distinctions and the role of language as displayed above) to which we commit: they are neither events or “experiences”.

Dewey proceeds to say that: “The existence of the Carboniferous age, the discovery of America by Columbus are not truths; they are events. Some conviction, some belief, some judgment with reference to them is necessary to introduce the category of truth and falsity”³².

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

³¹ Dewey, John, “A Short Catechism Concerning Truth”, in: *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910, pp. 154-168. The italics are mine.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

In brief, and as concerns this point, Rorty's objections decry Dewey because he failed to anticipate and construe pragmatism *a la Rorty*. He failed to completely fulfill the therapeutic function that advises us to sever and forget the old philosophy, or philosophy, period. This is why he presents us with a more desirable Dewey, as it were, capable of identifying truth with "whatever works" and thus, as someone who wishes to identify truth with justification. This is where Rorty's second assumption rears its head: "Pragmatists think that if something does not presuppose difference in practice, then it should also fail to imply any difference in philosophy. This conviction makes them wary of the distinction between justification and truth, as it involves a difference that *does not imply any difference whatsoever* when the time to act has come...I cannot jump over justification in order to focus my attention on truth; when the question refers to what I must believe at this very moment, *evaluating the truth and evaluating its justification constitute a same activity*"³³.

The identification between truth and justification is explicitly expressed by Rorty who, albeit admitting that their distinction can be sometimes be useful, does not conceive of it as being essential, since it could be replaced (in case of failures in belief, or their modification for "what I thought would happen did not", and in so many other ways)³⁴. And although my purpose is not to refute Rorty, it is interesting to note, it seems to me, the odd paraphrase he supplies as a backbone for his arguments. The relationship between grounded expectations (adequately justified) and their upsetting (a change in that justification) does not spring from a change of audiences or from conceiving of a real one; rather, it seems to come from the nature of belief itself, as *none of this would make any sense unless we could establish the distinction between what is the case and what is merely assumed or thought to be the case*³⁵.

The distinction between what I thought would happen, and what actually did, which modifies my backup (justification) in terms of the content of a belief, seems to imply a feature particular to the notion of truth (and based on common sense).

What is clear to us, in any case, is that the identification of both notions in Rorty's proposal is an identification we need not accept, lest better arguments for it be offered. On the other hand, this seems subsidiary to his

³³ Rorty, Richard, "¿Is truth a goal of inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright", in: *Verdad y Progreso*, p. 31. The italics are mine.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Winch, P., "Language, Belief and Relativism", en: *Trying to Make Sense*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 194.

therapeutic attempt to cast off the traditional problems of philosophy and replace them for “edifying” questions in the line of: “What communitarian ends shall I share” or “What sort of a person should I strive to become?”

In Dewey’s case, I think, such questions are completely valid against the backdrop of a continuity between the actions we initiate in daily life and the broad frame for philosophical reflection (which is also conceived of as an action), from which we manage to comprehend the connections and complexity of our more general articulating schemes concerning the world and, why not, also “experience”.

Be as it may, I think it can be said that Dewey does not, among other things, strive to provide us with a definition or a meaning for the concept of truth because he considers it an abstract enterprise. That is why, if we wish to trace a normative difference between verificationist criteria or warranted assertability, on the one hand, and the normative aspect of the classical notion of truth on the other, such a difference should be sought within the legacy of Peirce. In this sense, we can safely assume that Dewey is aligned with that particular brand of pragmatism (or yet better, of pragmatism), and less with that of W. James.

Come this point we find ourselves backed by Dewey himself: “The best definition of truth that I can conceive of from the logical vantage is Peirce’s: ‘we understand by truth the opinion that is destined, in the last instance, to have all investigators rest on it and the object represented by this opinion is the real’” [*Collected Papers*, vol. V, p. 268]. Another, even more complete (and compelling) statement would be the following: “Truth is that agreement of an abstract formulation with an ideal limit towards which an endless investigation would tend to lead to scientific belief, an agreement which, in its abstract formulation, can be reached by virtue of the profession of its inexactness and one-sidedness, with this profession being itself an essential ingredient of truth” [*Ibid.*, pp. 394-395]³⁶.

In this way, and according to the material we have so far quoted, it could be affirmed that whenever we cannot defend or speak about the truth in terms of correspondence or agreement in a traditional and metaphysical sense, there is no reason for us to dismiss the pre-critical or commonsense notion of the truth as being bound to the representation of a non-linguistic reality with which our practices or actions must meet; even as this is obviously not a pre-categorized or ready-made reality.

I am also not completely sure that the previous statement can be altogether drawn from Dewey’s exposition: the need to correct and adjust our

³⁶ Dewey, John, *Logic*, pp. 383-384, footnote

cognitive practices, as well as our complete scheme of activities within the world, makes it supremely relevant to preserve the normative aspect of a moderate, realistic conception of the truth which, I believe, is bound to our quotidian concept of it.

(Translated from Spanish by Monica Belevan)