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Together: Non-Representational Accounts of Social Cognition

edited by Carlos Vara Sánchez

Introduction

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For a long time, the 'theory-theory' and the 'simulation-theory' have been the predominant approaches in the philosophy of mind and psychology for explaining how we understand and interact with others. Proponents of the first set of theories argue that we use 'folk psychology' to infer things about other people's mental states (Baron-Cohen 1995; Leslie 1987). On the other hand, those who endorse the second approach believe that we use our own mental activity to create models of other people's minds (Gordon 1986; Heal 1986). Despite relevant differences, both frameworks share some basic assumptions, such as the unobservability principle (Krueger 2012) – i.e., we need some extra-perceptual processes to gain knowledge from mental states – and the observational stance – i.e., we need to observe others to explain their behavior.

In recent decades, the situation has undergone significant changes. The conversation has become more nuanced and complex. New frameworks have introduced novel approaches to social cognition. Among the reasons for this shift, we can mention the resurgence of phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and pragmatist theories of the mind (Dewey 1922), the consolidation of James Gibson's ecological psychology (Gibson 1979), and the emergence of enactivism (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991). All these circumstances have brought renewed ideas, concepts, and perspectives to the debate. Compared to the theory-theory and the simulation theory, a shared aspect emphasized by these approaches is a focus on non-representational explanations of social cognition. Instead of private events like simulations

and inferences, we now find dynamic and action-oriented notions that are deeply embodied and embedded in the sociomaterial environment. Mentions of habits, resonance, attunement, constraints, affordances, or coordination are frequently found when discussing social cognition from a non-representational perspective in the work of Shaun Gallagher (2020), Anthony Chemero (2009), Giovanna Colombetti (2014), Dan Zahavi (2014), or Thomas Fuchs (2018). However, there is still much to discuss in this field.

This issue of *JoLMA* reflects the different views in the field by offering four novel contributions that encompass linguistics, aesthetics, and philosophy of mind.

The role of interpersonal imagination in the transformative aspects of performing arts is the topic addressed by Antonio Ianniello and David Habets in their text "Performance art as a dynamic imaginative niche: intersubjective achievement of seeing differently". This work constitutes a continuation of their previous collaboration. In this case, they incorporate the idea of "intersubjective achievement" into that of "dynamic imaginative niche" to explore the dynamic process of synchronizing perception in interaction. This paper dialogues with relevant bibliography on performative arts, one of the main interests of enactive aesthetics.

In their paper "Why direct social perception theory needs to be more Gibsonian", Martina Meyer and Edward Baggs focus on one key aspect of ecological psychology: direct social perception. Their goal is to overcome the general view of Gibson's framework as a response to inferential and mentalist theories of mind. To this end, they identify three positive different strategies – empirical evidence, Anscombe's account of intentionality, and the Gestalt view of emotions – and argue that each of them is aligned with relevant aspects of Gibsonian ecological psychology. Moreover, they suggest that they could be brought together into James J. Gibson's ecological approach to perceptual information.

Robert Gordon's contribution to this journal, "Rethinking the simulation theory", constitutes an extremely interesting revisitation of the framework that he critically contributed to developing with key publications. On this occasion, Gordon offers a pertinent discussion of some of the Simulation Theory's key ideas in light of the predictive processing strategy. More specifically, in the paper, he explores the role of perspective-taking and error correction in adapting shared mental representations.

Filippo Batisti and Marcos Vidal, in their paper "Post-Cognitivism and the Indissoluble Bonding of Languaging, Embodiment, and Thinking", review philosophical and linguistic approaches to language from the post-cognitivist camp. After noting the strengths and limitations of existing work in this problematic yet essential topic, they open a new pathway for future research based on four thematic

aspects: sociality and interaction, embodiment, ecological validity, and representation-as-*praxis*. They conclude by offering three further recommendations for those working in the field: constant dialogue with linguistics, awareness of the pervasiveness of language, and seeking connections with other post-cognitivist approaches to social cognition.

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Performance Art as a Dynamic Imaginative Niche
Intersubjective Achievement of Seeing Differently

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Abstract   In this paper, we intend to enrich the notion of a 'dynamic imaginative niche' that refers to how we actively construct the socio-material living environment to foster surprise and enhance playful exploration through 'intersubjective achievement.' We will stress the role of interpersonal imagination in the transformation typical of performing arts, where the participants collectively go from "seeing to seeing differently", as Noë writes in *Strange Tools* (2015). We think of achievement as a reconfiguration of perception, as a break in unreflective engagement with the world, calling attention to the structures and attitudes that shape our everyday experience. To do this, we will use Anne Imofh's performance Faust, presented at the Biennale of Venice 2017, as a tangible example..

Keywords   Imaginative niche. Performance art. Intersubjective achievement. Surprise. Play.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 *Faust* in a Gray Zone. – 3 Performance Art as an Intersubjective Achievement. – 4 In the Imaginative Circle: Action Possibilities for Intersubjective Achievement. – 5 Playing Together in Dynamic Imaginative Niches. – 6 Intersubjective Dynamics, *Faust* as an Imaginative Niche.

1 Introduction

In this paper, we aim to enhance the concept of a "dynamic imaginative niche" (Ianniello; Habets 2025) by incorporating the idea of "intersubjective achievement" (Ianniello 2024; 2023; 2021; Gallagher 2008). The term "intersubjective achievement" describes a shift from "seeing to seeing differently" (Noë 2015), and involves a dynamic process of synchronizing perception in interaction. This interplay is shaped by a sensorimotor feedback loop and (subtle) social normativity, leading to a reorganization of ourselves (Noë 2015). We think of achievement in terms of perceptual change as a break in unreflective engagement with the world, calling attention to the structures and attitudes that shape our everyday experience. Such disruption allows us to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways, which is achieved imaginatively. We consider imagination radically situated (Van Dijk, Rietveld 2020) and an inherently intersubjective phenomenon that unfolds in skillful coordination with the socio-material environment (see § 4). The interplay between performers and audience, and the audience among themselves, in the performance arts, is exemplary to illustrate this process. We will use Anne Imhof's performance of *Faust*, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2017, as a concrete example.

The concept of dynamic imaginative niches refers to environments that foster open-ended and surprising forms of engagement, allowing individuals and groups to explore new possibilities through imaginative and creative interactions (Ianniello, Habets 2025), where meaning remains fluid rather than predetermined. We will argue that "intersubjective achievement" is situated in imaginative niches and offer an acceptance of engaging with irrational, fantastical, surreal, unfinished, nonsensical, subversive, or disturbing possibilities, without fearing the dismissal or rejection of their actions and communications by others as nonsensical (cf. Winnicott 1971, 75).

By gesturing with things, spaces, and other people in an exploratory manner – such as a piece of cloth in an improvisation exercise (see § 4) – participants surprise one another, allowing each other to see the cloth differently. The paper aims to contribute to a situated and enactivist account of imagination, so the phenomena of "intersubjective achievement" and "dynamic imaginative niches" are not meant restricted to the performance arts but occur across a wide range of creative, artistic, and everyday practices. Think, for example, of a moment when a colleague tells you a joke that makes you think differently about a complex and stressful situation at work. Drawing on our background in the performance arts and scenography, we will use participatory performances as exemplary examples to illustrate the concept of imaginative niches.

We will start our paper by presenting the performance *Faust* and the aesthetic concept of the "grey zone" (Bishop 2018) (§ 2). Then, we will deepen the notion of "intersubjective achievement" by combining the divergent enactive approaches to cognition of Alva Noë and Shaun Gallagher (§ 3). Then, we will present a theatrical exercise representing a paradigmatic example of enacted imagination as an intersubjective achievement (§ 4) that leads us to discuss *dynamic imaginative niches* in which intersubjective achievements are situated. In the final section (§ 6), we will return briefly to *Faust* to summarize the main concepts developed in the paper. This paper is part of the ongoing process of our theoretical and practical exploration that we are developing not only as researchers in the field of the embodied mind but also as an artist collective, *Future Monsters*, our ever-expanding imaginative circle.

2 *Faust* in a Gray Zone

Faust was first presented by Anne Imhof in the German Pavilion during the 2017 Venice Biennale Arte. The performance spans seven months – the Biennale's duration – and includes five–hour performance cycles, pictorial elements, and sculptural installations. The German Pavilion was radically transformed for the occasion by installing a floor of unbreakable glass raised about one meter above the ground. Above and below this floor, performers in ordinary clothes performed. The actions took place simultaneously in three different and interconnected rooms, meaning that the audience was actively called upon to define their own experience, i.e., what to see and how to take part in the performance. There was no canonical narrative development. The performers – almost indistinguishable from the audience – were engaged in a wide variety of activities that included pressing their bodies against the glass panes, licking the surface, standing open-mouthed for several minutes, burning objects, standing still two meters above the ground on other small glass panels, masturbating, playing the guitar, singing. All these actions were repeated simultaneously and cyclically in the three different rooms, and no delimitation or lighting was used to direct the visitors' attention. Spectators entering the German Pavilion space entertained themselves by looking at one performer and then moving on to another without using predetermined spectatorial styles: they stood still, photographed, posted online, grouped around, danced with, headbanged, moved around, chatted with their neighbors and left the scene at will. Not only did the performer's actions guide the audience, but the audience's responses created many moments that reorganized the collective body of performers and visitors. For example, one visitor joined in playing air guitar with a performer, others

followed, and soon people grouped around the scene, photographing and posting it online and attracting other biennial visitors nearby to be dragged into the performances via social media.

One only has to think of what immediately appears to the spectator upon entering such exhibition space: when in the Pavilion, the spectator is, first of all, literally immersed in a tangle of actions and reactions, gestures, affections, attentional paths, invitations, and technologies jointly deployed by the spectators based on the performers' gestures; each one is actively participating in "bringing forth" the performance itself. *Faust* is an exemplary performance to render intersubjective synchronization in and manipulation of (§ 4) of a dynamic imaginative niche (§ 5).

Faust is part of that broader trajectory that, over the past 15 years, has taken the performing arts from the stage of the experimental theatre, defined as the "black box" (Wiles 2003, 251), into the museum, or "white cube" (O'Doherty 1986). This has led to the involvement of a specific type of audience that frequents museum spaces as an active agent in the performances and creates a conflict between the typical normative experience of the museum and the theater. The conflict between these two dimensions is said to have given rise to an additional one, what art historian Claire Bishop has termed the "grey zone" (2018), in which the spectatorial posture, accelerated by the all-pervasive presence of digital technology, must be constantly renegotiated.

The "black box," popular since the 1960s, contrary to classic theaters, is characterized by the smallness of the scale (Wiles 2003, 251) and the fact that the rectangular room's ceiling, floor, and walls are all painted black. The space is organized primarily to emphasize the actor's presence and the proximity and intimacy between all participants. The spectators' behavior is regulated so they arrive at a designated place at a set time, occupy an assigned seat, and watch the performance synchronously throughout its duration with other spectators.

On the other hand, the term "white cube" refers to a gallery used for displaying works of art, which has been popular in Europe since the early 20th century. Square or rectangular, it consists of entirely white walls and is usually lit from above. The white cube became popular as an exhibition space capable of creating a neutral environment that allowed a direct and uninterrupted enjoyment of the works (O'Doherty 1986). Today, the white cube is globally popular and is the standard for museums, art fairs, and alternative spaces.

The grey zone unfolds in the white cube, which has accommodated the performing arts over the years, traditionally confined to the black box. A grey zone does not prompt normative behaviors typical of biennials, art fairs, or classical venues, such as theatres or museums. Performances unfolding in the grey zone display how interactions

between performers and audiences have become ever more important tools and means for artists to put on display our everyday engagement with each other in real life. *Faust* is exemplary of grey zone performance, which was performed in the context of one of the most important art biennials in the world.

In a gray zone, crucially, the object of attention is no longer framed by the stage or immobile on a pedestal but a living body acting and dynamically changing in time and space. Take, for instance, another paradigmatic performance that unfolds in a gray zone (Bishop 2018), *PLASTIC*, by artist and choreographer Maria Hassabi, who in 2016 developed a slow-motion performance on the MoMA stairs. The audience must follow the performance in slow motion up the stairs themselves. Museum stairs are usually used to move from one floor to another and not to present artwork. Alternatively, the untitled performance presented by Tino Sehgal at the Venice Biennale in 2013, in which, upon entering a room set up with sculptures and paintings on display, one encounters a small group of performers sitting on the floor performing minimal, almost imperceptible actions such as making sounds with their mouths and moving by them. Some visitors did not even notice them, others found it uninteresting and moved on, and others managed to stand still. This change in spectatorial posture helped them observe something that demanded quiet attention to be grasped, such as the subtle synchronization processes that were taking place between the various performers.

It is important to underline that all artistic performances, not just *Faust*, *PLASTIC*, or *untitled*, are characterized by the fact that they emerge as the result of interactions between actors and spectators. Art historian Erika Fischer-Lichte has spoken in this sense of an "autopoietic feedback loop" (2009)[1] to indicate how all performance art is to be understood as a self-organizing system within which new, unplanned elements are continuously integrated from time to time (165). Mechanisms of synchronization and desynchronization are integral to the performance arts:

> Performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree. (Fischer Lichte 2009, 38)

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[1]   This concept is based on a key idea in the enactivist framework, namely that of "autopoiesis," introduced in the wake of the cybernetic turn by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Varela, Maturana, and Uribe 1974; Maturana, Varela 1985) to describe the defining activity of living beings, which make themselves (autopoiesis), in contrast to allopoietic systems, which are designed and constructed by others. Autopoietic systems are simultaneously producers and products: autonomous systems that survive through self-generation.

In practice, an artistic performance emerges as a collective enterprise in which all participants' affections, imagination, and skills are involved and put to work in a situation that must be constantly negotiated. It is precisely this that has been brought to the forefront by artists engaged in this art form since the 1960s (Goldberg 1979) when they placed the central characteristics of performance art such as co-presence, actor-spectator inversion, community creation, and contact at the center of their investigations (Fischer-Lichte 2009). By placing smartphones and their disruptive role in attentional processes at the center of the interaction between performers and the audience, *Faust* creates a performative situation in which reflection and questioning of acquired spectatorial postures become possible.

What we want to emphasize is that the challenge of the performing arts is emblematically directed at a community – one that includes not only all the spectators but also the performers – who, to "achieve" something, engage in a collective process that may involve subtle and complex dynamics of interaction. In this sense, performing art is an emblematic illustration of "intersubjective achievement" (cf. Ianniello 2024b) through "skilled co-presence" (Ianniello 2023).

3 Performance Art as an Intersubjective Achievement

To better define *intersubjective achievement*, we will draw on the enactive perspective of the embodied mind. Central to the enactive framework is that perception is not a process of passive reception, i.e., it does not happen in us, but it is enacted; it emerges from a skilled and embodied engagement with the socio-material environment (Varela et al. 1991; Gibson 1979; Chemero 2009; Noë 2004; 2012; 2015; Rietveld-Kiverstein 2014; Gallagher 2017).[2] What we perceive should be understood in terms of action and achievement" (Noë 2004; 2012; 2015) that we obtain through hard work and skill:

> Perceivers are active. They are continuously peering, squinting, moving, looking around, probing the environment to get a better look at what is going on. This shows that we, ordinary perceivers, are not content to consult an internal representation of the world;

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[2] Although this fundamental assumption is broadly shared by all scholars working in this field, there is an ongoing debate about how this engagement takes place and the emphasis placed on certain aspects of cognition. For a discussion of this topic, see Ward et al. 2017 and Gallagher 2017. Based on these various perspectives, different approaches to aesthetics emerge, yet they generally converge in adopting the Deweyan project of understanding "what arts does" and of eliminating the divide between everyday experience and aesthetic experience (Shusterman 1992; Johnson 2007; Freedberg, Gallese 2007; Scarinzi 2015; Noë 2015; Gallagher 2021; Feiten et al. 2022; Rietveld 2022)

we are interested in the world and are continuously active in trying to secure access to it. (Noë 2012,93)

For Noë, art has value precisely because it "recapitulates" (Noë 2015, 102) the perceptual process – that is, it allows us to engage with a sculpture, painting, or performance in a way that reflects how we typically interact with the world, while also opening new possibilities for perceiving our environment. To do this, the work of art challenges us: "See me if you can" (Noë 2015); that is, by making things "strange," it dares us to bring it into focus, to grasp it. If we engage with the challenge, we can move "from not seeing to seeing or from seeing to seeing differently" (Noë 2015) as a reconfiguration of the perceptual process. When confronted with a work of art – a "strange tool" devoid of a determined purpose – our unproblematic engagement with the world is disrupted, and we are called to "figure it out.". In this sense, we can think of artworks, such as *Faust*, as perceptual exercises. Open-ended situations disrupt and, by doing so, invite reflection on the more practically inclined and often unreflective day-to-day engagement with the world (also see Brincker 2015). This process can potentially transform us. The *achievement* is not some realization of a truth about the artwork, but a reorganization of an individual's engagement with the world.

Although our proposal is firmly tied up with Noë's insight into art as an active achievement, there is an aspect that is problematized exactly by grey zone performances. We do not consider this process to unfold solitarily, even when a person approaches a painting in an empty gallery alone. The challenge of an artwork points us to the situation's interactive, communicative, and intersubjective character. Even if "others" are not directly present. In our view, this is where the view of a "solitary perceiver" facing an artwork becomes vulnerable to criticism. This is an instance of what has been called "sensorimotor loneliness" (Gallagher, 2008). For example, one can ask how the intersubjective dimension is present in one of Noë's examples, where he asks us to imagine ourselves in an unfamiliar city when trying to find the castle on the hill, considering two alternatives. We could consult a map – a metaphor for internal representation – or we could start looking around and move through space, actively engaging with our surroundings and thus exploring through a sensorimotor process – that is what Noë is suggesting (2004, 23). Gallagher's critique of such a question is, "Why not ask someone for directions to reach the castle?" (cf. Gallagher, 2008). This slightly comical example underscores the importance of taking the social dimension and interactivity in sensorimotor coordination seriously.

Think back to what happens in *Faust* when one enters rooms full of people taking and posting pictures while joining in and dismissing the performers' actions collectively. It challenges us to reflect on how

we "objectify" the performers, the props, and the situations they put into motion through the behavior of snapping, filming, and posting that has become normative in everyday life. This challenge emerges from a dynamic interaction between the performers and the participating audience in unfolding the performance. It offers possibilities to explore collective experiences beyond the performative situation. More generally, we suggest art experiences are to be considered an "intersubjective achievement." Even when alone in front of a painting, the situation at large is not devoid of others (cf. Alloa 2024). Later, after leaving the gallery, one might talk to others, ask whether they have seen the painting that attracted their attention, and share their experience to make sense of the moment of perceptual disruption. This is precisely because achievement, seeing differently, does not remain limited to the gallery's walls.[3]

How is "intersubjective achievement" practically realized in performances? Consider a traditional performance, where we sit in a darkened horseshoe-shaped theater and watch a comedy. On stage, an actor delivers a joke that ends up being extremely funny to one audience member, who starts laughing loudly. This laugh, an expression of a single spectator, may invite others to pay closer attention to the situation, helping them better grasp the particular aspect of the line that makes it so funny. This cooperation, triggered by the laughter, can spark a reaction in the entire audience – of course, this process can also unfold in the opposite direction. This laugh can alter the course of the performance, steering it toward a more comedic tone and thus shaping the collective experience in a specific way. Crucially, what transforms through the laughter is not only the response of the audience but also the performer's experience, who will then act accordingly, exploring specific cues in the text, gestures, and staging in alignment with an audience's laughter. We want to emphasize with this example that performance is a collective achievement in which spectators and performers participate, each within different (sometimes alternating) roles (cf. Gallagher 2021). Any stand-up comedian nervously trying out a new repertoire knows this thoroughly. What seemed hilarious on the writing table might drop flat during a first live performance.

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3 In this paper we will keep the focus on the performative arts. In future work we plan to provide an illustration of the intersubjectivity at work in creative practices that at first sight may be thought of as solitary activities, such as 'reading a novel' or 'appreciating a painting in an empty gallery'. In the paper *intimate place*, Habets et al. (2024) we have argued that even solitary art experience depend on the societal acceptance and situatedness of phantastical, irrational and imaginative thoughts in specific places in the public domain, such as museums, theaters, galleries etc. in our living environment.

In a paradigmatic example of performance arts, *Lips of Thomas* by Marina Abramović,[4] it is possible to observe how artists foster 'intersubjective achievements' even more clearly. In this iconic performance, Abramović performs a series of self-inflicted actions – breaking glass and injuring her hand, carving a Star of David into her belly – until, after lying naked and bleeding on a block of ice, the spectators intervene to lift her and care for her, effectively becoming performers themselves and bringing the piece to an end. Abramović stood for a long time in pain and lay bleeding on the block of ice in a museum exhibition hall. This surely evoked the discomfort that moved some of the spectators to intervene. These spectators not only performed the actual carrying and caring for Marina's body but simultaneously enacted more abstract notions, like mutual care and martyrdom (cf. Reddy 1979; Lakoff, Johnson 1980; Gallagher 2017). The (spontaneous) joint action (Lindblom 2015) of Abramovic and the audience can be considered an articulation and accomplishment of complex thoughts, like martyrdom, through performing, contrary to some predefined concept represented symbolically in the performance. Performances are not just performed in the sense of executing pre-defined directors or performers intentions, but emerge from and depend on the interaction between actors and spectators. What *Lips of Thomas* does, and what characterizes the commitment of artists from around the 1960s, is that it shows that the experience of artistic performance depends on the skills, emotions, and imaginative capacities available within the pool of performers and spectators. Acting as a participant in an artistic performance – as simple as smiling at a joke or pulling Abramović off the block of ice – implies putting one's abilities into play, inevitably inviting others to act similarly (or act in refusal). Through this complex process of actions and reactions, the performance becomes defined as "funny," or Abramović's body is perceived as fragile and needing care.

4 In the Imaginative Circle: Action Possibilities for Intersubjective Achievement

In Abramovic's performance, as she was not really going to bleed herself to death, her actions became gestural. Gestures can be considered "action as a possibility for further action" (cf. Gallagher 2017, 243, Gallagher 2021). Rather than mere possibilities for transmitting information, gestures are integral to how we engage with and make sense of our living environment, bringing forth a new core of signification through them (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 148; Goodwin

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[4] 24 October 1975, at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck.

2003). It is in the artist's skills to guide the intersubjective process of gesturing, as give an articulation of "what is to be seen differently" (Ianniello 2025). To make this more concrete, we will look at a paradigmatic theatrical improvisation – first introduced by Tom Osborn – a playwright and reader at the Royal Court Theatre (Johnstone 1999, 306). Through this example, we will outline the role of gestures in intersubjective achievement.

In the exercise, students are arranged in a circle (see Fig. 1) and pass a tangible object to one another, manipulating it imaginatively. The object can be anything, typically an everyday item. In our description, it is a piece of cloth. Manipulated by one student, it is then passed to the next. The object offers multiple prompts and invites the group to explore the meaning that it can be given in the exercise. By playing, the participants guide each other's perception of the object through the gestures of its handling.

Fig 1 Illustration made by the authors. Circular theater exercise. 1) introduction of a real object, in this case, a piece of cloth; 2) imaginative play, caressing the cloth like a child; 3) imaginative play, a scarf in a stadium; 4) imaginative exhaustion, use of the cloth as a knife fails to establish correspondence with the material aspects of the cloth and in the group engaged in the exercise

Let us imagine a possible unfolding of the theatrical exercise. One student rolls the fabric, creating a ball-shaped form, and begins to rock it with an attitude suggesting that the imaginary child does not want to fall asleep. The exercise consists of giving tangible form to one's imaginative effort, which is ratified by the fact that the next person in the circle can coordinate with this effort. Once the action is developed, the student passes the rolled-up fabric child to the next person. The second student takes it and gently caresses it with great affection, then imaginatively transforms it into a scarf that they begin to wave vigorously in a stadium while cheering on their favorite team. In this process, we can observe various levels of attunement

and transformation: the second student embraces the imaginative material, ratifies it as an intersubjectively accepted possibility, and then further characterizes it before applying a radical transformation to the material aspects of the object in a way that is consistent with the structure of the fabric being manipulated. This can only go as far as the material at hand permits. For example, the next student takes the scarf, waves it proudly, and then tries to transform the fabric by rolling it into a knife. However, in this case, their imaginative effort does not align with the material aspects of the cloth, and importantly, it does not coordinate with the actions of the others. Practically speaking, the exercise ends here, as the possibilities for imaginative interactions have been exhausted.

We suggest that possibilities for gestural actions, like a piece of cloth rocked and gently caressed, can solely be understood as intersubjective achievements. In the unfolding of gestural activity, one can characterize certain aspects, making them salient and communicable, and letting them gain relevance for others, and come to see a fold of a piece of cloth as something different, such as a child's lips. The cloth does not merely offer practical possibilities for action, such as wrapping things in or as a picnic cloth to sit on the floor. In a situation like the theater exercise, the cloth provides opportunities to refer to other things, people, places, and phenomena through gestures. Gestural possibilities depend in part on the existence and material qualities of the object, as well as on the individual skills, abilities, and social practices available within the group engaged in the gestural activity (Ianniello, Habets 2025). Imagination is not something that happens solitarily inside an individual's head; it is then communicated to others through gestures (bodily, material, or mediated). We suggest considering gestures as an articulation and accomplishment of imaginative thoughts and feelings (cf. Van Dijk, Rietveld 2020; Goodwin 2003). Gestural actions are crucial for understanding a processual account of imagination.[5] Through gestures, we can partake in the imaginations of others, and this participation is supported by a shared imaginative setting, which we will call an 'imaginative niche.'

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[5] The possibilities for action offered by the environment to an organism were named *"affordances"* by the American psychologist James Gibson (1986, 127). In this paper we will not go into a discussion of affordances, but in earlier work drawn on an extended notion of affordances as developed by Erik Rietveld and Julian Kiverstein (2014) defined as follows, "affordances are relations between aspects of the material environment and abilities available in a form of life" (2014). In "Situated Imagination" (2020), van Dijk and Rietveld challenge the conventional representational view of imagination by examining the ethnographic details of imagining within specific contexts. They propose a relational and radically situated alternative, suggesting that the simultaneous emergence of multiple affordances during action can be experienced as imaginative. This indeterminate aspect of the coordinative process allows activities to expand and open up, introducing new possibilities for action.

5　Playing Together in Dynamic Imaginative Niches

Gesturing is never a solitary activity. Gestural possibilities lose their sense if solely performed alone, and gain relevance in situations in which we take the credibility of the imaginative thoughts of others. In many everyday situations that are often more practically inclined, mere gestural activity might be experienced as irrational or disturbing. Think of what you would think of a colleague who truly tries to convince you that the jacket balled up in his arms is a child. Or of a stranger on the street suddenly screaming 'to be or not be' while walking by. The relevance of gestures depends on the existence of situations in which one is accepted to communicate a flow of ideas, thoughts, and feelings as essential for fostering creativity (cf. Winnicott 1971, 74) and feel free to express otherwise irrational, fantastical, surreal, unfinished, nonsensical, or disturbing thoughts and feelings without fearing disapproval or rejection by others, and without depending on others' gullibility (cf. Winnicott 1971, 75). Crucially, we regard imagination as skilled engagement with the environment. In skilled action, 'situated normativity' shapes an individual's selective openness to possibilities of action that align with a community's social practices and expectations (Rietveld, Kiverstein 2014; Van Dijk, Rietveld 2018). Gestural actions are situated more normatively in some rather than other situations. As explained by the exercise above, "what is imaginable" is not unconstrained or detached from the materiality of such situations. So, there is a dependence on the specific materials in the environment (the cloth in this case) and broader social practices in which the imaginative niche is embedded (theater education, performance arts, and societal tendencies). Alternatively, in another example, think of children reenacting one of their favorite bedtime stories. What is played out depends on the materials (toys or random things) and the kind of children's narrative available in their family and broader societal situation. These shape what children imagine themselves to be: soldiers fighting a war with an umbrella for a gun, cars running a race, or a rabbit doctor healing their friend. Social norms, dominant narratives, and interaction styles constrain situated imagination. Playful situations are shaped in such a way as to evoke unpredictable elements of variation and creativity (Bateson, Martin 2013; Burghardt 2005; Spinka et al. 2001), while at the same time, they are typically constrained by rules of conduct, typical behaviors, and the materiality of the environment in playful situations. For example, the rules of staying in the circle and passing the object from one person to another can be understood as constraints.

Dynamic imaginative niches refer to situations that foster open-ended and surprising forms of engagement, allowing individuals and groups to explore new possibilities through imaginative and creative

interactions (Ianniello, Habets 2025). Importantly, we do not restrict imaginative ability solely to such situations. The concept emphasizes an amplification and situatedness of imaginative engagement in public life. Think of the theaters, cinemas, museums, festivals, galleries, etc. that enliven our cities and towns. However, also activities like parades, processions, theater exercises, or more day-to-day examples like reading a novel, telling a joke, or in child's play (or even specialized settings such as the psychotherapeutic setting, see Habets et al. 2024b for a comparison of artistic and psychotherapeutic settings). The places and activities on this heterogeneous and incomplete list all have a certain open-ended playfulness in common.

Our conception of *imaginative niches* is grounded in an enactivist approach to play proposed by Andersen et al., according to which humans engage in play as a deliberate means to create surprising situations (Andersen et al. 2023). Accordingly, play is understood as a method of informal experimentation through which individuals acquire knowledge and experience about their surroundings. Imaginative niches encourage uncertainty while reliably keeping an optimal zone for play between overstimulation and under-arousal (cf. Trevarthen 1979; Stern 2010). Play facilitates creativity and innovation by constructing environments conducive to surprise, precisely the unpredictability element conducive to the pleasure we experience while playing (Andersen et al. 2023, 467):

> Play can thus be described as a variety of niche construction where the organism modulates its physical and social environment in order to maximize the productive potential of surprise. (2022, 463)

Following Andersen and colleagues (2023), we suggest that the desire to play arises from the intrinsic motivation to encounter the unpredictable in a trusted manner (see Ianniello, Habets 2025). We underline that in play, we anticipate being surprised by the actions of others. By manipulating the environment, collective play and improvisation (see Noy et al. 2011) can be facilitated, where meaning remains fluid rather than predetermined. In that sense, imaginative niches facilitate and constitute people's intrinsic motivation to seek out *surprise and be surprised by* others.

In earlier work (Ianniello, Habets 2025), we have argued that openness of meaning sets "imaginative niches" apart from "cognitive niches" (Sterelny 2003) and "affective niches" (Colombetti, Krueger 2015).[6] Cognitive niches can 'scaffold' and offload cognitively

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[6] We want to underline that we do not consider cognition, affectivity and imagination to operate independently. We think there will always be overlap in real-life situations. The characterization of situations as typically cognitive, affective or imaginative

demanding tasks. An emblematic example of cognitive scaffolding comes from the history of the performing arts. Historians of English theatre have long puzzled over how the small troupes of Elizabethan theatres could have such large repertoires. As Evelyn Tribble (2005) suggests, it could be explained because, in those theatres, cognition was supported by a set of material artifacts – the theatre, the scripts, the actors' roles – and the theatre system was based on the use of verse and gesture, on a system of social apprenticeship and organizational practices within the companies. In practice, the performers anticipated and were dependent on the elaborate organization of the theater company to perform and effectively offload cognitive effort. What is anticipated of such a cognitive niche is that it reduces effort effectively.

Colombetti and Krueger have illustrated that the environment scaffolds "higher cognition" and affective states. This means that objects, places, and people can regulate our emotions as part of organism-environment interactions, which involve reciprocal influences that help achieve specific emotional states. Sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2011) cited the use of a bag as an illustrative example of this type of affective scaffolding.

> A handbag – including its content – functions as a highly portable, self-styled collection of technologies specifically chosen for regulating affect [...], which accordingly generate feelings of confidence, power, and security. (Colombetti, Krueger 2015, 1163).

Starting from this example, we can think of the collection and manipulation of artifacts and spaces (Colombetti et al. 2018 1) in our everyday environment as the construction of affective niches (Colombetti, Krueger 2015, 4). In practice, we rely on certain places, objects and people to have a specific effect on us.

Returning to the theatrical exercise, contrary to cognitive and affective niches, the piece of cloth is not anticipated to be effective in a specific way, as the handbag. That is, the object's meaning for an individual and the group within the activity remains open-ended. Play with the piece of cloth not only makes it possible to see the cloth as something else. This 'something else' is only achieved intersubjectively in playful activity. It not only affords to see the piece of cloth, for example, as a baby. Those gestures also evoke the emergence of feelings, emotions, and moods associated with that imagined person (or thing, or place), which, through play, we can articulate, share, and explore together.

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serves an analytic purpose to outline their differentiated situatedness within our living environment.

Similarly, *Faust* does not only put performers trapped behind the glass on display as fictional characters. However, it offers a space to explore the ambiguous moods and estranged feelings the performance evoked. The crucial point is that within *imaginative niches*, we can transform and are accepted to explore such feelings as shared objects of attention.

6 Intersubjective Dynamics, *Faust* as an Imaginative Niche

In this last section, we will use Ianniello's first-person experience of participating as a spectator in *Faust* during the performance at the 2017 Venice Biennale that took place in the German Pavilion to illustrate situations of intersubjective coordination. The ambiguity of what the performers inside the pavilion were doing contributed to the inherent disorientation that *Faust* staged. Performers enacted a series of actions in which the exercise of violence was a primary component – such as crushing their faces against thick sheets of glass or strangling themselves. Even the distorted sound of a guitar created discomfort and estrangement. Unexpectedly, it constructed an environment that was conducive to spontaneous and surprising reactions from visitors, which collectively altered the performative setting. The heterogeneous actions deployed in the grey zone demanded negotiation of the spectatorial posture.

In Ianniello's experience (in the remaining description, we will use the "I-form"), there was a moment when a performer picked up a guitar and began to play savagely. We can think of this sound as the balled-up, cradled fabric of the theatrical exercise. One of the spectators took up the invitation and started headbanging – consisting of violent head movements to the rhythm of music typical of metal music culture – inviting others to join. Headbanging here is comparable to the action of the student who, in the theatrical exercise, takes in the imaginary child and begins to caress it: although operating on the shared imaginative matter, an infant, he was characterizing it in a specific way based on his affective and imaginative coordination – the child was no longer like a fussy baby to be put to sleep but a small creature to be cared for.

Here, in *Faust*, my neighbor, solicited by a performer, allowed me to explore the performative environment differently in ways I possibly would not have explored alone. Our joint actions contributed to the transformation of the imaginative niche and surprised each other – including the performer. In practice, *Faust* can be seen as a hallmark of intersubjective imaginative achievement. By joining imaginaries, the audience was invited to make sense of the ambiguous, grim, and heavily mediated space it offered by participating in each

other's moments in going from seeing to seeing differently. One could say that there was *a mise en abime* of contact styles (Noë 2012), of perspectives that stand for *per-spicere*, "to see by means of" or, precisely, "to see through" (see Alloa 2024, 4).

In my specific case, I went from seeing the emaciated body of a performer harnessing a guitar, catatonic and isolated, deprived of bonds and enclosed in transparent walls, exhibited and violated – scrutinized by thousands of screens that photographed him at a hand's breadth from his face – to seeing a young body engaged in sharing its rage through music and inviting a physical connection, to tune into the rhythm and create a bond with a community. In short, by playing guitar and headbanging, we shaped our imaginative niche through an intersubjective achievement and found ourselves through a trusted surprise exploring unexpected possibilities.

I found myself no longer in a space resembling a lager or a bank in which the very lives of people were reduced to the bare minimum – photographed, consumed, locked up, segregated, spied on, and controlled. Thanks to my fellow headbanging imaginative explorer, a momentary and ephemeral component of the club – the imaginative circle – I now found myself among angry young people who use a medium – music – to express dissent, a burning dissatisfaction and in doing so, invite us to cooperate, that is, to shake our heads, intone rhythmically, and be part of a collective that breaks with normative violence of the standing order. Like *Faust*, art performances exemplify a better understanding of imagination as an intersubjective achievement, a collective effort that demands joint action. It involves creating and actively participating in situations that lead us from seeing to seeing differently. Like the collective handbanging as a form of resistance in a coercive space, an imaginative circle that can rendezvous anywhere and at any moment through the collective creation of imaginative niches, where there is a safe space for rehearsing to see the world differently.

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Why Direct Social Perception Theory Needs To Be More Gibsonian

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Abstract   The current debate on social perception is dominated by the invisibility principle: the assumption that mental states are inherently private and unobservable. Direct social perception theorists challenge this view, arguing that the mental states of others can be perceived directly. At present, however, there is no widely agreed programmatic approach for studying social perception as a direct phenomenon. In this paper, we identify three strategies that have been proposed by researchers to advance the direct social perception account. The empirical strategy emphasizes the need for experimental evidence; the Anscombean strategy highlights the importance of separating the analyst's description of an action from the actor's own perspective; finally, the Gestalt strategy proposes viewing mental states, such as emotions, as patterns of structures that occur across space and time. We argue that all three strategies can be pursued within the Gibsonian framework. The Gibsonian approach stresses the importance of ecological information, understood as structures in the environment discriminable in perception. We suggest that the Gibsonian perspective offers a coherent foundation for understanding social perception without relying on mentalistic inference.

Keywords   Direct Social Perception. Ecological Information. Gestalt. Anscombe. Ecological Psychology.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Direct Social Perception and Embodied Cognitive Science. – 3 The Empirical Strategy. – 4 The Anscombean Strategy. – 5 The Gestalt Strategy. – 6 The Gibsonian Framework: Information for Direct Social Perception.

1 Introduction

Do we ever perceive another person's anger? Certainly, we can perceive the other person's facial expressions and their behavior. According to a common intuition, however, this is not the same thing as saying that we perceive their anger: what we perceive is simply the outward manifestation of the emotion; there is something inherently subjective about the state of being angry. We can push this intuition a little further. Varga (2020) proposes the following thought experiment. Imagine we had access to a machine that could show us in real time the neural makeup of the person undergoing an episode of anger. Would we then be inclined to say that we see the person's anger? Varga (2020) suggests that we would be equally inclined to say 'no'. We would say that we can see the brain scan of an angry person, but still not the anger itself.

This thought experiment brings out an important assumption about what mental states are: we tend to see them as inherently undiscoverable and unobservable. Even advanced screening technology would not be able to make us see emotions, because emotions are private, inaccessible to others: they exist within subjective experience. Fernández Castro and Heras-Escribano (2020) call this view 'the assumption of invisibility'. It is also known as 'the unobservability principle' (e.g., Krueger 2012; Becchio et al. 2018). According to this assumption, certain parts of the world are not available to be seen, but can only be inferred. The assumption of invisibility belies a deeply dualist understanding of the mental.

A number of theorists have sought to deny the assumption of invisibility, and have proposed that perception of mental states can be direct. To date, however, no coherent positive programmatic approach to direct social perception has been developed. The debate remains overly conceptual and somewhat confused. The paper is structured as follows. We provide a brief overview of the state of the debate. We then individuate three methodological strategies that have recently been proposed for addressing these issues: the empirical strategy, the Anscombean strategy, and the Gestalt strategy. We will conclude by suggesting that all three of these strategies can best be pursued within the framework of Gibsonian perceptual information.

2 Direct Social Perception and Embodied Cognitive Science

The notion of 'direct social perception' has been the subject of some debate among philosophers since the late 2000s (Gallagher 2008; Krueger 2018; Spaulding 2015; Zahavi 2011). The driving force of this debate was, initially, dissatisfaction with the theory of mind paradigm. The theory of mind paradigm itself arose out of Premack and Woodruff's (1978) classic study asking, "Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?" Daniel Dennett's commentary on the paper, which offered a critique of the methodology, led to subsequent studies of human children with a focus on whether children are sensitive to the false beliefs of others (Dennett 1978; Wimmer, Perner 1983). Much of the research on social cognition in the 1980s and 1990s centered around the question of how we come to know others' mental states (including their false beliefs). For many years, the two main hypotheses were the theory-theory which claimed that we learn the landscape of others' mental states by hypothesis-building and -testing, much like scientists discovering the nature of the world (Gopnik et al. 1999), and the simulation theory, which claimed that we grasp others' mental states by implicitly or explicitly simulating them on our own neural apparatus (Gallese, Goldman 1998; Gordon 1986).

Neither of these hypotheses is particularly attractive from the viewpoint of embodied cognitive science. Both posit social cognition as a private achievement of the observer. The most prominent alternative hypothesis to the theory of mind paradigm is Shaun Gallagher's interaction theory (Gallagher 2004; 2008; 2020). In the most comprehensive account of this theory to date, Gallagher (2020) builds a negative argument against the theory of mind paradigm. He usefully identifies not one but three problematic assumptions associated with theory of mind (71). These are:

1. the unobservability principle, i.e. the assumption that we don't have direct perceptual access to other minds
2. the observational stance, i.e. the assumption that we know about others by observing them
3. the supposition of universality, i.e. the assumption that a theory of mind mechanism must explain all instances in which we understand others

The first assumption we have already discussed above. Gallagher proposes to reject all three assumptions. He asserts instead (Gallagher 2020, 100) that (1) other minds are not hidden away and inaccessible, (2) our normal everyday stance towards others is second-person, not third-person, and (3) our primary way of understanding others is not through mindreading but through embodied engagement.

Similarly, Fernández Castro and Heras-Escribano (2020) identify two problematic assumptions within existing work on social cognition. First is the aforementioned assumption of invisibility, which holds that mental states are inherently private to the individual who undergoes them. Second is the assumption of methodological individualism, according to which the primary unit of analysis should be the cognitive states of an individual cognizer, as opposed to, for example, the interacting dyad or the entire ecological, cultural and social environment of the agent.

This second assumption has been the focus of much enactivist theorizing about social cognition, notably the theory of participatory sense-making (De Jaegher, Di Paolo 2007; Di Paolo et al. 2018). This refers to collaborative activity within which the agents actively regulate their coupling with each other and with the environment, giving rise to an emergent whole that no individual is in control of (think of the movement of players on a soccer team as they create and exploit space around their opponents). The agent and the environment are dependent on and shaped by one another. Arguably, the entire agent-social environment pair is the unit on which level cognition takes place (De Jaegher et al. 2010).

But let us return specifically to the notion of direct social perception. How should we understand it? How does it differ from indirect social perception? Gallagher (2008) explains the difference in a useful way. Direct perception, he suggests, is smart; indirect perception is dumb. The example Gallagher gives is that when looking at a car, the dumb perception account posits that we perceive components (redness, shapeness, etc.) which we then mentally combine 'to make it add up to my car' (Gallagher 2008, 536). The smart perception account, meanwhile, posits that we perceive the car as a whole. The entire configuration is available for perceptual detection.

> The question about direct perception, whether of objects or of others is not simply about how direct it is, or what directness means, but how smart, how richly informed, it is. The smarter the perception is, the more work it does; the dumber it is, the more it requires extra cognitive processes (theory, simulation) to get the job done. The direct perception theorist is claiming that social perception is very smart and that in the usual circumstances of social interaction it does most of the work without the need of extra cognitive (theoretical or simulationist) processes. (Gallagher 2008, 538)

In our opinion, the distinction Gallagher draws in the above quote is key to any coherent understanding of the phrase 'direct social perception.' At the same time, the approach that Gallagher is advocating here appears to be an instance of adopting 'the observational stance,' which, in the later text, he claims is problematic (Gallagher

2020). We know about the car, in Gallagher's example, by observing it. That is, we know about it by interacting with the information that it projects into light, not by interacting physically with the car. Gallagher's (2008) notion of direct social perception as smart perception seems to be separable from the notion that social cognition is inherently interactive (in the social sense), and yet, as can be seen from the above, these two issues have been conflated in the literature on embodied social cognition (De Jaegher 2009).[1]

In summary, the habitual framing of embodied accounts of social cognition as being a response to, or an alternative to, the theory of mind paradigm appears to have led to a couple of undesired consequences. First, embodied accounts of social cognition have tended to become overly negative, focusing on what theory of mind gets wrong instead of how to build a coherent programmatic alternative. What is called for is a positive theory of social cognition within the embodied tradition. Second, embodied accounts have tended to conflate two issues: on the one hand, the interactive, or second-person, nature of social life, and, on the other, the availability of information about other actors in the environment.

In the rest of this paper, we will focus on some desiderata for a positive programmatic approach to direct social perception.

3   The Empirical Strategy

If our aim is to develop a programmatic approach to the perception of social properties, a reasonable place to start is to ask what kind of empirical evidence we should be seeking. We take our cue here from a recent discussion by Mason Westfall (2023) on the perception of agency. Westfall argues that the perception of agency is fundamentally the same thing as the perception of animacy. To empirically investigate agency, therefore, a good place to start would be to consult the literature on the perception of animacy. As Westfall points out, however, existing research from within the theory of mind paradigm is not necessarily helpful here. 'Most discussions of animacy center on the role animacy plays in mental state attribution–in particular, the attribution of intentions. Often, though, we perceive animacy *without* attributing mental states' (Westfall 2023, 848; italics in original).

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[1]   In the dynamical systems tradition, some theorists attempt to understand social interaction as arising from spontaneous interpersonal coordination (e.g. Richardson et al 2007). Again, we understand this work as being about processes of social interaction, and somewhat separate from the direct social perception discussion, which, we are suggesting, should be concerned with identifying information or perceptual invariants. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to address this line of work explicitly.

Westfall (2023) argues that perceiving animacy is not the same as perceiving motion, because it is possible to perceive something as animate without perceiving it moving, e.g. a motionless deer encountered on a hiking trail. It is also not the same as perceiving unpredictable motion, because even unpredictably moving entities such as a plastic bag in the wind do not appear animate. Finally, perceiving animacy is not the same as perceiving life, because we can distinguish life from animacy, and animacy detection is developmentally prior to life detection.

The most famous empirical study of the perception of animacy is Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel's classic study of 'apparent Behavior' (Heider, Simmel 1944). In the study, the subjects are presented an approximately 2.5 minute long film in which two triangles and a circle move around a rectangular, empty structure. After seeing the film, the subjects are asked to interpret what happened. Subjects tend to spontaneously describe the figures as intentional entities, having personalities and complex goals. The Heider and Simmel study is an excellent example of the human tendency to see intentionality in seemingly the most simple structures.

While the Heider and Simmel study is compelling as a demonstration that we can perceive both animacy and agency in simple motion, the study does not establish how we achieve this perceptual outcome. What are the underlying mechanisms that lead participants to see animacy when they watch the film? The theory of mind paradigm reaches for an explanation in terms of ascription: participants perceive animacy and intentions because they ascribe personalities to the figures. What we are interested in, however, is whether there is a perceptual basis for the appearance of animacy. Scholl and Gao (2013) provide a useful set of clarifications here:

> "[P]erception" refers in this context to a family of processes that is relatively *automatic* and *irresistible*, and that operates *without the ability to consciously introspect its nature* [...] for a process to count as perceptual, it needs to be *strongly and directly controlled by specific and subtle features of the visual input itself*. (Scholl, Gao 2013, 202; italics added)

Note the compatibility with Gallagher's (2008) definition of direct perception as smart perception, discussed above. A perceptual account of animacy-perception, on this reading, would be one that does not require the observer to add something mental on top of the incoming stimulus information.

An example of a class of processes that can be understood as perceptual, in the sense described here, is the perception of causation. Causal perception is retinotopically specific and cannot be explained by appeal to adaptation of lower-level visual features (Rolfs et al.

2013). It would be very difficult to explain the perception of causation without an appeal to visual processing because we do not know of any higher-level processes (like cognition or judgments) that evoke retinotopically specific processing. This is the standard that we would like animacy to meet. Scholl and Gao (2013) suggest, pessimistically, that this particular retinotopically specific processing goal cannot be achieved by animacy because the perception of animacy is dynamic in both spatial and temporal dimensions.

The perception of animacy has been operationalized in a number of different ways, for example: as self- propulsion, as abrupt changes in speed or direction, as certain patterns of approach and avoidance, as coordinated orientation cues. Generally, animacy is thought to be perceived when agents violate Newtonian mechanics. Animate objects move in ways that cannot be explained by the forces their environment subjects them to (Scholl, Gao 2013). To argue that animacy is directly perceived we would have to gather evidence that self-propelled motion is distinguished from other stimuli by a specific bottom-up visual processing mechanism.

Westfall (2023) discusses multiple studies that he argues provide convergent evidence for a perceptual understanding of animacy-detection. We focus on one of these. A study by Pratt et al. (2010) uses a multiple object tracking paradigm to investigate whether attention is preferentially, and automatically, allocated to animate motion. The authors conducted a series of experiments that suggest that subjects perform better at detecting changes in geometrical objects if these objects have previously exhibited animate movement. In the study, animacy is defined as self-produced and unpredictable motion.

The subjects in Pratt et al.'s (2010) study see a number of geometrical figures on a screen. The figures that exhibit unpredictable motion, that is, those which show changes in motion that are not a result of collisions, are considered to be the 'animate' objects. In the first two experiments, four objects move pseudo-randomly on the screen, sometimes colliding with each other and with the screen frame. At one point, one of the objects changes direction without a preceding collision. Subsequently, one of the four figures changes its state and the participants need to report this change. The hypothesis is that if the changed object was the one that exhibited animate motion, the reaction of the study participants will be faster, since their attention is already allocated to this object. In both experiments, the subjects were indeed faster to respond to the change if it involved the object that exhibited animate motion.[2]

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2 These two experiments are followed-up by four additional experiments, excluding that the faster reaction time was due to the animate movement being a singleton (an odd one out) or that the subjects reacted faster because they learned to strategically

We will not here attempt to resolve the issue of whether there can be a purely perceptual explanation of the detection of animacy. Interested readers are directed to the discussion in Westfall (2023). The moral that we want to draw is that whether or not something is perceptual is an empirical matter. The problem with the theory of mind paradigm here is that it attempts to short-circuit the empirical process, appealing to hidden cognitive mechanisms instead of seeking useful perceptual variables that could underpin the perceptual achievement. A programmatic approach to direct social perception must be methodologically committed to the empirical strategy: if we have not yet identified the perceptual basis for the detection of some social property, we must assume that we have not looked hard enough (Warren 2021).

4 The Anscombean Strategy

One of the difficulties in studying psychology is that it requires great discipline on the part of researcher in keeping separate those things that we know and have access to, from those things that the actor we are studying knows and has access to. Confusing these two things seems obvious and easily avoidable, and yet it happens all the time. William James (1890) noticed this problem a long time ago. He called it the 'psychologist's fallacy'. Studying social cognition only compounds the difficulty here. In addition to the third-person perspective of the researcher and the first-person perspective of the actor, we are forced to add the second-person perspective of the social peer. As linguistically sophisticated adults we have a set of beliefs and desires that form an extensive 'theory' of how the world works. In social situations, we know how these come into play and are exhibited in our social behaviors. Because that is how our internal life works, we speculate that this is how others' minds work as well. When asked how we have the knowledge of others, we refer to this set of beliefs and desires we think they have. Thus, we explain social cognition in inferential terms.

The confusions are particularly acute in the domain of goal-directed behavior. In philosophy, goal-directed behavior (or, more broadly, intentionality) is mostly defined in terms of preceding mental states such as desires and beliefs (e.g., Bratman 1987; Davidson 2001). Since

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attend to the movement that preceded the change. In the fifth and the sixth experiment, the researchers hypothesized that the stronger the animacy is indicated (by the degree of direction change or the speed of the movement), the faster the subjects will be to spot the change, which proved to be the case. These results suggest that animacy is distinguished in perception and prioritized in *bottom-up* allocation of attention during perception.

these approaches simply help themselves to speculating about hidden internal mechanisms, they are of little relevance to a direct social perception program. Fortunately, as argued by Segundo-Ortin and Kalis (2024), there is another way of thinking about goal-directedness that is potentially compatible with a direct social perception approach, namely Anscombe's theory of intentionality, which was inspired by the Wittgensteinian tradition of thought.

Segundo-Ortin and Kalis (2024) identify four prominent features of Anscombe's approach to intention. First, they point out that Anscombe takes a 'grammatical' approach towards intentionality and other problems of perception and action. That is, in the Oxford philosophical tradition, she attempted to explain perception and action by looking at the way they are reflected in language (Segundo-Ortin, Kalis 2024, 82). Although this is somewhat removed from the usual methods of ecological psychology, it may be useful for our programmatic aims. It could show us why other approaches (such as Davidson's or Bratman's) start from false intuitions about the phenomenon, and it could help us keep separate the different perspectives that are at play (first-, second-, third-person).

Second, and relatedly, Anscombe points out that actions are *only intentional under a description*. We can describe an action in many ways, all of which are valid. For example, when we are eating a cookie, we are decreasing the levels of cortisol in our blood, satisfying our hunger, stealing our colleague's dessert, increasing the demand for cookies in our country, etc. An action is intentional under a description if the action is identified as a means towards a goal according to this description. Intentional actions are, as quoted in Segundo-Ortin and Kalis (2024), "actions to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting" (Anscombe 2000, § 5, 9).

Third, intentional actions presuppose practical knowledge. Segundo-Ortin and Kalis (2024) describe three major characteristics of Anscome's understanding of practical knowledge. Firstly, we exhibit practical knowledge when we know what we are doing intentionally without observing it. Secondly, intentional action depends on the agent knowing what they are doing (possessing practical knowledge). Thirdly, practical knowledge allows us to answer 'why' questions about the performed action. As underscored in all three points, practical knowledge is inseparably connected to action. By conceiving goal-directedness in terms of practical knowledge, it is plausible that the goals in question could become accessible to a direct social perception approach.

Finally, intentional actions form a means-ends hierarchy or a teleological pattern. For instance, we might find ourselves at some point in the day filling a kettle with water, but we would not identify 'filling the kettle with water' as our goal. The action occurs as part of

a larger means-end hierarchy, in which the ultimate goal is making a cup of tea. Intuitively, actors are aware of this entire structure, in some sense: "by describing an action as intentional, what we are doing is indicating that the agent knows what she is doing right now, and how what she is doing embodies a certain teleological structure" (Segundo-Ortin, Kalis 2024, 80).

According to Segundo-Ortin and Kalis (2024), Anscombe's account provides a way of thinking about goal- directed action that avoids Cartesian dualism. They again quote Anscombe, clarifying the view of intentionality as a grammatical feature of actions: "an action is not called 'intentional' in virtue of any extra feature which exists when it is performed [...] [w]e do not add anything attaching to the action at the time it is done by describing it as intentional" (Anscombe 2000, § 19, 28). The relevant claim here, for our purposes, is that Anscombe's view avoids the assumption of invisibility. Intentional action is not a matter of any accompanying or preceding mental states of the agent but a realization of intention in action. In consequence, perceiving an intentional action can be direct and does not require 'peeking inside' another agent's mind.

A relevant empirical study here was conducted by Morris and Lewis (2010). This study looks at the phenomenon of diving (or simulation) in soccer, where players pretend to have been fouled by an opponent in order to gain an unfair advantage. The study shows that human observers are, at least in some circumstances, specialists in being able to detect an actor's real intentions. Participants were shown videos of soccer players falling to the ground following real collisions with opponents versus simulated collisions. The study found that the participants are not only in agreement about which ones of the presented videos showed real tackles, but that their judgment is mostly correct.[3]

Participants in this study can, in principle, notice features of the event such as a lack of temporal contiguity between the tackle and the fall, lack of ballistic continuity (e.g., does the falling player add motion to their roll on the ground that is not imparted by the tackle itself?), and lack of contact consistency (e.g., the player is struck in the chest and then falls down clutching their face). The ability of the participants to tell in which situations the player is pretending and in which their behavior is genuine lead the researchers to the conclusion that intentions can be perceptually detected. The study's results are consistent with the Anscombean view of intentionality. Because the players' intentions are realized in their actions, the players

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[3] The Morris and Lewis (2010) study addresses three questions: in the first part, the researchers try to find out whether participants agree about which players are pretending; in the second part, whether the participants judged correctly (their answers were compared to the instructions the players received before recording the dive on camera). In the third part, the researchers develop a taxonomy of diving behaviors.

cannot help but generate information about the deceit. This information is, both in principle and in practice, shown to be detectable by third-party observers.

The moral here is that in developing an empirical approach to direct social perception, it is imperative that we avoid conflating our description of the phenomenon of interest with the perspective of the actor or actors that we are investigating. Anscombe's approach is valuable because it provides a rigorous method for keeping the perspectives separate from one another. Anscombe shows that it is not necessary to understand intention in neo-Cartesian terms, with reference to hidden thoughts and desires. The observed agent, in their actions, provides us enough perceptual information so that we know their (realized in action) intentions. The Morris and Lewis (2010) study provides a useful example where the intention-in-action can be detected in information. This finding supports Anscombe's account: the intentions of the players seem to be indeed perceivable in their actions for the third-party observers. Therefore, there is no need to refer to internal mental states to explain intentions.

5　The Gestalt Strategy

A third positive strategy that has been advocated recently is to revive the practice of conceiving social perception in terms of Gestalts. This proposal has been raised in the domain of emotion perception by Forlè and Songhorian (2024) and by García Rodríguez (2021).

The paradigmatic example of a Gestalt is a melody, which consists of the arrangements of different notes but exceeds the sum of these notes played separately. A melody can be transposed to a different key such that none of the notes are the same as they were, and yet the melody itself remains intact. In Gestalt perception, we perceive the features of an object as a whole, not in isolation; the organization of the parts and the relations between them are crucial. Emotions, according to some direct social perception theorists, exhibit such a structure.

> [I]n cases of joy, one perceptually takes in a Gestalt that includes a particular kind of smile, wrinkled and glowing eyes, a generally relaxed bodily posture, certain linguistic expressions, and so on, in a context including relations to others and the environment; hence, one perceives a totality of features in context. (García Rodríguez 2021, 9440)

Expressions of emotions are both temporally and spatially extended, and exist across multiple sensory modalities. An emotion of joy might cause changes in posture, vocal pitch, or facial muscles. Gestalt

structures are actual perceptual phenomena, characterized by the following features: (1) they exceed the mere sum of their elements and (2) these elements gain new qualities in the context of the Gestalt (Forlè, Songhorian 2024).

The Gestalt view of emotions can be contrasted with the more standard cluster view of emotions. According to most contemporary theorists, emotions are clusters of, on the one hand, external properties such as facial expressions, and, on the other hand, internal properties such as feelings. As we saw above with Varga's (2020) thought experiment about the brain scanning machine for reading emotional states, this cluster view is compatible with the assumption of invisibility. The relevant parts of the emotional cluster may, after all, not be the parts that are visible. To truly perceive an emotion, on this view, we would have to perceive something that is private to the agent who is undergoing it. Therefore, direct perception of emotion is incoherent.

To escape this conclusion, Forlè and Songhorian (2024) suggest taking a different starting point. They suggest that a suitable view of interactions with others and our knowledge of their emotions can be found in the work of the German phenomenologist Max Scheler:

> According to Scheler, in our everyday encounters, we are neither confronted with a mere body nor with a mere mind, but with a psychophysical 'expressive unity' [...] This is the reason why Scheler can say that we are 'directly acquainted with another person's joy in his laughter, with his sorrow and pain in his tears, with his shame in his blushing, with his entreaty in his outstretched hands, with his love in his look of affection'. (Forlè, Songhorian 2024, 507)

It is possible that the argument here is overstating the extent to which the mainstream view of emotions is genuinely committed to dualism. Some direct social perception theorists have argued for a view of configural patterns that is potentially compatible with the cluster view. For instance, Krueger and Overgaard (2012) propose that certain bodily expressions are a *proper part* of the mental phenomenon, i.e. they are part of the emotional cluster.

That said, the strategy of stressing the Gestalt quality of emotions is, in our view, a useful one. Identifying the specific configural pattern that specifies a given emotional percept is exceedingly challenging (Zebrowitz, Collins 1997). Nevertheless, some such pattern must exist if a direct social perception program for emotional perception is to be viable. There is some inter-species evidence that suggests that such an approach is needed. Müller et al. (2015) report a study of dogs who are trained to respond preferentially to pictures of angry and happy human faces, which they are able to do at above chance levels. It is implausible that dogs could be using a theory of mind

strategy to achieve this. A logical place to look for the explanation would be in the dogs' sensitivity to higher-order Gestalt patterns.[4]

The moral that we would like to draw here is that a direct social perception program must address the issue of configural patterns. Social perception appears to be sensitive to higher-order configural patterns: in facial expressions, in bodily postures, in vocal modulation, etc. An adequate theoretical framework must be able to accommodate such configural features. A promising candidate framework already exists: the framework of Gibsonian information.

6 The Gibsonian Framework: Information for Direct Social Perception

As we have seen, recent debates around direct social perception have taken place largely among philosophers. Many discussions of direct social perception focus on a negative argument, namely, on whether we should reject representational interpretations of social perception in favor of a more embodied account (e.g., Gallagher 2020). We also saw that the issue of identifying the information for social perception is frequently conflated with the issue of describing interpersonal interaction. We then identified some positive strategies for developing a programmatic approach to direct social perception: the empirical strategy, the Anscombean strategy, and the Gestalt strategy. We suggest that empirical evidence supports findings in ecological psychology. Intentionality, understood in the Anscombean sense, points to a non-mentalistic picture of social cognition that avoids reference to hidden thoughts and desires and provides a view of intention-in-action detectable as ecological information. Emotions can be usefully understood as Gestalts and directly perceived as such, aligning with the principles of ecological psychology.

In concluding, we would like to suggest that all of these strategies can most naturally be brought together in the existing framework of James J. Gibson's ecological approach to perceptual information. We thus endorse the broad approach laid out in a target article by Becchio et al. (2018). The three pillars of empirical evidence, the Anscombean framework of intentionality, and the theory of Gestalts can serve as a starting point of the positive account of social ecological psychology.

Gibson is often invoked in discussions of direct social perception, particularly for his concept of affordances (e.g., Abramova, Slors

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[4]   Müller et al. (2015) themselves posit that the mechanism is based on the dogs' memory for actual human faces, but this only postpones the explanation of how the dogs discriminated the meanings of those faces in the first place.

2015; Gallagher, Varga 2014; Kiverstein 2015; Valenti, Gold 1991). The concept of affordances is certainly relevant to any discussion of social cognition (Baggs 2021). However, our argument in the present paper is that there is a more fundamental vehicle for direct social perception that has been largely neglected in these recent debates, namely Gibsonian information (Becchio et al. 2018).

James J. Gibson wrote about the perception of social situations in the 1950s. Characteristically, Gibson sets out from the observation that perception works remarkably well most of the time. Gibson's argument here is that social perception research should aim to identify relevant properties of the stimulus that underlie this accurate perception:

> How do we perceive, for instance, that one person is being kind to another, bearing in mind that we do this with some accuracy? How do we perceive the intentions and abilities of a political candidate, taking it for granted that he does not fool all of us all the time? In other words, what do we discriminate and identify in these complex stimulus-situations which, when conditions are favorable, yields a correct perception? This ought to be the primary line of inquiry, but instead it is almost completely neglected. (Gibson 1951, 95–96, quoted in Heider 1958, 41)

This passage contains the kernel of a Gibsonian approach to social perception. The key to understanding Gibson's account of direct perception, generally, is that perception is a matter of discriminating structure that can be found within the stimulus-situation. Contrary to the main current of western philosophy, James and Eleanor Gibson argued that discriminating structure is sufficient for perception, and perception does not require mental augmentation in the form of, say, an act of mental categorization or the creation of a mental model (Gibson and Gibson 1955). Notice, once again, the similarity with Gallagher's (2008) glossing of direct perception as smart perception (see also Runeson 1977). Gibson later adjusted his terminology and argued for an account of perception as the direct detection of 'stimulus information' (Blau, Wagman 2022; Gibson 1979). In essence, the argument remains the same: perception research should be based on the detection or discrimination of informative structures within the stimulus-situation. Gibsonian information thus refers to discriminable structure present within the stimulus.

Gibson himself published little on social perception after the early 1950s (Reed 1988). Gibson's friend Gunnar Johansson, however, initiated an influential research program based on temporally-extended visual patterns that are generated by bodies in motion (Cutting, Kozlowski 1977; Johansson 1973; Runeson, Frykholm 1983). A Gibsonian approach to social perception must necessarily start from

such patterns within perceptual information (Baggs, Steffensen 2024; McArthur, Baron 1983).

We will not attempt here to present a complete account of how the Gibsonian perceptual information framework can be applied in the social context. We will offer only one illustrative example. Brett Fajen (2021), in a discussion of visual control of locomotion, raises the issue that when we move around in the world, we often encounter other objects that are themselves moving, and that we can potentially collide with.

> One factor that could complicate the perception of heading based on optic flow is the presence of objects that move independently of ourselves, such as pedestrians, automobiles, and cyclists. When such objects are present, as they often are, they introduce regions of the optic flow field with motion that is discrepant from that generated by the stationary background. In the instantaneous flow field, the velocity vectors corresponding to a moving object have different magnitudes and (in most cases) point in different directions. (Fajen 2021, 7)

Fajen asks us to imagine cycling into a traffic light-controlled road intersection as a vehicle crosses our path of locomotion, temporarily occluding the road ahead. As Fajen indicates in the passage above, we might expect that this situation would confuse our visual system. When cycling, we generate a centrifugal pattern of optic flow that has its centre in our current direction of heading. This information is held to be instrumental in controlling our action (Gibson 1958). The moving vehicle disrupts this pattern, temporarily denying us access to the useful source of information. Why do we not fall off the bike?

In practice, we are not confused by this situation. An object crossing our path is typically not experienced as a deletion of information, but as a presence of an object. The vehicle's movement is an additional source of information within the optic flow that exists alongside, or within, the self-generated global pattern of optic flow. The cyclist is well-advised to attend to this additional source of information. In the specific example that Fajen provides, the cyclist is on course to pass to the right of the vehicle, and this fact is specified in the leftward movement of the vehicle's solid angle as projected into the optic array of the cyclist. This complex configural pattern is information that the cyclist can use to detect that it is safe to maintain the current heading.

This example offers a useful illustration of how a Gibsonian approach to direct social perception might proceed. Most of us are familiar with the experience of moving around in traffic. Moving in traffic is a situation that, while it has its frustrations, we are nevertheless able to negotiate successfully most of the time. Given that

this is the case, we must be making use of a reliable source of information to guide our movements. The above discussion indicates that the information for social perception is, in fact, exceedingly rich. By paying appropriate attention, we can notice that other people and things are moving (we can detect animacy), and we can discriminate what goals are being pursued. We can also attend to features of the situation that are informative about other people's emotional states. In developing a programmatic approach to direct social perception, to paraphrase (Gibson 1951) information 'ought to be the primary line of inquiry.'

The direct social perception view today is primarily framed in negative terms, as a response to inferential, mentalist theories of mind. In this paper, we proposed three distinct strategies that support the framework of ecological psychology: empirical evidence, Anscombe's account of intentionality, and the Gestalt view of emotions. We suggest that these strategies position ecological psychology as a good candidate for a positive account of direct social perception. We admit, nonetheless, that the difficult work is yet to be done. The difficult work involves identifying and defining variables that specify social information in our environment. A goal for future work is to identify some concrete perceptual variables that might indicate the emotional states of others, and to investigate the extent to which such variables can be said to lawfully specify those emotional states. Ultimately, the viability of a Gibsonian approach to direct social perception hinges on whether such informational variables exist and are used by social animals.

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Rethinking
the Simulation Theory

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Abstract   This paper revisits the Simulation Theory (ST) as a framework for understanding human social cognition, challenging traditional 'theory of mind' or 'folk psychology' approaches. While these theory-based models posit that humans use an implicit body of knowledge to interpret and predict others' behavior, ST emphasizes the use of mental simulation, leveraging the brain's existing mechanisms for planning and prediction. By employing a predictive coding strategy, the brain minimizes cognitive load, interpreting others' actions through 'inverse planning' – a process that reuses one's own action planning system to hypothesize the goals and intentions of others. The concept of agent-neutral coding is introduced, proposing that inputs for self and others are initially shared, reducing the need for explicit mental state attributions. This approach not only economizes cognitive resources but aligns with evolutionary perspectives on human social interaction in small, cohesive groups. In addition, the paper explores the role of perspective-taking and error correction in adapting shared mental representation. This reevaluation of ST underscores its efficiency and adaptability, offering a streamlined alternative to theory-based accounts of social cognition.

Keywords   Simulation theory. Theory theory. Social cognition. Other minds. Primate evolution.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 The Thirst for Efficiency: The Predictive Approach. – 3 Inverse Planning. – 3.1 Simulative Inverse Planning. – 4 Agent-neutral Coding. – 5 Perspective-taking and Positional Correction. – 6 An Evolutionary Perspective. – 7 Ignorance And False Belief. – 8 Knowledge First. – 9 Emotions. – 10 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Since the 1960's it was widely assumed that human competence in interpreting and anticipating the behavior of others depends on a body of general knowledge – a theory, commonly called 'folk psychology' by philosophers and 'theory of mind' by psychologists. This is a theory, we can say colloquially, of 'what makes us tick.' And the core stipulation of the theory is that behavior, or at least intentional action, is caused by the agents' beliefs and desires primarily, although other mental states may be added to the mix. Our capacity to theorize about these underlying states is sometimes called mentalizing; but the term is often interpreted more broadly, to cover our everyday understanding of others' behavior, with or without reference to mental states.

In the 1980s, the 'simulation' theory (ST) posed the first serious rival to the 'theory theory' (TT). ST locates the main source of mentalizing competence in a procedure or set of procedures called 'simulation,' or 'mental simulation.' Introduced by philosophers (Gordon 1986; Heal 1986; Goldman 1989), this account is usually thought to challenge the very assumption that mentalizing is an application of an implicit theory of mental states. The TT- ST debate soon became a topic of interest to developmental psychologists and others working on social cognition.

One of the initial motivations for a simulation account was efficiency, or getting the most benefit with the least expenditure of resources – in brain circuitry, processing time, and metabolic energy. The importance of getting the most with the least, as well as the computational means for accomplishing that, have become clearer in the past two decades.

What would simulation offer? For one thing, simulation would spare the brain the overhead costs of acquiring, storing, and applying the information needed to construct a model of what makes us tick. But an important part of the simulationist response was to ask a simple question: Why would a system need to invest in a general theory or model of systems like itself? Wouldn't it be more economical simply to use itself as a stand-in for these other, similar systems? This question will be a major theme in what follows.

2 The Thirst for Efficiency – The Predictive Approach

How is it possible for the human brain to make sense of the complexities of human behavior and interaction? Consider everything you know about the behavior and interactions of everybody you know or remember. How can all this be handled by the primate brain – in fact, just a portion of the primate brain?

Part of the solution would be to make that portion, namely, the neo-cortex, much bigger. This is clearly what happened in the evolution of the primate brain. According to Robin Dunbar's widely accepted Social Brain Hypothesis, primate societies are unusually complex, and the need to manage such complexity is the main explanation for the fact that primates have unusually large brains. Primate sociality is based on bonded relationships that underpin coalitions, which in turn are designed to buffer individuals against the social stresses of living in large, stable groups. This is reflected in a correlation between social group size and neocortex size in primates (but not other species of animals). The correlation, in humans at least, is due to our *mentalizing skills* as they grow to encompass an expanding community.

In the light of this thirst for resources, it is disappointing to note that many proponents, as well as most critics of the simulation theory, have supposed simulation to be an elaborate set of processes involving recognition of one's own mental states and an implicit inference from oneself to others. The form of inference is essentially the old argument from analogy, which requires that one first introspect in order to recognize one's own mental states under various conditions; then, after identifying those states, inferring that the other is in similar states.

Why the need for this elaborate, intellectually loaded process? Why all the judging and recognizing and leaps of analogy? Is there something about the primate brain that demands all this thinking? I don't think so.

The approach presented here is much in line with the current view in psychology and neuroscience that neural systems tend to reduce metabolic and other expenses by employing a predictive coding strategy. This is a strategy of 'guessing ahead.' Rather than waiting for the world to bombard us with new information, the system makes its latest best guess as to what will be coming in. This process of predicting input values minimizes the need for new information input, in that only discrepancies, or information that conflicts with the predicted values (prediction errors), need be encoded.

Any corrections or departures from this default are likely to be relatively small, requiring minimal resources to encode these differences.

Thus understood, simulation would resemble schemes commonly used in the digital transmission and storage of video content (Gordon 1992). Typically, little or no visual content changes in, say, the thirtieth of a second that separates one frame from the next; successive frames in a video sequence are nearly always very similar. Therefore, it is an efficient strategy to treat each frame initially as a copy of the previous frame – and then looking for any discrepancies, a much smaller task than building an entire new frame from scratch.

A comparable simulation account will show how our mentalizing system exploits massive redundancies to achieve extreme code compression. Rather than building from scratch a picture of the other's reasons and motives, we start with – not ourselves, strictly speaking, but the world.

3 Inverse Planning

To address the question of how the brain interprets the observed actions of others, Baker, Tenenbaum, and Saxe (2006) suggest that we adopt a framework that has been particularly fruitful in studies of vision. Contrary to the widely held view that visual perception simply pastes together a complex scene from elements such as lines and edges, it is now thought that the process works in reverse. Our brains generate predictions about the incoming sensory information based on past experiences and learned patterns. These predictions help anticipate what we are likely to perceive in a given situation. When actual sensory input matches these predictions, the brain processes the information more efficiently, leading to a sense of familiarity and reduced cognitive load. However, when there are discrepancies between predictions and actual input, our brains update their models to better match the current environment. This theory highlights the active role of the brain in shaping our perception of the world around us. The interpretation of a visual scene might involve, essentially, using in reverse the process of *producing* such a scene. Analogously, the interpretation of another's behavior might be understood as a comparable inverse problem (Baker, Saxe, Tenenbaum 2011; Baker, Saxe, Tenenbaum 2009):

> By analogy, our analysis of intentional reasoning might be called 'inverse planning', where the observer infers an agent's intentions, given observations of the agent's behavior, by inverting a model of how intentions cause behavior. (Baker, Tenembaum, Saxe 2006, 100)

The process is *inverted* in that, instead of proceeding forward from a given intention to its behavioral execution, it takes the behavior as the given and determines the intention most likely to have produced it. The planning process would thus be used as a mechanism for testing hypotheses about underlying intentions.[1]

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[1] In the broadest terms, inverse planning exemplifies hypothesis-testing as unconscious inference, an idea introduced in the perceptual realm by Helmholtz (1856). The proposal bears some resemblance to 'hypothetico-practical' inference (Gordon 1986),

Strictly speaking, however, the term 'inverse planning' suggests that the very mechanism that is used to plan our own behavior may be reused as a platform for testing hypothetical explanations of the observed behavior of other agents. This would, in effect, be a way of *simulating* ways of generating the behavior. However, Baker, Saxe, and Tenenbaum (2011) actually propose something more complicated. The authors speak of inverting a *model* or *theory* of the planning process. As they point out, their project originated as an attempt to formalize an intuitive theory of mind thought to underlie our interpretations of behavior – the so-called 'theory theory':

> On a theory-based interpretation, inverse planning consists of inverting a causal theory of rational action to arrive at a set of goals that could have generated the observed behavior. (Baker, Saxe, Tenembaum 2009, 347)

The theory-based approach attributes to the brain a capacity for detachment: it *stands back from its own operations* and employs instead a general theory or model of these operations. As distinct from actual action-planning, the theory theorist proposal is that in mentalizing about others the brain engages in *plan-theorizing*, *theorizing about* the steps in the other's planning process. The proposal assumes that we humans have an intuitive theory of mind and that our brains employ this theory not only in our explicit attributions of mental states but also in their unconscious subpersonal neural processing. I will call this *inverse plan-theorizing*. Thus understood, it does not make use of our capacity for planning: it is not inverse planning as such, i.e., an inverse reuse of one's own action planning system. Strictly speaking, what would be analogous to 'inverse graphics,' where perception involves searching among alternative hypothetical ways of building a scene, would be 'inverse planning,' understand as a search among alternative hypothetical ways of generating (planning) an action to find the most plausible simulation of the planning that might have generated the observed action.

Baker, Saxe, and Tenembaum acknowledge that a simulation-based account would cover the data just as well as their theory-based account:

> On a simulation account, goal inference is performed by inverting one's own planning process – the planning mechanism used

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modeled on a traditional model of the scientific method, hypothetico-deductive inference. Instead of forming hypotheses and *deducing* consequences that match observations, hypothetico-practical inference would form hypotheses and then *act on* them, *producing* consequences that match the observed behavior of the other agent.

in model-based reinforcement learning - to infer the goals most likely to have generated another agent's observed behavior. (Baker, Saxe, Tenembaum 2009, 347)

If indeed such reuse of its own 'first-person' planning system would be sufficient for goal inference, the question arises: Why would the brain need to operate instead on a model of the planning process? Here again, using an existing system would avoid the overhead costs of storing and utilizing an information-rich theory or model. Moreover, first person inverse planning would seem to be the proper analogue of the inverse graphics account of vision. As inverse graphics is the inversion of a causal physical process of scene formation (Baker, Saxe, Tenembaum 2011), so inverse planning should be the inversion of *a physical process* of action determination – *not* the inversion of a causal *theory of* a physical process of action determination. The 'vision is inverse graphics' idea is generally understood to be an analysis-by-synthesis paradigm, and analysis by synthesis is not analysis by a *theory of* synthesis.

3.1   Simulative Inverse Planning

There is at least one crucial difference between the simulation account of inverse planning (where the planning process itself is inverted) and the theory-based account (where a model of that process is inverted). On the simulation account, one and the same action planning system has a double function: in addition to its primary use in generating one's own actions, a reuse, or secondary use, in which the planning process is inverted in order to infer the goals and reasons that lie behind another agent's observed behavior. Moreover, it appears likely that the secondary use of the action planning system, namely, inverse reuse for explanatory purposes, runs concurrently with its primary use, for generating one's own actions. Otherwise, we would have to suspend our own actions in order to interpret the actions of others. Thus, the system is translating existing inputs into action and at the same time looking for hypothetical inputs that would explain the perceived actions of others. Concurrent processing for self-action and other-understanding would be consistent with evidence of 'motor contagion,' or interference effects between observed and executed actions. First noted in the case of biological movements, it has been suggested that motor contagion may be "the first step in a more sophisticated predictive system that allows us to infer goals from the observation of actions" (Blakemore, Frith 2005, 260). Indeed, recent research indicates that such interference is markedly increased when the observed movement is directed toward a visible goal (Bouquet et al. 2011). This interference suggests a competition for resources,

and thus that the same, or strongly overlapping, neural resources are employed concurrently in goal-directed action planning and in interpreting the goal-directed actions of others.

Such concurrent double employment raises the question: What, if anything, must *change* as the planning system switches from primary use to reuse, and from self to other? Specifically, what happens to the existing inputs? When the system switches to inverse planning as it seeks to explain another's behavior, does it clear the slate and approach the task with no a priori top-down commitments? More specifically, for the inverse use, does the brain suspend the beliefs, desires, preferences, emotional valences, affordances, and other influences on one's own action planning? That is, does it expend energy to intervene and wipe away the inputs and start with a blank slate when simulating others? That would seem wasteful both in loss of information and in use of resources. At the opposite extreme, does the brain leave all inputs in place, add no others, and seek the best explanation of the other agent's behavior strictly on the basis of the beliefs, desires, preferences, emotional valences, affordances, and other influences on one's own action planning? That would seem highly limiting. The most plausible account would be for the brain to default to this do-nothing position and devote its limited energy to looking for problems. Focusing on exploiting redundancy and then checking for exceptions is much in line with a widely held view in cognitive science: that neural systems tend to reduce metabolic and other expenses with a predictive coding strategy (Clark 2013). As in the case of vision, this is a strategy of 'guessing ahead.' Rather than waiting for the world to bombard us with new information, the system makes its latest best guess as to what will be coming in. This process of predicting input values minimizes the need for new information input, in that only discrepancies, or information that conflicts with the predicted values (prediction errors), need be encoded.

4 Agent-Neutral Coding

Gordon (2021) argues that the top-down inputs to inverse planning would default to *agent-neutral coding*. That is, inputs, including factual inputs, would by default remain the same for self and other; that is, the same unless corrected, e.g., in response to predictive error. Coding begins as agent-neutral, in the sense that any differentiation would be the result of intervention of some sort: Identical coding for self and other would be the default. With agent-neutral coding, one's own actions and the actions of others are constrained by the same inputs unless there is reason for differentiation. The claim is not that *my* inputs are carried over, but rather that an *undifferentiated* input, neither mine nor the other's, becomes differentiated into mine and

the other's. It is of course my own mental states that provide input to the forward planning of my own actions, and it is representations of the other's mental states that feed into the inverse use of the planning system to explain the other's behavior. It might be supposed that the system has to distinguish these in some way. But this is not so. Unlike intentions and motor plans, beliefs may remain happily undifferentiated, and failure to differentiate is not only not pathological, it is the norm. What the system needs to 'know' is, simply, that there is a puddle in the path; it can deal with undifferentiated, impersonal 'facts,' without marking them as facts-to-me, facts-to-you, or facts-to-another – or, in other words, as facts *as I believe them to be*, or you, or another. Moreover, as will be argued, simple 'factive' explanations, such as, 'She stepped to the side because there was a puddle in the path', are the preferred form of action explanation, in contrast to 'because she believed…' explanations (use of 'because she believed…' is taken to imply that there was reason not to use the simple factive form).

In reconstructing the processes behind the other's action, inverse planning locates the agent's reason or reasons for acting, as far as possible, within a shared world of facts; and likewise, as I discuss in the final section, what the agent's emotions are about, Shared world explanations have a number of advantages over those requiring explicit mentalizing: they can identify environmental threats and rewards, they are conceptually and linguistically less demanding, and they achieve greater code compression. If this is correct, then we must reject the common assumption that explicit mentalizing, or mental state attribution, is the paramount explanatory aim of the procedures we lump under the term *mentalizing*. The aim is rather to interpret behavior in terms of a shared world where this is possible and to diagnose cases where it is not.

We can of course add to any theory a stipulation that the interpretation starts by importing the world of the interpreter. Rebecca Saxe, a leading proponent of the theory-based approach to mentalizing in neuroscience, writes:

> I agree that by far the bulk of action explanation in every day life is accomplished by 'factive', 'agent-neutral' coding of beliefs (and indeed of desires!). When I try to explain this, I sometimes talk about the default naive realism we bring to understanding both the world and other people. Instead of beliefs or perceptions, we explain actions in terms of facts. Instead of desires, we explain actions in terms of what is valuable or good. Explanations in terms of mental states (what she saw, or didn't see, or thought, or wanted) are exceptions, corrections. (Personal communication, July 6, 2020)

It should be remarked that agent-neutral coding requires a simulative account of inverse planning. It stipulates that top-down inputs are by

default invariant between the direct, or forward, employment of the action planning system and its inverse simulative use in interpreting another's behavior. If Saxe indeed accepts the simulative account of inverse planning, with its reuse of the very system used for planning and generating one's own actions, all well and good: what are facts for us are portrayed as available to others' decision making as well – and therefore, as I will argue, as something known to the others. If on the other hand it is simply plastered onto a formal theory or model, perhaps as a useful heuristic, then we can't speak of an automatic carry-over of an agent-neutral (same for self and other) coding.

Agent-neutral coding requires the simulation account of inverse planning, with its concurrent use of the same system for generating actions and interpreting the action of others; and, as I will argue, it is agent-neutral coding that explains why what we ourselves regard as *facts* get passed along to other (the target agent) as *known* facts. However, not all versions of the simulation theory of mentalizing support default agent-neutral coding. The simulation theory has sometimes been characterized as a two- or three-step process of first reading one's own mental states (by introspection or otherwise) and then inferring that the other agent has similar mental states. Many proponents, as well as most critics of the simulation theory, have supposed simulation to be founded on such an implicit inference from oneself to others. The form of inference is essentially the old argument from analogy (Mill 1869), which requires that one first recognize one's own mental states under actual or imagined conditions and then infer that the other is in similar states. This is usually linked to an introspectionist account of how one recognizes and ascribes one's own mental states (Goldman 1993). It is further assumed that, to recognize and ascribe one's own mental states and to mentally transfer these states over to the other, one would need to be equipped with the concepts of the various mental states. According to this account, in short, simulation is an analogical inference from oneself to others premised on introspectively based ascriptions of mental states to oneself, requiring prior possession of the concepts of the mental states ascribed. Goldman's account of simulation has been characterized as requiring three stages of processing in order to generate an interpretation of another's behavior:

Stage 1. *Mental simulation*: Subject S undergoes a simulation process, which outputs a token simulated mental state $m*$.
Stage 2. *Introspection*: S introspects $m*$ and categorizes/conceptualizes it *as* (a state of type) M. (Barlassina, Gordon 2017)
Stage 3. *Judgment*: S attributes (a state of type) M to another subject, Q, through the judgment Q *is in* M.

In short, we (or our brain) must somehow read our own mental states, then describe or categorize them, and finally form a judgment that the other is in the same or similar state. However, given the simple alternative of agent-neutral coding, with one and the same neural code indifferently serving both self and other, this elaborate intellectually loaded process seems both unnecessary and wasteful of time as well as of energy resources.

5 Perspective-Taking and Positional Correction

The most economical strategy for mentalizing, other things being equal, would be one that minimizes individuation, or information tagged to specific individuals. That is, it would minimize the need for explicit mentalizing, in the sense of judgments about mental states or processes. In the default case, with uncorrected agent-neutral coding, the actions of others would be interpreted in terms of a shared world – that is, to the world on the basis of which we ourselves act. Mentalizing, on this account, would be called on to complement or to correct what is passed along through agent-neutral coding. It would be reserved for cases in which a shared world proves inadequate to predict or explain the actions or emotions of particular individuals.

Spatial perspective-taking is probably the most familiar type of error correction in the interpretation of others' behavior. Moving mentally to the other's viewpoint, we may recognize that their view is partially or wholly occluded (they are in a different room), or we recognize that they can see aspects of a scene that are hidden to us, and consequently that they may know something we do not know. As Nagel writes,

> the capacity to differentiate patterns of knowledge and ignorance in our fellow agents enables us to exploit their epistemic access to those parts of reality for which their vantage point is better than ours. If you want to know which way the coin in my palm is facing, you know you can ask me. While many primates show selective social learning from peers recognized as knowledgeable, humans show exceptionally active use of the knowledge of their peers (Tomasello 2019), guided by an exceptionally well-developed sense of what others do and do not know, a sense informed by continual feedback from conversational exchanges (Westra and Nagel 2021) and extraconversational encounters with reality. (Nagel 2023, 206)

In addition, rather than imparting different information, the altered viewpoint may account for a different emotional or motivational response. To a stranger observing the scene from a distance, the bear now approaching me is not likely to feel threatening, or in any case

as threatening as it does to me. The threatening (or non-threatening) emotive quality of the bear may be seen as a function of one's location relative to the bear – or, the bear's location and vector in egocentric space. With the ability to move mentally into another's spatial perspective, individual differences become mere positional differences. That is, it is a good starting bet that (unless there is evidence to the contrary) any individual in the same position will see the bear as threatening. With the operation of 'putting ourselves in the other's place' by spatial perspective-taking, we are able to restore the economic advantages of a shared world. We allow the threatening quality to remain out there in the bear, or rather in the bear from a point of view. We need not represent it as a function of individual mental makeup, even if some individuals may be found immune to the standard bear-approaching-me response.

Although it is spatial perspective-taking that gives us the general metaphor of 'perspective-taking,' 'adopting the other's point of view,' and 'putting ourselves in the other's place,' many other kinds of corrections may be considered broadly perspectival, or positional. For example, differences in social or occupational role may be bridged by a kind of perspective shift: student/teacher, worker/manager, diner/waiter, patient/doctor, consumer/salesperson. In these cases, as in differences in spatial perspective, it may be sufficient to shift to a generic 'point of view,' or, as we say, to understand where the other is 'coming from,' to explain the other's actions, without explicit mentalizing. That is, it may be a good starting assumption that a person in a given 'position' will act in more or less the same 'standard' way, an assumption that may underlie the notion of generic 'scripts' of action sequences postulated by Schank and Abelson (1977). Such an assumption would exploit positional redundancies and limit new input to deviations from the standard.

6 An Evolutionary Perspective

For most of human history, social encounters would have occurred primarily within small, close-knit cultural groups with limited exposure to faraway lands and diverse cultures. As a result, to explain and predict behavior within the local group, 'mentalizing' could have consisted largely of looking to the shared world and its common facts, emotive qualities, affordances, attractions, and repulsions.. The environmental and cultural contexts of these small social groups led to the development of shared mental maps and a common understanding of their surroundings. Members of these groups would have agreed on which elements of their environment were significant, threatening, appealing, or repulsive. This shared understanding allowed for relatively straightforward predictions and explanations of

each other's behavior, given the group's limitations and homogeneity. Of course, even in these close-knit communities, individual differences in temperament, sensory and cognitive capacities, knowledge, acculturation, and goals existed. However, such differences would have been relatively rare and likely observed against the backdrop of the more predictable shared background. In such situations, minor adjustments could be made to accommodate these individual differences.

The evolutionary advantage of this social predictive system lies in its ability to exploit, reinforce, and create redundancies within the group. The more shared understanding and predictability there is among group members, the smoother the social interactions and cooperation, leading to increased chances of survival and successful reproduction.

The process of social learning and prediction plays a vital role in fostering unity and cooperation within small groups. Infants and young children acquire knowledge by observing and imitating the behavior of trusted adult caregivers. Through social referencing, they learn how to react to various situations and stimuli based on the responses of those they trust. By imitating similar responses, the child's behavior aligns with the group's norms and expectations, leading to shared patterns of behavior that are strengthened and repeated.

However, as societies evolved and expanded, encounters with culturally distant and geographically separated groups became more frequent. In such encounters, the strategy of agent-neutral coding that worked reasonably well within small, homogenous groups might no longer be effective. Understanding and predicting the behavior of people from vastly different cultures would require extensive corrections and adjustments, as their mental maps, norms, and affordances could vary significantly from one's own.

In summary, the evolutionary perspective suggests that the reliance on agent-neutral coding and shared mental maps was an effective strategy for understanding and predicting behavior within small, culturally cohesive groups. However, as human societies became more complex and interconnected, this strategy faced limitations in explaining behavior in culturally distant contexts, necessitating the development of more nuanced and culturally sensitive approaches to cross-cultural understanding.

7 Ignorance and False Belief

How does inverse planning deal with ignorance? For example, we see someone do something surprising: in broad daylight, they walk nonchalantly into a deep puddle. We are aware of the puddle, but apparently the other, engrossed in their cellphone, is not: Earlier, I cited Nagel on knowledge recognition. For facts automatically passed

along by agent-neutral coding, perhaps the more important capacity is *ignorance* recognition. We pick up on evidence of behavior that is *not* truth-anchored, and accordingly, we modify the default input to inverse planning. We make the surprising behavior unsurprising by disconnecting or 'decoupling' the fact that there was a puddle in his path from the input to inverse planning. Decoupling a fact from inverse planning is a way of marking ignorance of a fact. Ignorance, in turn, may engender false belief because the puddle-walker was ignorant of the fact that there was a puddle. Out of touch with the facts concerning his current environment, they continued operating on the false default assumption of an ordinary puddle-free path. The puddle is there, but it is not there for the other – until it is.

Agent-neutral coding and the possibility of toggling between knowledge and ignorance would give us the neural underpinnings for two theses long held by the psychologist Josef Perner: first, that well before they have an explicit grasp of belief attribution, young children are quite capable of explaining action in terms of the external situation; and second, that older children and adults use the same type of explanation young children use, except in the occasional cases where it proves inadequate; then they must fall back on explanations that mention the mental states, especially the beliefs, of the agent. Young children and, where possible, older children and adults

> make sense of intentional actions in terms of justifying reasons provided by 'worldly' facts (not by mental states). (Roessler, Perner 2013, 35)

The young child's conception is all we usually call upon, because it is typically all we need. This comes to saying that explaining and predicting actions in terms of actual situations or facts is our default mode of explanation and prediction, the mode we employ unless we find some reason not to. Only where this appears inadequate do we invoke beliefs in our explanation. In the classic 'false belief' condition, you see individual A place her treasure at location *x*. You also see that (*m*) the treasure has been moved and is now at a different location *y*.

If you were planning to steal the treasure, your action planning system would take account of (*m*) and direct you to location *y*. However, if your system is hypothetically generating A's plan to retrieve A's treasure, the question arises: Does A know about the move? Is A aware that (*m*)? The possibility of attributing ignorance, or not knowing, is simply the possibility of decoupling the action planning system from the fact that (*m*). (*Egocentric* ignorance acknowledges that there are facts to which our own planning is not yet coupled or connected.) *Knowledge*, on the other hand, is represented simply by nonintervention. That is, one implicitly attributes knowledge that (*m*) simply by *not decoupling* the system from the fact that (*m*). 'Knowledge

representations' accordingly consist in nothing more than *access to facts*.

Attributing ignorance consists in decoupling from fact, which is an extra step beyond implicitly attributing knowledge. False belief requires decoupling as well as introducing into the planning process an 'as if' fact, such as that the treasure is still at location *x*. True belief for the wrong reason would similarly entail introducing an 'as if' fact. (Although it might produce the same actions as the 'real' fact, the counterfactual dependencies would differ.) The upshot is that what is really basic is a shared world, where, prior to any corrective processing, everything we ourselves regard as the world, as the facts, is publicly accessible and thus available to others as possible reasons for action.

8 Knowledge First

It is traditional to see factual knowledge as an achievement, as having a status that is to be earned by meeting certain stringent conditions. As Nagel suggests, we develop the capacity to recognize when those conditions indicate a state of mind of a type that one can only have to truths. Consistent with this, however, is that knowledge is also a status granted by birthright, as it were. When we try to make sense of another's actions and emotions, we gift the other with access for planning – and, I will argue, for emotion generation – to all the facts available to us in generating our own actions and emotions: that is, with knowledge of these facts. (There may be differences in attention, of course: for one thing, our own direction of gaze may differ from the other's. But this is often a bridgeable gap: we look around to previously unnoticed features of the environment, or more broadly, to aspects of the world that might be salient to the other.

In summary, there is evidence that the human brain exploits a strategy that appears to operate in several other areas of cognition, that of analysis by synthesis. Specifically, the brain interprets the behavior of others by testing hypothetical ways of *generating* that behavior. This would involve the inverse use of one's own system for planning and generating intentional action, concurrent with its primary 'forward' use in generating one's own actions. The inverse use of the planning system for hypothetically generating the actions of others would ordinarily require adjustments of the top-down inputs to the system. These would include adjustments of the factual input, the set of facts that influence planning. In hypothetically generating another's actions, the planning system may be selectively decoupled (disconnected, unplugged) from some of these facts. In a predictive strategy, the actual world – that is, what we ourselves take to be the facts – serves as a starting point, an opening bid or bet, subject to

revision ('correction') on the basis of new evidence. As our mechanisms for decision-making and planning are used to test hypothetical explanations of the actions of others, the carryover of agent-neutral inputs has the effect of projecting onto others a shared world within which we act and interact. Strictly speaking, the brain doesn't do anything to accomplish this; rather, it is by not doing anything to modify or correct the top-down inputs in the concurrent use and reuse of action planning that gives us a shared world as a default. Withholding or diminishing the implicit attribution of knowledge, such as attributing a belief that falls short of knowledge, requires additional steps in neural coding and processing. Those extra steps, their added complexity and their drain on resources, suffice to explain the empirical findings: why (per Phillips 2021) some individuals – non-human primates, young children, and certain cognitively impaired people – can attribute knowledge but not belief, while none attribute belief but not knowledge; and why attributions of knowledge are 'more automatic' than those that require additional processing.

9   Emotions

Emotions are not, in any straightforward sense, planned and executed as actions. They may sometimes be expressed in action, as in 'acting out of anger'; it is also possible to allow oneself to be angry, as well as to decide to interpret as anger interoceptive responses that are ambiguous. But in general, anger is not generated by action planning, and its interpretation by others is therefore not a function of *inverse* planning. However, it is plausible that the processes responsible for emotion generation, whatever their nature, can be interpreted by inverting them. In inverse emotion generation, we test hypothetical ways of generating something approximating the emotion we observe.

Suppose we see someone look startled, or frightened, or obviously pleased about something, but we can't easily tell the source of the emotion. Following the other's gaze, we find several objects or environmental features, any one or more of which might be the source: we need to pick out the *right* feature or features. Or suppose the person has already turned away from the source of the emotion. What do we do in such cases? We look around for a plausible target. That is, we look for something startling. Or if the other is frightened, we look for something that is frightening. If pleased, we look for something pleasing. To do this, we engage *our own* system for generating emotions out of our perceptions. We are also prepared to make positional adjustments, where necessary. For example, I see a competitor for an award and find her looking elated. On the wall nearby there is posted a list of award-winners. My own name on the list

would indeed be pleasing; but I automatically shift to viewing the list through her eyes. We do this sort of thing so routinely that we aren't aware of doing it – and we fail to appreciate the sophistication of the maneuver we are engaging in.

10   Conclusion

If we understand simulation in terms of default agent-neutral coding, then we have to reject a well-known account of the simulation theory: that it requires introspective recognition of one's own (actual or pretend) mental states (metacognition), followed by attribution of the same states to the other individual (Goldman 2006). Agent-neutral coding clearly would support a more economical account of simulation, one that requires neither metacognition nor self-other inference (Gordon 1995). It is simply by default that the inputs to inverse planning are the same as the inputs to forward self-planning; This carry-over is not established through an inferential leap from self to other, but rather, as I suggested, simply by omission: that is, crossing the self-other border without doing anything to *alter* the existing inputs.

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Post-Cognitivism and the Indissoluble Bonding of Languaging, Embodiment, and Thinking

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Abstract   Classical cognitive science often strips the inherent social character out of language, treating it as a system of internal mental representations, and so does Generative Linguistics. In contrast, post-cognitivist approaches to psychology reject representationalism but struggle with language's capacity to refer beyond sensory experience. Cognitive Linguistics addresses meaning and embodiment but remains somewhat isolated from broader post-cognitivist thought. The enactive approach overtly problematizes the concept of representation, but tends to marginalize language; when such focus is taken, a coherent account of semantic content remains an unresolved task. This paper surveys philosophical and linguistic perspectives on language within post-cognitivist frameworks and proposes a blueprint for future research based on four points: sociality and interaction, embodiment, ecological validity, and representation-as-*praxis*.

Keywords   Post-cognitivism. Languaging. Representations. Embodiment. Cognitive Linguistics.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Classic Cognitive Science and Language. – 2.1 Language in the Philosophical Representation Wars. – 2.2 Cognitive Science in the Linguistic Wars. – 3 Language from a Post-Cognitivist Perspective. – 3.1 Cognitive Linguistics. – 3.2 Post-Cognitivism. – 4 A Blueprint for a Post-Cognitivist View of Language. – 4.1 The Social and Interactional Dimension. – 4.2 The Role of the Body. – 4.3 Ecological Validity. – 4.4 Representation-as-*praxis* – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Language[1] embodies the ultimate way of sustaining sociality – understood as coordinative cooperation – and cognition. Languaging has proven evolutionarily effective in making our ways of acting in the world closer to our needs and in providing possibilities for novel strategies for pursuing our aims, including leading us to identify entirely new ones. Thinking, one might argue, leads to better speaking, and speaking better makes us think better.

In the philosophy of mind, emphasis has typically been placed on the cognition-enhancing efficacy of words, texts, and utterances (Clark 1998), often neglecting the social dimension. In fact, the disregard for sociality as a fundamental feature of cognition is inscribed in the assumptions of classic cognitive science. Within the post-cognitivist family of approaches to cognition (Heras-Escribano 2019), however, overcoming methodological individualism and foregrounding the intrinsic social nature of our mind is a manifest goal.

Yet, a consensus on a comprehensive account of language seems far. While post-cognitivists are eager to replace disembodied cognitivist views in each chapter of the classic cognitive science book, the established view of language is proving to be an especially tricky one to unpack, and disagreements within different post-cognitivist positions arise here too.

We start by outlining the conceptualization of language within classical cognitivism and, conversely, the cognitive dimensions of coeval linguistics. Then, we review the contemporary attempts to overcome the aforementioned problems. Finally, we propose a blueprint for a post-cognitivist, socially grounded view of language.

Throughout our analysis, we integrate insights from both philosophy and linguistics, as we contend that post-cognitivism can only benefit from the interdisciplinary study of a complex phenomenon like language.

2 Classic Cognitive Science and Language

2.1 Language in the Philosophical Representation Wars

Classic cognitive science is grounded in the Representational Theory of the Mind (RTM). Somewhat paradoxically, there is no consensus on what representations are or how the term should be precisely used (Smortchkova et al. 2020, 1; Coelho Mollo 2022, 1048-9). A key reason behind the lack of agreement is the recognition that representations are varied in kind, making it challenging to settle on a single, comprehensive definition. Nonetheless, RTM's fundamental stances can be articulated clearly: the mind operates through descriptions of the external world, which guide action via computational processes. These descriptions may be minimal – more than the term 'description' might suggest – but this does not alter the theory's core claim: action in the world requires the agent to first reconstruct the relevant features of the environment and then act based on this even minimal reconstruction.

Within non-representational accounts of cognition, language has emerged both as a deeply problematic and unavoidable topic. This is largely because language – traditionally understood across theories as an inherently representational tool – enables us to speak of what is not immediately present to the senses. Of course, we just as often refer to things that *are* in the immediate physical context of the speakers. In principle, reference to such items can be made through a willful dart of our gaze, pointing with fingers, moving our limbs, etc. However, gestures are limited in scope and effectiveness compared to the virtually limitless possibilities language offers.

With these greater possibilities, though, come greater risks of failure: as words detach from the *hic et nunc*, achieving mutual (practical) understanding becomes an increasingly difficult goal. But language possesses an intrinsic counterbalance: meaning is constituted and reinforced through shared interaction between speakers. Since senses and bodies are not apparently involved, and gestures fall short of meeting the challenge, a different mechanism must be at work. The traditional twentieth-century explanation invokes mental representations that link words to meaning, with the key steps of the process occurring within the mind of each speaker. This mainstream view of language, however, poses a significant obstacle for theories that aim to discard representations as the fundamental explanatory postulate.

The intersection between explanations of cognition at large and language is particularly delicate. Why? The fundamental disagreement between cognitivists and their antagonists hinges on how animal behavior is explained. "Content" has emerged as a crucial explanatory category as a medium between agents and the world. If

"[r]epresenting correctly explains successful behaviour and misrepresentation explains failure", then "a good theory of content should show how the contents it specifies are suited to explaining behaviour in that way" (Shea 2018, 28). Contentful mental representations are posited to have a fundamentally semantic nature. This is why cognitivism integrates linguistic elements seamlessly into the framework of RTM, treating them as unproblematic: words represent states of affairs in the external world and are understood or produced through their intentional relationship to those states. By contrast, since most post-cognitivist approaches commit to various forms of anti-representationalism, an alternative account is in order.

This debate mirrors a well-known twentieth-century philosophical dichotomy between *knowledge-that* and *knowledge-how*. Cognitivism asserts that practical skills (*knowing-how*) depend on propositional knowledge (*knowing-that*), whereas post-cognitivism argues the inverse: *knowing-that* is a non-basic cognitive process, while *knowing-how* is evolutionarily and logically prior (see Ryle 1946). By definition, *knowing-that* implies truth-functionality, i.e., a structure of knowledge in which the information of which one may have knowledge is put in terms of a certain state of affairs being either true or false. In contrast, *knowing-how* refers to practical abilities that do not necessarily depend on (accurate or less) propositional knowledge as a prerequisite for action.

Post-cognitivists generally acknowledge that representation exists as a cognitive function, at least in certain cases (see Miłkowski 2015, 75). However, they contest that internal mental representations are part of the fundamental mechanisms of cognition, or that accuracy conditions enable agents to function in the world. That said, some mental processes are admitted to being "representation-hungry" (Clark, Toribio 1994; Hutto, Myin 2013), with language spearheading the group. A key argument for this concession is that some linguistic elements possess intentionality, or *aboutness* (Shea 2018, 8) – the ability to refer to entities not immediately available to the senses, such as what is in the past, the future, geographically distant, or abstract concepts.

But can language be reduced to components with clear *aboutness*, such as names? What about the many well-documented non-referential aspects of linguistic activity? Before addressing these questions, let us turn to the other side of the debate: linguistics.

2.2 Cognitive Science in the Linguistic Wars

The role of meaning has been a central pillar in the tensions and developments across different fields in linguistics, even predating the emergence of cognitive science. Saussurean structuralism provided linguistics with its foundational modern framework, laying the groundwork for subsequent paradigms, including formal accounts

of language, such as generative linguistics, and usage-based frameworks like Cognitive Linguistics.

To understand how sociality informs the history of linguistics, we must consider the basic tenets of structuralism. At its core, structuralism conceives language as a social system of mutually determining categories. For Saussure (1916), "[n]atural languages are symbolic systems with properties and principles of their own, and it is precisely those properties and principles that determine the way in which the linguistic sign functions as a sign" (Geeraerts 2010, 48). Language is thus a received system of conventionalized and arbitrary combinations of signs, where the value of any linguistic element derives solely from its place within the system and its differential relationship with other elements. This arbitrariness of the sign led Saussure to focus on the structured relationships within the system rather than the historical evolution of words or individual beliefs, as expressed by the relation between *langue* and *parole*.

He also proposed that the relationship between the components of a sign is mediated by a *mental image*, enabling the externalization of the system's structure. While his analysis of *parole* introduced a psychological dimension to meaning articulation, the focus remained on the external system.

From the 1950s, generative linguistics transformed structuralism by conceptualizing language as a generative system governed by a finite set of rules capable of producing an infinite array of sentences. While structuralism concentrated on the external system of linguistic rules, generative linguistics shifted to the internal representation of these rules and their cognitive realization within individuals. In this new framework, the scope of the discipline expanded from comparing linguistic systems and their taxonomies to investigating the fundamental nature of the mind. By addressing the homogeneity of the human genome, Chomsky (1968; 1980) sought to prove the genetic basis of language, positing that it was rooted in universal properties of the human species. If the new goal of generativism was to identify the genetic roots of language, the socially constituted systems described by structuralism became increasingly sidelined.

Here is where the concept of representation became central for generative grammar. Although Saussure acknowledged internal mental images, for Chomsky and cognitivism, representation had a slightly different use. Linguistic knowledge was viewed as neurologically localized and autonomously realized. Thus, drawing from the computational metaphor, the combinatory rules of any language could be algorithmically represented, processed, and studied. However, the uniqueness of human language lied not in its symbolic nature, but in its capacity for syntactic complexity and creativity. This explained the primacy of syntax with a minimal emphasis on meaning, given its historical and cultural variability.

Tensions surrounding the role of meaning erupted in the 1960s during the so-called "Linguistic Wars" (Harris 2022), gradually prompting the recontextualization of grammar and the reintegration of semantics into linguistic studies. These debates underscored the sensitive role of meaning and grammaticality, particularly in light of Chomsky's famous example: "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously". Originally presented as a grammatical and yet meaningless sentence, this example illustrated the autonomy of syntax from semantics. However, Katz and Fodor's (1963) *componential analysis*, which sought to systematically represent meaning and incorporate it into syntactic structure, reevaluated whether sentences lacking coherent meaning could truly be considered grammatical. Their inquiry arose from the observation that certain syntactic transformations – modifying rules between the deep structure and surface structure – could alter meaning in nontrivial ways, such as the transformation from active to passive voice in some sentences. If meaning played such a central role in syntactic operations, allowing semantics to take precedence would challenge Chomsky's autonomy of syntax, thereby endangering the core explanations of language acquisition and the universality of grammar. These challenges not only brought semantics to the forefront but also set the stage for future accounts on the intersection between meaning, body, and sociality.

3 Language from a Post-Cognitivist Perspective

Having outlined the parallel development of cognitive science and linguistics in the latter half of the twentieth century, we examine the present-day landscape. As the classic frameworks of cognitive science and both structuralism and generativism faced increasing criticism, new perspectives emerged.

3.1 Cognitive Linguistics

As a result of the Linguistic Wars, a branch of cognitive semanticians emphasized the primacy of meaning, leading to the development of Cognitive Linguistics (CL) (Johnson 1991; Lakoff, Johnson 1980), a cornerstone of post-cognitivist linguistic approaches since the 1980s. Structuralism left a blind spot between *langue* and *parole* in explaining language acquisition, which generative grammar addressed by introducing the notions of genetic and internalized linguistic knowledge (competence) and its individual production (performance). However, this downplayed the social dimension of language.

By stressing semantics, CL adopts a more integrative approach. A grammar based on constructions – pairings of form *and* meaning

(Langacker 2009) – replaces generative syntax. CL also examines how semantic categories are structured through conceptual metaphors, image schemas, and prototypical relations. For the purpose of this paper, what interests us most is that, across these research areas, bodily experience is central in shaping linguistic functions.

Although CL aligns with post-cognitivist approaches, its trajectory diverged into a more independent line of inquiry. Unlike other post-cognitivist strands overtly critiquing representation, CL adopts a nuanced stance. Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) apparently rejected traditional notions of representation, but their evaluation was not a wholesale dismissal. Lakoff (2014) maintains that representations play a key role in frames and metaphors, understood as fixed mental structures organizing knowledge in an automatic, unconscious manner.

Despite providing an embodied explanation of language, the body in CL often appears as self-constituted and universal, resembling the brain-centric perspective of generativism. This reductionist view treats sensorimotor experience as belonging to a generalized or prototypical body, neglecting the interactions between organisms and their environments and overlooking individual differences and diversity of experience. In addition to this handicap, Zlatev (2007) identified several enduring issues within cognitive science broadly and CL specifically:

> [T]here is no uniform concept of *representation* within 'embodied cognition' [...] embodiment theories have a strong individualist orientation, and despite recurrent attempts to connect embodiment to social reality and culture there is still no coherent synthesis. [...] there is no adequate notion of *convention* or *norm*, which is essential for characterizing both human culture and the human mind. (Zlatev 2007, 242 emphasis in the original)

The universalist view of the body, the underspecified notion of representation, or the individualist account of cognition catalyzed a sociocultural turn in the study of language. This shift challenged the primacy of the universal unaltered body, advocating for a more integrative perspective. Debates over universality versus cultural specificity within CL testify its internal tensions (see Geeraerts, Grondelaers 1995; Kövecses 1995). Some of these studies stress a *sociosemiotic commitment*, "a return to a Saussurean conception of language as a social semiotic without the Saussurean assumption of the internal homogeneity of language systems" (Geeraerts 2016, 536).

Despite growing acknowledgment of bodily and cultural interplay in CL, the theory often resorts to vague notions of interrelatedness when explaining how they are constitutively built. "[C]ognitive linguists had better admit that they do not know yet how exactly to

reconcile the two [cognitive and sociosemiotic] commitments." (Geeraerts 2016, 538). Different dimensions emerge theoretically unified by experience while methodologically utilized as self-constituted domains with their own internal logic. For example, linguistic normativity is exclusively framed as correctness or appropriateness to social contexts, such as conversational roles, shared knowledge, and cooperative maxims. "Epistemologically, our knowledge about the content of norms is ultimately based on *intuition*, not on observation or sense-perception" (Mäkilähde, et al. 2019, 2-8).

This framing overlooks normativity as a constitutive element in perception itself, such as vision. Rödl (2018) argues that normativity is present in perception from the outset. For example, saying "That table is brown" presupposes not only social norms about the correctness of linguistic rules or about common knowledge of what constitutes a table, but also a normative act embedded in *seeing* the table as a discrete object and its color as brown. To perceive the brown table is to engage in a normative judgment: one must identify the discrete object as a table, recognize its color as brown, and commit to these elements as relevant. This involves aligning perception with rational standards of correctness – how things 'ought to be' within the framework of intelligibility. Treating normativity or sociality as external layers added to embodiment risks fragmenting experience and losing an integrative account of language and cognition.

Recent efforts aim to introduce more dynamic approaches to studying language, where intersubjectivity has become a central asset (Soares da Silva 2021), though it is sometimes framed through Theory of Mind and metarepresentation – rooted in classic cognitivism. Moving beyond CL, enactive and ecological approaches are gaining traction in metaphor studies and broader linguistics (Gallagher, Lindgren 2015; Gibbs 2019). As research shifts toward ecological approaches, it increasingly diverges from traditional CL models. Ecological accounts of language face challenges common to fields addressing organism-environment interactions, such as the status of representation and modeling dynamic processes. In an effort to bridge CL and ecological psychology, Inoue (2023) suggests that the meaning of nouns arises from co-occurring verbs, best understood as "bundles of affordances". However, as of yet, limited clarity has been provided on the nature of these bundles or their (semi)representational status.

3.2   Post-Cognitivism

While CL can be seen as continuous with post-cognitivism in psychology in some respects, the treatment of language by the latter has taken distinct directions.

Although the term *languaging* originates with Maturana and Varela (1980), enactivists only began properly focusing on language at a later stage. The most significant contribution in this area is arguably *Linguistic Bodies* (Di Paolo et al. 2018), which is introduced as the first coherent, embodied, and social conception of human language that does not rely on mental representations. There, languaging is described as a "way of living", a form of social agency that ultimately reflects our embodiment as sense-makers. The book can be interpreted as an effort to extend concepts that are essential to enactivism *in general* – such as "agency" and "autonomy" – into the vast domain of language. Another compatible interpretation sees it as a case study aimed at addressing the "no higher-order cognition" objection often leveled against enactivism. More recently, Cuffari and Figueiredo (2025, 1), in the same enactive vein, advanced a novel definition of "utterances" as "co-authored meaningful acts", common to non-human and human animals. Thus, they can "deconstruct the natural/nonnatural sign dichotomies that stall the work of finding continuity across sense-making species". In so doing, they reject the Theory of Mind model as well as moderate views that still rely on mindreading as the *explanans* of social cognition (which includes language). Cuffari and Figueiredo hold that minds are created socially and there are no such things as private intentional states to be "read" by "other minds" for behavior coordination. In other words, they apply the enactivist of finding explanations for behavior more in "organism-environment interactions and interactive dynamics" (26) rather than through positing exorbitant capacities of individual minds.

Before these last developments, others pursued different routes from that of autopoietic enaction to criticize cognitivism Van den Herik (2019, 45) noted that if one is to exclude internal representations, then "the received view of linguistic knowledge cannot be correct. However, as of yet, no alternative account of linguistic knowledge has been proposed". Similarly, Gahrn-Andersen agreed that in contemporary enactivism "only little attention [...] to the phenomenon of language" was paid. In these very few cases, like Hutto and Myin's (2013; 2017) radical version of enaction, "they end up considering language in ways that are at odds with enactivism's non-representationalist basis (Gahrn-Andersen 2019, 167).

What Hutto and Myin (2013) called the "Hard Problem of Content" (HPC) relates to this. In short, language, more than any other cognitive process, is intentional, i.e. refers to entities in the world and enables us to do that *in absentia* (Miłkowski 2015, 79). If one agrees

with the idea that the very concept of representing implies a degree of identity between the representee and the representation, it seems almost impossible for a representation to be about nothing, or be about something so fuzzy that cannot be described in terms of accuracy or satisfaction conditions (see van den Herik 2019, 12). The claim that cognitive science can renounce contentful representations leads to the Hard Problem of Content. If one holds that the only acceptable kind of information within a naturalistic framework is co-variance, then the anti-cognitivist is thus constrained from allowing semantic information to be the currency of such high-level cognitive processes. Here "semantic" means information that is described in terms of veridicality, accuracy, etc. Assuming that naturalism cannot be renounced, it seemed to some (Harvey 2015; Miłkowski 2015) that the dilemma could be resolved only by taking two opposite paths. The first is to concede that representations do have a place in the architecture of human cognition. The other one is to hold the fort and find explanatory alternatives. The solution offered by Hutto and Myin consists in adopting a teleosemiotic reading that tones down the explanation, summoning a notion of "Ur-intentionality" (direct-edness toward the world based on a sensitive responsiveness to natural signs) in the acts of organisms that, however, do not qualify as veridical (i.e., semantic).

A different route is taken by Moyal-Sharrock (2021), who considers Wittgenstein an enactivist *ante litteram* and a well-suited source to address HPC: "I see language as fundamentally enactive, and the emergence of language as simply a seamless *extension* of action" (S406). Moyal-Sharrock is closer to the broad view expressed by Di Paolo et al. (2018), emphasizing the continuity between language and (inter)action, and rejecting any exceptional metaphysical status for minds that manipulate symbols, whether linguistic or mathematical. To focus on how information (content) makes its way into the mind, as per her interpretation of Wittgenstein, would amount to missing the point of language as a refined form of social action:

> We come to extend the scope of our ways of acting through grammar—that is, through a *normatively* generated and sanctioned use of words or symbols. The generating, sanctioning, transmitting, and understanding of these symbols are all logically due to, or embedded in, action; that is, they are inherently enactive. (Moyal-Sharrock 2021, S417)

Van Dijk (2016, 1002) draws on Wittgenstein's description of language games too, arguing that non-representationalist views of language must avoid the reification trap afforded by our experience: that would turn "the ongoing world into a static realm and [segregate] it into process-source, word-meaning, and subject-object dichotomies".

Instead, the focus should be on language's "contextual flow of activity" as it "continuously comes forth as meaningful and brings forth a meaningful situation by having linguistic activity continuously shape and (re-)direct the flowing situations from which and into which it flows" (1001).

Similar grounds are covered by the Distributed Language Approach (DLA), prioritizing situated interaction as the conceptual starting point. Proponents often downplay the very concept of "language" (and "languages", see Saraceni, Jacob 2019), not to prioritize Saussure's *parole* over *langue*, but because the distinction itself is held as fallacious. Languages are considered mere analytical constructs with no real-world referent (Love 2004). Therefore, even discussing their "usage" is problematic (see Batisti 2021for a critique). Instead, DLA emphasizes *languaging*, highlighting the inherently situated and dynamic nature of linguistic experience. The idea of language as an autonomous entity is rejected, as it can only be maintained by neglecting the lived, embodied, and situated aspects of linguistic activity (Cowley 2019). Cowley (2024) underscores the connection between the structuralist view of language and its implied psychological counterpart. Agency is mostly attributed to the hypostatized language-systems, while speakers are reduced to "performers who rely on mind or, perhaps, *habitus*" to manipulate *abstracta* (words, etc.) that constitute language systems:

> If *abstracta* can be understood as having meanings, one assumes a methodological individualism. For the purposes of analysis, one posits that the relevant decision-making is organism-centred [...] Thus, any appeal to form hints at inner process or, at least, constructs that the folk attribute to a concept of mind. (Cowley 2024, 86)

Cowley not only critiques Chomsky's attribution of "generative powers to a mind/brain" but also argues that framing the "use of language" as a distinct concept follows the same reductive logic. This approach neglects "living beings, coordinative activity, and practices", which are central to *languaging*. Gahrn-Andersen (2024, 135) takes an even more radical stance, dismissing as meaningless the separation of language and cognition in adult humans. For him, all linguistic activity is inherently cognitive – though understood broadly as part of "our enacted, socio-material doings".

Others, critically drawing on the tradition of ecological psychology,[2] have developed anti-representationalist accounts of linguistic

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[2] Kiverstein and van Dijk (2021) criticize Gibson (1979), noting a "double standard" in his ecological psychology. While Gibson proposed an anti-representationalist theory

cognition. Kiverstein and Rietveld (2020) restrict the veridical character of representation to some special kinds of language use, namely, assertions. Thus, they address the "higher-order cognition" objection by reframing linguistic thought as another form of *skilled intentionality*, rooted in sociomaterial contexts. "Enlanguaged affordances" is what people engage with, among a plethora of other affordances, different in quality. By confining accuracy and veridicality conditions to assertions, their view emphasizes the situated and actional nature of language. The ecological-enactive view frames practical situations involving linguistic elements as non-representational, conceptualizing them as forms of *doing* or *know-how* (see Gahrn-Andersen 2019, 170).

Gahrn-Andersen (2023, 77) radicalizes again this view, claiming that a sharp distinction between "linguistic and non-linguistic affordances obscures the fact that so-called non-linguistic affordances (i.e. affordances devoid of symbolic representations) have the potential for being 'enlanguaged' in the sense of being conditioned by language-related knowhow". Mental content, in other words, is not necessarily a prerequisite for enacting practices successfully, even when such practices involve concept-based perception.

The strategy here is, again, to *steer away from* the Hard Problem of Content by understanding all linguistic activity as fundamentally contentless by framing even sophisticated activities like metalinguistic debates as the following of specialized perceptual cues – linguistic ones – that are akin to cues in other perceptual domains, like vision. Although the question of how content entered human cognition is presented as extremely problematic by Hutto and Myin, not everyone among post-cognitivists agrees on its problematic status in the first place (Ramsey 2023). It is symptomatic that more recently some, like Cuffari and Figueiredo (2025, n. 7), refrain – at least for the time being – from making the notion of content central to their explanation of the same phenomena. However, the avoidance of HPC by alternative views may leave philosophers unsatisfied, since avoidance of a problem does not equate to its proper dissolution.

4 A Blueprint for a Post-Cognitivist View of Language

We have shown how cognitive science and linguistics have treated the interface of language and thought from different vantage points. While we sympathize with the recent post-cognitivist developments, we believe there is still room for progress.

On one hand, there is clear disagreement on foundational issues: opposing cognitivism means renouncing the Descartes-inspired view

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of perception, he paradoxically characterized language as containing "information".

that preferred abstraction of bodies over particularities, situated contexts, and diversity as the best way of producing scientific generalizations, and elected the mental as the source of universality. The post-cognitivists' opposing thrust implies retrieving the body, not assuming the mind is (always) a calculator, making room for diversity within generalizations, and retrieving the interactional nature of linguistic behavior.

On the other hand, providing equally robust explanatory accounts has proved a hard challenge. Recent ecumenical efforts (Heras-Escribano 2019, Brancazio 2020, Baggs, Chemero 2021) appear to be now in crisis[3] not to mention the missing link between said novel streams in philosophical psychology and the latest Cognitive Linguistics (but see Sinha 2024). While the failures may be partly due to contingent and all too human reasons, purely theoretical tensions are surely at play.

Within the enterprise of the construction of non-cognitivist views of language, we delineate four tenets for an explanation that integrates philosophical, psychological, and linguistic elements: sociality, embodiment, ecological validity, and representation-as-*praxis*.

4.1 The Social and Interactional Dimension

While much progress is underway in the domains of social cognition, post-cognitivists ought to prioritize language as the next field of study within the explanatory competition with RTM-based views.

The first key theoretical step to differentiate the new proposals is to adopt a different philosophical understanding of "language". Classic cognitive science, backed by generativism, defended a narrow working definition of language that, in turn, channeled its study within avenues that, decades later, proved to be dead ends. Instead, a post-cognitivist account of language should look up more to Vico, Herder, Humboldt, Boas, Croce, Mead, and Wittgenstein, rather than Descartes, Locke, Saussure, Chomsky, or Fodor in acknowledging that language is first and foremost a culturally-situated form of social interactivity rather than a mental "faculty" or a "system".

Languaging is an intrinsically social, interactional form of cooperative coordination. "Language" as a name already leads to the erroneous objectifying view. "To language" as a verb, echoing the Humboldtian view, fits our picture better. Due to its cooperative

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3 We can only offer anecdotal evidence for this claim, based on talks given at relevant conferences in the last few years. While this renewed disagreement has not been put in writing yet, our experience indicates that, at least on the part of ecological psychologists, a strong resistance towards enactive concepts like that of "sense-making" is in place.

nature, it cannot be learned in isolation. Furthermore, knowing how to speak implies knowing how to listen (or, at worst, how to be quiet at the right time). Turn-taking, for one thing, is a fine-grained infrastructure that is taught and learnt *interactionally* – and necessarily so – and the knowledge of its workings is mostly implicit (see Styvers et al. 2009). But this is old news for conversation analysts and, more generally, linguists who study situated interaction. In Maynard's formulation:

> Once language comes to be studied as a lived phenomenon, whereby units of speech […] achieve objectivity through practices, and investigators examine these practices as participants deploy them [in] interaction, it means abandoning propositional or ideal approaches to language. […] The preoccupation with abstract and transcendent forms means a diminished comprehension of language as it is lived through bodily enactments […]. (Maynard 2012, 28)

The crucial further step here is to ask questions like: how can we make these pieces of knowledge fall into place within a cognitive (but not cognitivist) framework, given the quasi-behavioristic tendencies of Conversation Analysis? How can the obvious cognitive significance of, say, the intricacies of turn-taking or the calculation of pronominal ways of addressing others (e.g., Sidnell 2019) be included as an integral aspect, and not a marginal one, of how we language? Cuffari and Figueiredo (2025), for instance, provide some answers in this respect following an evolutionarily continuist account of the origins of language with non-human animals, avoiding appeals to individualist premises such as mindreading or the positing of internal mental representations. By the same token, classical behaviorism is ruled out too, as their enactive picture abstains from dichotomies between "the observable and unobservable, mind and body, inner and outer" (20).

4.2   The Role of the Body

In accepting the premise that the mind – and, by extension, languaging – is largely embodied, issues regarding the status of the body arise. As we recognize our inherent social constitution, the body abandons its universal, unaffected status; there are no bodies in isolation, nor are all bodies equally shaped by their environments.

This perspective has two key implications. First, it supports an interactional approach to the study of languaging, as previously noted. Analyzing linguistic interactions requires a multimodal and holistic framework that integrates words with gestures, posture, and other bodily movements. This claim resonates with the idea advanced by G.H. Mead that linguistic activity is a sophisticated form of social

action and, as such, builds on gestures, which are an evolutionary prior and ontogenetically more basic form of communication (see Baggio 2025). Second, while CL has demonstrated that language and concepts are deeply embodied, the sociosemiotic commitment must also challenge the body as a neutral means of languaging. Instead, linguistic activity is fundamentally interwoven with experience in its broadest sense, including how the body plays a role in it, and decisively moving beyond the autonomy of Saussurean linguistics.

As Gahrn-Andersen (2024, 136) argues, "considering how perception feeds into cognitive faculties such as memory and imagination, it is indeed difficult to see how any cognitive behaviour pertaining to linguistically competent human beings can be completely devoid of conceptual influences". However, rather than framing these relations as "influences", bodies and language are better understood as mutually constitutive: the experience of one's body is embedded in how it is linguistically represented. Without this perspective, and if we concede cause-effect chains, we risk falling into Cartesian dualism. For example, Ilyenkov (1977) talks of a relation of organ, where thought is not the product of bodily action, but the action itself.

This aligns with earlier discussions of normative practices, which assert that norms are not secondary to perception but embedded in it from the outset. For example, the composition of a language variety, such as the presence of nouns, enables the identification of objects, while the existence of discrete objects simultaneously establishes a need in the development of nouns in such language variety. This, however, raises issues related to the effects of linguistic diversity. Contemporary studies in linguistic relativity continue to grapple with the extent to which language constrains or shapes cognition. So far, an autonomous linguistic system where meaning is relatively fixed and in which linguistic varieties both reflect specific cultural experiences and function as a constraint for certain perceptive cues, such as color identification, has been always presupposed. However, this view risks entering an endless cause-and-effect chain, introducing explanatory gaps that challenge any theory attempting to account for the *continuity between life and language* (Di Paolo et al., 2018; see Rodríguez Jordá, Di Paolo 2023).

As previously stated, our position seeks to avoid any form of Cartesian dualism while also moving beyond reductive materialism. In this sense, the relationship between body and language must be understood as hylomorphic, wherein no strict distinction exists between *Leib* and *Körper*. Language is neither an emergent product of experience nor a mere function of the body, but rather a principle of their organization. In other words, language operates as the formative ground that gives bodily experience its structure and intelligibility. Although full-blown linguistic behavior reaches completion later in evolutionary terms, a proper hylomorphic relation between form

and matter stipulates that language is not reduced to a secondary asset that exerts an external influence on bodily experience. Instead, the body provides the necessary conditions for the realization of language and is itself an essential part of that realization. Conceptualizing languaging as the very form the body takes in action, rather than as a social construct or an added layer of experience, provides a way to avoid both linguistic constructivism and naive realism about discrete objects while maintaining a continuity-based approach.

The relationship between linguistic activity and bodies also highlights the need for a situated perspective that accommodates the variability of human experience. This requires moving beyond the concept of a universal body or the universal status of cognition and language. Instead, universality should be placed in activity itself, conceived as the fundamental *locus* of the mental.

4.3 Ecological Validity

If language is indeed an "ecological phenomenon" (Steffensen et al. 2024), its study cannot disregard the ecological conditions in which it is subject to scientific inquiry. Vico (2015, § 445) already recognized that the differences of physical *and* social environments are primary drivers of linguistic diversity among human groups. Cognitivism, however, adheres to methodological individualism, neglecting social and interactional contexts in experimental settings. Similarly, mainstream linguistic approaches focus on texts, sidelining not only the contextual features of language but also its multimodal nature. By contrast, ecological validity has been more prominent in subfields like ethnolinguistics, with methodologies such as Conversation Analysis leading the way. However, the latter can be still subject to a textualist pitfall as it operates on a restricted notion of "interaction".

To address this and other foundational issues, de Ruiter and Albert (2017) advocate for a "methodological fusion": experimental psycholinguistics can benefit from the insights of CA. Despite significant differences in their objects of study, methodologies, and epistemological assumptions (92-4), the authors argue in favor of "a practical synthesis that combines their strengths and avoids their weaknesses" (91). Findings undermining the validity of controlled experiments in social psychology make it "overly optimistic to assume that effects found under controlled laboratory conditions provide sufficient support for theories that explain behavior outside of the lab in our real lives as social agents" (98). On the other hand, CA has developed a careful process of preliminary qualitative analyses that reasonably "polishes" the working assumptions that, in turn, lead to descriptions of what happens (and why it happens at that point) in talk-in-interaction (96). De Ruiter and Albert advocate for "acceptable compromises

between internal validity (e.g., control of independent and potentially confounding variables, proper operationalizations, and accurate measurement, etc.) [...] and *ecological* validity" (100).

For our purposes, greater attention to ecological validity can serve as a *bridging step* away from the traditional paradigms toward a more radical epistemology of languaging, closer to post-cognitivism. However, this measure alone may not be resolutive. In fact, it is possible to improve ecological validity within controlled experiments without renouncing the core theoretical tenets of cognitivism.

4.4 Representation-as-*praxis*

While evidence shows that languaging and abstract thought are largely embodied (Borghi et al. 2021), the capacity for indirect speech – speaking about referents not immediately present to the senses – seems unattainable without the notion of representation. This leads to a critical question: how is offline cognition achieved?

In trying to retain any useful idea of representation within post-cognitivism, a firm externalist position is needed. Neural correlates or symbolic structures are far from exhausting the explanation of human cognitive and linguistic behavior. Languaging, which is intrinsically cognitive, is, instead, continuous with in-world action (Van Dijk, Withagen 2015).

Assuming a capacity to represent what is absent from immediate bodily experience, representations must derive from a general principle to action. Human transformative activity, defined as a conscious act of *objectification*, positions language as a "productive technique" (Thao 1984) that participates in a fundamental process of duplication. This marks a qualitative change in the continuity between animal and human existence, defining how we engage with and through our ecological context. As Marx (1932, 31) explained:

> The animal is immediately one with its life activity. [...] Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. [...] The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man's species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created.

This objectification of activity may take the form of linguistic representations – not as fixed mental descriptions of the world, but as habits grounded in *praxis*. From this perspective, the possibility for indirect speech and offline linguistic cognition emerges from normatively informed, enlanguaged practices.

What distinguishes representations as habits of *praxis* from traditional representations? Classic descriptions frame representations as static information housed in the brain, corresponding directly to external objects. In contrast, representation-as-*praxis* embodies *transformation*, where representations do not mirror the external world but serve as a *moment* of human activity. In a similar vein, Cuffari and Figueiredo (2025) frame their concept of *utterance* as acts of dialogic nature, forcing thereby a relational perspective: "[e]merging from and always tied to dialogical activity, an utterance reflexively regulates the shared moment of interaction that generates and frames it" (6). Representations, in this sense, are attuned to the situation, embodying more than they apparently contain.

A digression on Peirce's notion of universals may further clarify this concept of representation.[4] Consider the general concept of *dog*, which allows us to identify all dogs as sharing something in common. Peirce asks whether this shared quality is created by the mind or exists independently. McNabb (2018) explains that the universal meaning of *dog* cannot be understood as the sum of individual instances (e.g., dalmatians, my aunt's dog, three-legged dogs). Instead, the universal *dog* encompasses a continuum of possible dogs. Peirce privileges here universals over particulars, granting them a reality akin to the law of gravity, which is as real as any specific instance of a falling stone. Universals, then, are not static abstractions but principles that operate actively in the world.

While this perspective might still seem compatible with the storable and internal status of representations, for Peirce, meaning is not derived from a correspondence between a mental state and a thing in the world; instead, what something *is* must be understood as a function of what it *does*.

How, then, are we conscious of this universal *dog* without relying on mental storage? A possible answer lies in habits formed through experiences with particular dogs, where habits are "tendencies actually to behave in a similar way under similar circumstances in the future" (Peirce 1935 [CP: 5.487]). Universals manifest as patterns that guide our knowledge of particulars, rather than as mental images we retrieve. The relationship between the universal representation of *dog* and a particular dog is not one of equivalence: it emerges dynamically as part of the general cognitive (and not specifically linguistic) ability to generate and recognize habits. Consequently, the relationship between linguistic expression and the thing it represents cannot be one of simple identity. Representations, in this

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4 As an anonymous reviewer proposes, Morris' (1938) may serve to further understand language through Piercean lens. For a more recent discussion of the interaction between enaction, the role of representation, and Peirce's philosophy see Fanaya (2021).

sense, are social products of our cognitive life, rather than an internal-only prerequisite for it.

Recognizing representations as distinct from what they represent restores the transformative *living* power of languaging – its ability to reshape and redefine the world through action.

5 Conclusion

How to account for our linguistic life has proved a challenging task for post-cognitivist approaches. Four thematic points were offered as a blueprint to put such efforts on the right path. In so doing, three further directions should be highlighted.

First, a constant and non-trivial conversation with linguistics is key to avoiding sidelining several decades of previous pertinent elaboration. The two disciplines share a history, and many foundational questions have already been asked in a relevant way.

Second, the pervasiveness of language in our life should be considered while rethinking cognition. We suggest that the post-cognitivist understanding of languaging here proposed strongly relates to the features of situatedness and relationality that are being highlighted against classic cognitive science. This alikeness, in fact, goes both ways. On one hand, languaging falls into the wider category of co-ordinative interaction. This realization should contribute to breaking the spell of all overly exceptionalist conceptions of language. On the other hand, it is true that in many instances language connects to our cognitive activity. Thus, far from claiming that *all* cognition is linguistic, or that language is the *only* key to understanding thinking, we stress its importance. Additionally, a similar notion of languaging will help fight the problematic distinction assumed by cognitivists and many post-cognitivists between lower and higher-order cognition (Zahnoun 2021).

As for the third point, it is more of an admission. In this short article, we have not come to the point of discussing how our proposal relates to the rest of post-cognitivist social cognition theories. However, while aiming at deradicalizing the discussion on representations, we made a statement that calls for a reply from all fields of post-cognitivism: the ultimate form of social cognition is languaging, and failing to properly include its role in new theories is a mistake.

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II

On the Philosophy of J.-P. Cometti.
A Symposium

**edited by Luigi Perissinotto
and Roberta Dreon**

A Life Between Art and Philosophy
A Note on Jean-Pierre Cometti and His Work

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Abstract   This note offers a brief introduction to the previously unpublished text "Pragmatism and the Question of Language: Words and the Rest" by Jean-Pierre Cometti (1944-2016). It serves two purposes: first, to provide some biographical information about Cometti and his role in French philosophical culture; and second, to offer some insights – along with bibliographical references – into the themes that he explored throughout his long scientific life. These themes include: 1) Musil and the philosophical significance of his work; 2) Wittgenstein's philosophy; 3) American pragmatism, with reference to Dewey and the so-called 'neo-pragmatists'; 4) aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

Keywords   Jean-Pierre Cometti. Musil. Wittgenstein. Pragmatism. Art.

The text "Pragmatism and the Question of Language: Words and the Rest", translated here from French to English, is an unpublished work by Jean-Pierre Cometti (1944-2016) that he himself – according to a few preserved marginal notes – considered in need of revisions and expansion. Nevertheless, or perhaps even precisely for this reason, it offers a valuable glimpse into Cometti's working methods, style, and the breadth of his philosophical interests. It is also worth mentioning that this text was read and discussed at length in a seminar at Ca' Foscari University in Venice in 2015, at which Cometti was invited to speak by Roberta Dreon and Luigi Perissinotto. Moreover, this was not the only seminar that Cometti held in Venice over the years, although unfortunately it was the last one. Indeed, since the 1990s, a strong connection has been forged between Cometti (and Aix-Marseille University) and Perissinotto (and Ca' Foscari University), both scientific and institutional, leading to an Erasmus exchange between the two universities. Another important milestone in this collaboration was marked by the three conferences on Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy organized by Cometti in Aix-en-Provence, Perissinotto in Venice, and Silvana Borutti in Pavia, between 2003 and 2005. The papers presented at these conferences – conceived as a unified whole – were later published in *Il terreno del linguaggio. Testimonianze e saggi sulla filosofia di Wittgenstein*, edited by Borutti and Perissinotto (2006). Cometti's essay, included in this volume and translated into Italian by Ilaria Pirone, is titled "Il linguaggio e l'imprevedibile: sull'ambiente dei pensieri" (Cometti 2006) and anticipates some of the themes and issues explored in the text translated here. In this context, it may also be interesting to note that Cometti was well acquainted not only with Italian studies on Wittgenstein, but also with contemporary Italian philosophy more generally. His writings feature numerous critical discussions and references to Gianni Vattimo and Aldo Giorgio Gargani, for example. Incidentally, Cometti played a key role in introducing Gargani's thought to France by translating *Lo stupore e il caso* (Gargani 1985) into French as *L'étonnement et le hasard* (1989), and *La frase infinita. Thomas Bernhard e la cultura austriaca* (1990a) as *La phrase infinie de Thomas Bernhard* (1990b).

This note, which serves as a brief introduction to Cometti's text published here for the first time, has two fairly limited purposes. The first is to provide some biographical information about Cometti and his role in French philosophical culture. The second is to offer some insights – along with bibliographical references – into the themes that Cometti explored throughout his long scientific life. These themes, which are closely connected and often intertwined, include: 1) Robert Musil and the philosophical significance of his work; 2) Wittgenstein's philosophy; 3) American pragmatism, with particular reference to John Dewey and the so-called 'neo-pragmatists' (especially Richard Rorty); 4) aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

Jean-Pierre Cometti was born in Marseille on 22 May 1944 into a family of Italian origin. He began his philosophical studies at a relatively late age (see Morizot 2025) and taught philosophy in secondary schools in France (Millau) and abroad (Morocco, the Netherlands, and Germany) before joining Aix-Marseille University in 1992. He taught and conducted research at the university for two decades, and, after retiring in 2007, he remained active in academia continuing to teach at the École Supérieure d'Art in Avignon.

Following Pascal Engel's words in a tribute after his death, Cometti and his philosophical work can be succinctly presented as embodying an approach to philosophy that was "that of cultural circulation" (Engel 2016; translation mine). This is true in two senses: first, as an editor and translator, he introduced into French philosophical discourse many philosophers who were little known in France; second, his own philosophy drew freely on sources without any dogmatic limitations or divisions tied to a particular school. Although he was not an analytic philosopher, Cometti engaged with themes in the philosophy of language and mind that were far removed from those central to French philosophy at the time. He also helped to circulate philosophers and philosophical traditions that were either unknown or had been largely neglected in France – for example, Wittgenstein, with whom a growing minority of French philosophers are now engaging; Dewey and the tradition of pragmatism; and Nelson Goodman. Cometti thus left behind what can rightly be described as not only "a rich and original", but also a "courageous oeuvre" (Engel 2016; translation mine).[1] In short, his presence had a lasting impact, as Engel writes, leaving "above all, the feeling that philosophy would not quite be the same in France if he had not been there" (Engel 2016; translation mine).

Cometti published a vast body of work over the course of his career,[2] making it all the more surprising to learn that his initial contact with writing was, "paradoxically", "almost fortuitous" or accidental: as Jacques Morizot (2025) recalls, Cometti was introduced to Musil's then little-known work by Marie-Louise Roth (1926-2014), one of the leading experts on Musil. He went on to dedicate four volumes to Musil: two on his fiction – *Robert Musil ou l'alternative romanesque* (Cometti 1985) and *Robert Musil. De 'Törless' à 'L'Homme sans qualités'* (1986) – and two on his essays – *L'homme exact. Essai sur Robert*

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[1]   The complete list of works is available on his personal website at the following link: https://sites.google.com/site/jipcompage/bibliographie.

[2]   Morizot 2019, 199: "As everybody knows (or not), Jean-Pierre Cometti's relation to writing was insatiable. In fact he was something of a bulimic: more than one hundred books, either as an author, translator, editor, director of a collective publication, without even counting his multiple activities as consultant for publishers. Quite rightly, he was not reluctant to qualify himself as a Stakhanovite".

Musil (1997) and *Musil philosophe. L'utopie de l'essayisme* (2001b). In addition, he co-edited the French re-edition of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Musil 2004) with Philippe Jaccottet and Marianne Rocher-Jacquin. This edition offers a new interpretation of the unfinished second part and includes extensive previously unpublished material (translated by Cometti and Rocher-Jacquin), revealing the many traces of Musil's literary "building site" (Gödicke 2004, 153; translation mine; for further comments on this translation, see also Cerisuelo 2025). It should be noted here that Cometti's interest in Musil is always philosophically motivated. For example, in *L'homme exact*, Cometti examines the ways in which Musil attempts to overcome the duality between soul and reason, and between science and feeling (see Cometti 1997, 21-5). This duality, as is evident, would later be addressed, on the one hand, by thinkers of the pragmatist tradition and, on the other, by Wittgenstein: precisely those philosophers to whom Cometti devoted much of his intellectual energy.

Reflecting his enduring fascination for Austrian culture, Cometti regarded Wittgenstein as one of his major philosophical references. His interest in Wittgenstein was shared with – and to some extent shaped by – the renowned epistemologist Gilles-Gaston Granger, who, among other achievements, produced in 1972 the French translation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that would remained the most authoritative version available for many years. Cometti wrote three major works on Wittgenstein's philosophy: *Philosopher avec Wittgenstein* (1996), *La maison de Wittgenstein ou les voies de l'ordinaire* (1998), and *Ludwig Wittgenstein et la philosophie de la psychologie. Essai sur la signification de l'intériorité* (2004) – a book that he mentioned he had completed in just a few months during his stay in Canada. Along with these works, he also authored countless articles, contributions, and translations. By devoting himself to Wittgenstein – who is primarily known as a philosopher of mind and language – Cometti helped to shed light on some of the lesser-explored aspects of his philosophy. For example, as Jerrold Levinson points out,

> *Philosopher avec Wittgenstein* contains an extended examination of Wittgenstein's views on the affinity between aesthetic and conceptual questions, on the nature and role of religious beliefs, and on the use of philosophy for self and societal transformation. These are topics often omitted or glossed over in more standard interpretations of Wittgenstein as a philosopher. (2019, 18)

Furthermore, although it focuses less on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and more on "Wittgenstein's ultimate picture of philosophy" as presented in *Philosophical Investigations* and his other later works,

> Cometti succeeds nicely in demonstrating the continuity of Wittgenstein's later thought, putting that thought in relation with his earlier thought, though without minimizing the real differences between them. (Levinson 2019, 18)

One could also regard Cometti's engagement with Wittgenstein (not just with Musil), as Morizot (2025) suggests, as resulting in his focus on uses and conditions of use, his anti-essentialism and his preference for what he termed 'fragile ontologies' (*ontologies friables*) (Cometti 2012). This led him, in alignment with the 'later' Donald Davidson, to advocate "a relationship with the world freed from, *cleared of*, conventions and superfluous attributes that oppose, like so many as obstacles, a more authentic interaction with beings, things, or with God" (Cometti 1999, 10; translation mine). Accordingly, he called for an art he referred to as 'art without qualities' (*sans qualités*) – a notion he elaborated in his well-known 1999 book, the title of which echoes this expression (Cometti 1999; cf. also 2001a).

Moving beyond any dualistic framework and a strictly normative view of rules (Cometti 1996, 63-96) – and building on Wittgenstein's work, though not exclusively – Cometti gradually embraced American pragmatism. He drew mainly not from Charles S. Peirce or William James, but from Dewey (and Rorty). He oversaw the French publication of Dewey's most significant works, and helped foster their dissemination. Among Cometti's most notable contributions are *Qu'est-ce que le pragmatisme?* (2010) and *La démocratie radicale. Lire John Dewey* (2016b).

More than through overt references, Dewey's impact or influence on Cometti is evident in the distinctive philosophical method he employed, which is apparent in the variety of issues he examined – a point that can also be made about his engagement with Wittgenstein's work. As previously mentioned, one area in which this impact or influence is particularly evident is that of art and aesthetics. Firstly, it must be said that, for Cometti, art was not only a constant subject of reflection, but also, so to speak, a deep "secret gravitational centre" (Morizot 2025; translation mine). It is worth recalling that, as Morizot reveals, Cometti was a jazz guitarist and therefore "from the start" he "kept close contact with art and the world of the arts" (2019, 200). As for his philosophical work on art specifically, the following trilogy devoted to art is clearly and emblematically informed by a pragmatist, or rather neo-pragmatist, spirit: *La force d'un malentendu. Essais sur l'art et la philosophie de l'art* (2009), *Art et facteurs d'art. Ontologies friables* (2012), and *La nouvelle aura. Économie de l'art et de la culture* (2016c). To complete this overview, it is useful to mention at least three other significant works on art: *Art, modes d'emploi. Esquisses d'une philosophie de l'usage* (Cometti 2001a), which, as the title suggests, examines the various ways in which art can be employed;

Art, représentation, expression (2002), which addresses the questions raised by the search for a definition of art; and *Conserver/Restaurer. L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa préservation technique* (2016a), which explores the paradoxes surrounding the institutional management of art. Cometti's work on aesthetics and the philosophy of art is densely packed with subtle insights, detailed analyses, and rich information. Yet it consistently rests – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly – on a single foundational stance: the rejection of any doctrine or theory that seeks to make art an autonomous domain, isolated from the varied and complex fabric of experience.[3] As Dreon points out, it was primarily "Dewey's work in the philosophy of art [that] represented a crucial influence in pushing Cometti's interests toward the political dimension of artistic practices": Cometti's "engagement seems to answer's Dewey's rather polemical idea" (2019, 217) – as expressed in particular in *Art as Experience* – that a philosophy of art remains ineffective and sterile unless it reveals how art connects with other modes of experience.

Finally, attention should be drawn to another substantial and truly important aspect of Cometti's work, partly mentioned earlier: his remarkable activity from the very beginning of his career as an editor, translator, and director of collections and journals. In the series "Tiré à part" (Éditions de l'éclat), launched jointly with Michel Valensi, Cometti aimed to publish short, seminal essays by leading contemporary authors in analytic philosophy. The collection was a success: over the course of twenty years, Cometti published works by Davidson, Goodman, Rorty, Roderik Chisholm, David Lewis, Karl R. Popper, Hilary Putnam, Stanley Cavell, Jacques Bouveresse, Daniel Dennett, Jan Hacking, Jaakko Hintikka, Adolf Grünbaum, and many others. Thanks to this initiative, Anglophone philosophy expanded significantly in France. As Engel puts it, "[t]he young (and few) philosophers in France who were interested in analytic philosophy at the time had the opportunity to translate and comment on their favourite texts" (Engel 2016; translation mine). Cometti translated and published an exceptionally wide range of works – more than anyone else of his generation, as Engel (2016) admits – drawing from German, Italian, and American philosophical traditions. His translations include major figures. To give a few examples: among the German speakers, in addition to Musil and Wittgenstein, Karl-Otto Apel and Peter Bürger; among the Italians, besides Vattimo and Gargani, Umberto Eco and Maurizio Ferraris; and among the Americans, Rorty – to whom he was very close –[4] as well as Dewey, Goodman, Levinson,

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3 For a more in-depth exploration of this aspect of Cometti's thought, see also Oliver Quintyn's preface to Cometti 2009 (i-xxx).

4 Although Cometti disagreed with the undervaluing of experience in favour of language that characterised Rorty's approach.

Lewis, Putnam, John Searle, Richard Shusterman, and Robert Brandom. The philosophical significance and relevance of this careful work of selecting and translating the texts are, once again, clarified by Engel's words, which deserve to be quoted in full:

> Translation broadens the field, breaks away from schools and specialists, and shows that it is possible to move from one community to another without relying on predetermined frameworks. This is why translation was consubstantial with Jean-Pierre Cometti's work. I don't like the term 'passeur' sometimes used to label those who do this work, because it suggests someone merely passing through without building on their own foundation, whereas Jean-Pierre Cometti clearly had his own. Yet the term did suit the spirit of his project, which rejected any belief in the Eternal, in inviolable norms and values, in Truth, Beauty, Meaning, and Ideas. (Engel 2016; translation mine)

Cometti was also the driving force behind numerous edited volumes and special journal issues, demonstrating his commitment to fostering scholarly dialogue. Beyond his editorial work, he organised several important conferences, including notable ones in collaboration with the Ca' Foscari University research group, which brought together leading experts and stimulated vibrant academic exchanges. These events contributed decisively and significantly to the development of debates and collaborations within a broader scholarly community.

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Pragmatism and the Question of Language: Words and the Rest

Jean-Pierre Cometti

Translated from French by Elena Valeri

Abstract   This essay highlights certain limitations in the way the so-called 'linguistic turn' became prominent in philosophy throughout the twentieth century. In particular, in line with the pragmatist approach – especially that of John Dewey – it emphasises the importance of the relationship between language and experience. The main aim is to show that those philosophical traditions which focus either on experience (such as phenomenology) or on language (such as analytic philosophy) overlook the most crucial point: namely, what language and experience owe each other, as well as their rootedness in a shared natural and social foundation.

Keywords   Pragmatism. Linguistic Turn. Language. Experience. Communication.

Summary   1 Language and Experience. – 2 Two Typical (and Major) Misunderstandings. – 3 Language and Communication. – 4 Language and Social Action.

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> If we had not talked with others and they with us, we
> should never talk to and with ourselves. Because of
> converse, social give and take, various organic at-
> titudes become an assemblage of persons engaged
> in converse, conferring with one another, exchang-
> ing distinctive experiences, listening to one another,
> over-hearing unwelcome remarks, accusing and ex-
> cusing. Through speech a person dramatically iden-
> tifies himself with potential acts and deeds; he plays
> many rôles, not in successive stages of life but in a
> contemporaneously enacted drama.
>
> John Dewey, *Nature and Experience*, Chapter V

The 'linguistic turn' has enabled philosophy to better understand what it owes to language, and what language implies for individual and common experience, while also suggesting a better approach to the issues later taken up by the philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences.[1] These advances, generally taken for granted, have come at a price. Questions specific to the social field, whether they actually concern life in common or what takes shape within it, have largely faded into the background. No doubt, the renewed interest in language had the – very indirect – consequence of steering political philosophy in new directions, but the presumed effects remained quite marginal.[2] Pragmatism – whose origins lie in Peirce, for whom language plays a leading role – has undergone, so to speak, a renewal, as evidenced by Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, among others.[3] But once again, one thing does not come without the other: the counterpart to this has been the discredit into which the notion of experience has fallen, along with what it enabled us to articulate precisely on a social level and in terms of relationships with the environment.

I do not intend to continue this dual assessment of gains and losses. Instead, I would like to take a slight step aside in order to see how the question of language has been posed in pragmatist philosophy, rather than closely following the evidence that the adherents of the 'linguistic turn' have helped to disseminate. My guiding principle will be the following: a reflection on the role of language in pragmatist naturalism not only makes it possible to show that it has never

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1 Cf. Rorty 1992. Let us recall what Rorty means by 'linguistic turn': "the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use" (1992, 3).

2 One example is the benefit that authors like Habermas and Apel have drawn from Peirce, Wittgenstein, and philosophers like Austin. This influence is less evident in the case of authors like J. Rawls, although we certainly owe to him one of the books that most shaped philosophical and political debates in the final years of the twentieth century.

3 This is one of the things that distinguishes classical pragmatism and neo-pragmatism. Rorty and Putnam may have undergone a pragmatist conversion, but they nonetheless incorporated part of the legacy of analytic philosophy and the linguistic turn. Their conceptions of language, particularly in Rorty's case, bear clear witness to this.

been underestimated, but also leads to a better assessment of its role and the resulting consequences for a social and political philosophy, and even for a philosophy of language. It is likely that I will not be able to carry out this task in its entirety. At the very least, however, I would like to establish a few milestones along the way. For reasons of obvious convenience, but also because his work most clearly illustrates the perspectives I have in view, I will focus on what a reading of John Dewey suggests.

1 Language and Experience

Richard Rorty, who is largely responsible for the renewal of pragmatism and the renewed interest in Dewey's work, considered the notion of *experience* to be one of the remnants rendered obsolete by the 'linguistic turn' (Rorty 1982).[4] He believed that was that Dewey's emphasis on experience had distracted him from what a more thorough reflection on language would have allowed him to understand (Rorty 1982).[5] This (critical) position raises several issues that I alluded to at the beginning, particularly with regard to the Darwinian-type *continuity* that the notion of experience, in Dewey's sense, was tasked with legitimising, as well as the conditions it provides for a conception of culture and political institutions that privileges *social action*.[6] More simply, however, anyone who pays slightly more attention than usual to what Dewey wrote on this subject will see that this position is exaggerated, if not unjustified. We might thus be motivated to set the record straight and show that Dewey did not at all ignore the importance of language for all the problems that this importance generally leads us to consider. It seems to me, however, that there are better ways to spend one's time than donning the costume of Zorro in this way, because the polarity of *language* and *experience*, so often invoked, appears to mask – here to the benefit of language – an aspect of the philosophy of language that is the source of many misunderstandings; and precisely the kind of interest that Dewey actually had in language is of a nature to rid us of it.

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4 "Throughout his life," writes Rorty, "[Dewey] wavered between a therapeutic stance toward philosophy and another, quite different, stance – one in which philosophy was to become 'scientific'" (Rorty 1982, 73). Dewey was mistaken in choosing the latter direction.

5 Rorty observes that Dewey himself seems to have become aware of this while writing the preface to the second edition of *Experience and Nature*. At that point, Dewey was led to believe that the word 'culture' would be a useful replacement for 'experience' and would avoid the many drawbacks associated with the latter.

6 Cf. Dewey 1981 and 2007.

The writings and reflections that are likely to convince us of this are scattered throughout Dewey's entire body of work; they weave a tight web of concepts that ensure its coherence, and which I cannot hope to encompass.[7] The simplest approach, then, is to quickly examine one of the texts in which the specificity of Dewey's reflection on language emerges most clearly. This is Chapter V of his 1925 book *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1981).

In this chapter, as can be seen from the lines I have included as an epigraph, Dewey attempts to highlight the role of language in communication between humans – which is, admittedly, not a very original idea. However, he tries above all to show how language (the human faculty of using 'sounds' that carry meanings, as well as those meanings themselves) is structured around modes of interaction that find in it a complementary and effective means, and without which there would be neither 'meanings' nor 'language'.[8] This aspect of Dewey's reflection is important for several reasons that I would like to point out right away. Firstly, this approach is what allows us to conceive what links the *processes* of adaptation inherent in life (nature) to the more specifically social *processes* of interaction (culture), and to think about their *continuity* (the naturalistic hypothesis). Secondly, this approach, because it does not dissociate language from these interactions, dissociates communication from language, in the sense that the former does not have its exclusive condition in language. As we shall see, this leads to a philosophy of language that is entirely different from those that have prevailed in linguistics and philosophy, across all currents.[9] (But let us begin by) Let's briefly focus on these two points.

The analyses of language proposed in *Experience and Nature* constitute a complement to and deepening of earlier work in psychology. In this latter field, Dewey is an *experimentalist*; his psychology and his reflection on psychology were oppose to 'mentalism', but also differ just as markedly from what would later develop from a study of

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[7] The reason for this lies notably in the fact that language processing is not separate from the processing of experience, nor from the notion of belief (and habit) which is also involved in it, etc.

[8] "The heart of language is not 'expression' of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership. To fail to understand is to fail to come into agreement in action; to misunderstand is to set up action at cross purposes. [...] Meaning is not indeed a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior, and secondarily a property of objects" (Dewey 1981, 141).

[9] This remark concerns linguistic structuralism in particular, what structuralist or neo-structuralist philosophers have drawn from it, and – in the Anglosphere more specifically – the philosophies stemming from the 'linguistic turn' or related philosophies, from Carnap to Dummett. [To be specified]

'behaviour'.[10] As is clearly shown in one of his most important writings on the subject, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896) (Dewey 1972), the relation that behaviourists such as Watson would conceive according to the model of the simple S-R (stimulus-response) relation, driven by the ambition to guarantee scientificity, is only intelligible within the framework of relations with the environment that encompass the relation in question, the agents involved ('human' or 'non-human'), and the interactions that occur between them always under particular conditions. In "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" Dewey proposes an analysis of these interactions that makes behaviour dependent both on the *effects* induced by the factors or behaviours with which they come into relation, and on the reactions that these effects produce in return, due to what can be anticipated from them (see more precisely).[11] This interactionist model illustrates what the proposed understanding owes to Darwinism, as opposed to the empiricist (and mechanistic) schemes that have also shaped psychology.[12] The model notably provides an idea of the changes brought about by Darwinism, from the perspective of the modes of intelligibility it has imposed on attention. What is remarkable about this is particularly reflected in what Dewey draws from it regarding the status of 'meanings'. Unlike the empiricists, such as Locke, who viewed words as labels ('marks'), for Dewey, meanings are constructed within the exchanges that prefigure social interactions, so that they are inseparable from them, and find in language a condition without which they would not go beyond the 'primitive' stage at which we can imagine them to have emerged.

I am aware of what objections this kind of perspective can give raise to. It is not necessary, however, to conceive of all this in terms of anteriority or origin. It is sufficient – from a purely conceptual standpoint – to consider that the 'interactions' linking the biological and the cultural, 'meanings' and 'language' constitute three interconnected yet autonomous components – we shall see why – of what

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10 Within the framework of the Watsonian behaviourist current, according to the "stimulus-response" theory (John B. Watson, 1878-1958).

11 See Dewey 1972, 99: "[T]he reflex arc idea, as commonly employed, is defective in that it assumes sensory stimulus and motor response as distinct psychical existences, while in reality they are always inside a co-ordination and have their significance purely from the part played in maintaining or reconstituting the co-ordination; and (secondly) in assuming that the quale of experience which precedes the 'motor' phase and that which succeeds it are two different states [...]. The result is that the reflex arc idea leaves us with a disjointed psychology, whether viewed from the standpoint of development in the individual or in the race, or from that of the analysis of the mature consciousness".

12 Dewey's often-claimed empiricism is here illuminated in a way that nonetheless distinguishes it from the empiricist current in the proper sense. I refer to my study on this subject (Cometti 2010) as well as to my introduction to the French translation of *Experience and Nature* (Cometti 2012).

to our eyes is usually encompassed by the sole notion of 'language'. The benefit of this view is immediately apparent: communication is not just a matter of language; language itself cannot be dissociated from the actions and interactions within which it operates, certainly as an 'instrument' of communication, but also of cooperative or concerted action – although at times of conflict, too.

Apart from a few differences, this point of view is that of Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*: the bricklayers whom he uses to illustrate the notion of 'language game' utter *words* clearly *coordinated* with what they are *doing* (in relation to tacit rules) and inseparable from it; words to which this 'game' is not reducible, and which enable them to carry out a common task together.

2 Two Typical (and Major) Misunderstandings

This brief evocation of the connections that bind language to experience – referring here to the relations constituted on the basis of the interactions involved in situations of which language is most of the time an element – leads to an understanding that clearly departs from the conceptions that the 'philosophy of language' – but also linguistics – has most often favoured (I may provide some examples and clarify this point in the conclusion). It provides specific insight into two forms of the misunderstanding to which our reflections on language are very often linked. A first misunderstanding – these two misunderstandings are symmetrical, for reasons that stem from their dualistic rooting – is thinking that there exits a regime or modality of 'meaning' that is independent of and prior to language. A second misunderstanding is the one that leads to including the whole range of constitutive conditions of communication, our 'worldviews', and the potentialities of the imagination within language – thereby endowing it with all the virtues or all the faults, depending on one's perspective. Phenomenology, to take just one example, has fallen prey to the first misunderstanding and has even extensively cultivated it; in contrast, analytical philosophy of language has favoured the second one, and I need hardly say that the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy has contributed greatly to this. In reality, by attributing too much weight to either language or (sensory) experience, we ignore what they owe each other, as well as their rootedness in a shared natural and social foundation.

In what way, then, are we really dealing with misunderstandings, and in what way do the reflections found in Dewey's work help to dispel them? The core of the misunderstanding, in both cases, essentially lies in a mistaken appreciation of language, over-detached from the social interactions of which it is but one element or component. Philosophy, drawing on a Humboldtian and Romantic inspiration and

furthered by post-Saussurean linguistics, has elevated 'the' language to a quasi-Platonic position, at least insofar as language has been credited with the power to determine thought and the forms of organisation of the world, which has practically assured it the function of a 'foundation'. This view of language owes much to a set of hypostases, foremost of which is the fate reserved for 'meaning', regarded as a system effect, along with a propositionalism that was rightly challenged by authors such as Wittgenstein, and later by Austin and the ordinary language philosophers (I will return to this).[13] A characteristic effect of this was the sequestration of the dimension to which aesthetics, since Baumgarten, owed its philosophical dignity. The sensible, the body, in many respects appear to be epiphenomena whose significance in our lives derives solely from the power of language. The efforts to rehabilitate the sensible, which have been developed – if not nearly unleashed – in response to this linguistic imperialism, would not have been possible without language's increased power.[14]

One might be tempted to think of Dewey as one of the valiant combatants who have distinguished themselves in this endeavour. One of the particularities – and by no means a minor one – of the notion of experience, in Dewey's sense, is precisely that it integrates the whole part of the sensible into the variety of relations that we have with each other and with our environment (cognitive, aesthetic, sentimental and emotional, of course, practical and linguistic).[15] Yet, if the stage is neither the brain nor thought nor language, then this apparently cursed part cannot be dissociated from it. This means that there is no basis on which to guarantee one actor a position of principle or original ground over another. Darwinian continuism stands in opposition to such a hypothesis, just as in reality it stands in opposition to all the dualisms that this debate ultimately only serves to illustrate. In reality, the question of knowing whether there exists an *original* instance of meaning and, if so, which one, is just one expression of the misunderstandings that creep into our reasoning when we attribute the status of causes to effects and detach the benefits of our analyses, including the distinctions they mobilise or presuppose,

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13 The 'propositionalism' I have in mind is the view that language's functions are exhausted in the communication of propositional content. To some extent, this view – whether implicit or explicit – is bound up with a conception of meaning that Quine has characterised as a myth (cf. Quine 1962). The main source of this is the fact that the study of language, within the current that gave rise to analytic philosophy, focused on its logic or its role in logic and science.

14 This is one of the points of divergence between phenomenology and analytic philosophy.

15 Cf. Dewey 1981, as well as Dewey 1987.

from the conditions that enabled us to achieve them.[16] This type of displacement lies at the root of the dualisms that have contaminated our modes of thought, and of which 'language', as it has most often been conceived, is an expression.

In fact, contrary to what we might think, experience does not argue against 'the' language; rather, it invites us to understand that, in a certain sense – as Davidson provocatively put it, in a remark that was, to say the least, impactful – "there is no such thing as language" (2005b, 107), as philosophy or linguistic theories have elaborated the notion.[17] Assertions of this kind are not to be found in Dewey's work, but the reflections he devoted to this question seem to me to point entirely in the same direction.

As a result, one can understand why it is difficult to speak of a 'philosophy of language' in Dewey's case. Just as a Wittgensteinian would more readily speak of 'language games' to clearly emphasise that 'the' language is a fiction, albeit a convenient one,[18] so too would a consistent pragmatist philosopher more readily speak of language as an 'instrument' (*horribile dictu* for a very great number of linguists, first and foremost the 'structuralists'), which is always associated with other instruments in contexts of interaction, whose modalities of interlocution obviously form a part of them.[19]

Let us suppose, then, that these two misunderstandings have been dispelled, and see what the benefits are.

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16   Cf. Dewey 1981, Chapter I "Experience and philosophic method": "Philosophy, thinking at large, allows itself to be diverted into absurd search for an intellectual philosopher's stone of absolutely wholesale generalizations, thus isolating that which is permanent in a function and for a purpose, and converting it into the intrinsically eternal, conceived either (as Aristotle conceived it) as that which is the same at all times, or as that which is indifferent to time, out of time" (33). And again: "Three sources of large fallacies have been mentioned, each containing within itself many more sub-varieties than have been hinted at. The three are the complete separation of subject and object, (of *what* is experienced from *how* it is experienced); the exaggeration of the features of known objects at the expense of the qualities of objects of enjoyment and trouble, friendship and human association, art and industry; and the exclusive isolation of the results of various types of selective simplification which are undertaken for diverse unavowed purposes" (36).

17   Davidson 2005a, 107: "[T]here is no such thing as language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure that language-users acquire and then apply to cases".

18   Cf. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (2009) in which Wittgenstein compares language to a city.

19   This is Davidson's thesis in "The Social Aspect of Language". Davidson writes: "I have argued that sharing such a previously mastered ability was neither necessary nor sufficient for successful linguistic communication. I held (and hold) that the linguistic skills people typically bring to conversational occasions can and do differ considerably, but mutual understanding is achieved through the exercise of imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and an awareness of human interests and attitudes" (2005b, 110).

3 Language and Communication

The first noticeable consequence concerns communication. Language plays a role, probably a major role; it certainly contributes to shaping our thinking, our beliefs and our behaviour, since it is an integral part of them; but it is not a *necessary* and *sufficient* condition for communication (Davidson 2005b, 110). The conditions of communication are *social* – they are formed through interaction – and language itself is subordinate to them.[20] This distinction is important for understanding the nature of the learning processes that the use of language entails, and the very fact that our language is *learned*; it is also important in view of the variety of cases in which communication occurs without the aid of language, or at least of what has been learned as such; it is equally valuable for those who really want to understand the role of language in the history of changes, and even upheavals, that take place in common (or individual) forms of life, not to mention the evolution of linguistic practices themselves.

How could we learn to speak if we had to rely on the resources of language alone? We would come up against much the same kind of difficulty as we did with the 'origins' of language.[21] Undoubtedly, one must master the rudiments of a language to learn the meaning of a word on the basis of ostension, but learning these rudiments occurs in conditions of communication that involve 'situations' of interaction. As Quine suggested in *Word and Object*, with regard to our own language we are in a situation of radical translation[22] (or

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20 This is one of the benefits of Chapter V of *Experience and Nature*. It argues in favour of a thesis that goes hand in hand with Davidson's. Dewey writes: "Language is specifically a mode of interaction of at least two beings, a speaker and a hearer; it presupposes an organized group to which these creatures belong, and from whom they have acquired their habits of speech. It is therefore a relationship, not a particularity. This consideration alone condemns traditional nominalism. The meaning of signs moreover always includes something common as between persons and an object. When we attribute meaning to the speaker as *his* intent, we take for granted another person who is to share in the execution of the intent, and also something, independent of the persons concerned, through which the intent is to be realized. Persons and thing must alike serve as means in a common, shared consequence. This community of partaking is meaning" (1981, 145-6). Rorty is right to write in reference to Davidson and mentioning Dewey's name: "This Davidsonian way of looking at language lets us avoid hypostatizing Language [...]. For it lets us see language not as a *tertium quid* between Subject and Object [...], but as part of the behavior of human beings. On this view, the activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do in order to cope with their environment" (Rorty 1982, xviii).

21 In other words, against a similar circle, since one would already need a language to learn language.

22 Cf. Quine 2013. The 'radical translation' hypothesis assumes the lack of any data other than behavioural data. In a situation of 'radical translation', the only available concept of meaning is that of 'stimulus meaning'; this forms the basis on which the linguist can compile a dictionary. However, guarantees related to such a concept only

radical 'interpretation'), which implies that the mastery of a language is learned from communication situations that cannot be exclusively linguistic, for otherwise one would have to imagine the possibility of one-to-one correspondence systems between languages – something that both common sense and the indeterminacy of translation rule out.

What we learn are rules, but these rules are learned through use, and the correctness of their application is essentially verified through our understanding of them based on (public) criteria that cannot be linguistic either (Wittgenstein 2009);[23] otherwise, we would have to accept a sort of autistic conception of language, whereby we would learn to master a language by a sort of ingestion, apply its rules by uttering sentences that would strictly conform to them, and could only be sure of the correctness of these applications through what the rules of language allow us to establish – to say! I don't even know what that would lead to, but it is absurd. Language is intertwined with the situations in which individuals interact with one another in a multitude of ways – in relation to objects, events and a shared world – and that is why they can learn something from it, and above all, understand one another.

It is because things happen in this way that language is neither a closed universe nor a necessary and sufficient condition for communication; quite the contrary, since in a sense it is communication that is the condition of language. One might well ask what communication without language would be like. It is clear that most communication situations are situations of verbal exchange. In standard cases, it is knowledge of the *same* words and the *same* rules that provides speakers with the possibility of understanding each other.[24] That is what language is for. But this simple possibility presupposes a number of

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concern observational sentences. Therefore, the situation of 'radical translation' brings to light the 'indeterminacy of translation' and the 'inscrutability of reference'. "Understanding a sentence means understanding a language". In a situation of radical translation, indeed, no one can assign a unique reference to a word. Besides, no translation manual can claim exclusivity. Several translation manuals are possible for the same language, all of which are equally satisfactory with respect to the needs they are intended to meet. Furthermore, contrary to what one might be tempted to believe, such findings do not concern only the relations between distinct languages. As Quine says, "radical translation begins at home" (1969, 46).

23   One overlooked point is that the question of knowing whether a rule is being followed correctly is not merely resolved in a 'public' (as opposed to private) manner, but within a context that allows one to 'make the difference', in the pragmatist sense of the term. And this excludes that the assessment could take place solely in thought, or even solely in language, if that idea has any meaning at all.

24   Cf. Davidson 2005b. Dewey also writes: "The meaning of signs moreover always includes something common as between persons and an object. When we attribute meaning to the speaker as his intent, we take for granted another person who is to share in the execution of the intent, and also something, independent of the persons concerned,

other conditions, which are equally common, starting with a shared background; moreover, the fact that language plays the role of an instrument – no doubt essential in most cases – does not mean that it alone fulfils all functions. It may well be a necessary condition, but it is certainly not *sufficient*.[25]

It is not even certain that it fulfils the role of a necessary condition. One aspect of Dewey's aforementioned analysis of the relationship between language and experience – that is, the interactions associated with meanings – is that, no matter what scope we give it, language serves to reinforce something that is outlined as a process of communication without properly constituting it. Certain situations that we do not usually pay enough attention to are likely to shed light on this point. These are situations where understanding is not compromised, despite the application of the rule being faulty. Literature and poetry offer countless examples of this, as do humour, slips of the tongue, and witticisms more generally.[26] How is it that I understand or can understand sentences that clearly and sometimes radically transgress the rules of the languages we master and which we assume to be a condition for communication? It's simple. These transgressions simply show us that the condition does not lie in these rules, even though learning them most often fulfils these conditions. In reality, in such cases, the learning in question serves somewhat as a backdrop to the whole set of 'extra-linguistic' conditions involved in language and its rules, and these conditions make up for the gaps or transgressions to which language falls victim.

Despite what appears to stand in its way, what the effectiveness of communication suggests in these cases is that communication does

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through which the intent is to be realized. Persons and thing must alike serve as means in a common, shared consequence" (1981, 145-6).

25   As Dewey rightly suggests in the above-quoted passage, the factors involved in a communication situation go beyond the strictly linguistic components.

26   These are all deviations from the rules of language, especially when they are not the result of chance, error, or ignorance of the rules. See Davidson 2005b, 115: "Even during a conversation, each is apt to use words the other did not know before the conversation began, and so cannot belong to a practice he speakers share in detail; here I think particularly of names and of words new to the vocabulary of one or the other speaker. Then there are malapropisms which are nevertheless understood, slips of the tongue, and all the 'errors', as we think of them, that we would not normally commit ourselves [...]. These are often part of the practice of one speaker but not of another, but communication does not suffer [...]. We have no trouble following the conversation of a child who says 'He wented to the shop' and who generally forms the past tense according to a rule which is not part of the 'language'. Actual cases grow rarer as they grow more extreme, but more extreme cases certainly exist. People who speak dialects of what we call the same language may not at first be able to make anything of what the other says; after they learn to understand each other, each may continue to speak in his own way, just as I have learned to answer letters in German, Spanish, and French in English".

not depend on it, or at least not exclusively. This becomes even more convincing when we also recall that in language, there is not *just* language, but also a whole set of aspects or functions that play a role in communication without being exclusively cognitive or propositional in nature. Since Austin, ordinary language philosophies and pragmatic theories have provided decisive insights into this point. A sentence does not enter the process of communication bearing only its semantic (propositional) content; it also carries an illocutionary force, which notably contributes to the conditions under which it will be understood by a listener; context and situation also contribute, which ultimately means: 1) that the criterion of communication lies in *understanding*; 2) that understanding is not only a function (of the rules) of language – sometimes it may not even depend on them at all; 3) that language is therefore not the only factor in communication. As a result, it is perhaps easier to grasp why and how changes in language can occur, and how they can contribute to changes in ways or forms of life. This is an important point that enables us to revisit one of the points addressed at the beginning, namely the contrast between the philosophies stemming from the 'linguistic turn' and John Dewey's philosophy of experience, with greater clarity.

4 Language and Social Action

Richard Rorty is the main protagonist of this story. Rorty's view of language led him to make it a decisive element of his philosophy, in line with the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, from whom he also borrowed an essentially critical (therapeutic) view of philosophy. This inspiration distinguishes him from Dewey's thought and ambitions of construction and reconstruction. In this respect, Rorty criticises Dewey for pursuing quasi-metaphysical goals and losing his way in some of the impasses he was trying to neutralise (cf. Rorty 1982). It would take a long time to analyse the ins and outs of what distinguishes Rorty and Dewey (although the former claims to follow the latter); it is clear, however, that their belonging to distinct and distant philosophical horizons constitutes one of the elements. This is why I considered it appropriate to insist from the outset on the importance of the 'linguistic turn', of which Rorty is obviously an heir.

For Rorty, as for Wittgenstein (at least on the surface), philosophical questions originate in language and, therefore, in our 'grammatical confusions'. Like Dewey, Rorty believes that the dualisms running through the history of philosophy, much like our language (its grammar), need to be defused; but while Dewey believed that this depended on a multitude of factors that were not exclusively linguistic – far from it – Rorty often gives the impression that he believes it is a matter of 'vocabulary', i.e. of language (see, for example, Rorty

1989). This is true not only of philosophical questions, but also of the ills affecting the state of the world, which can hopefully be changed only by 'changing the vocabulary'.

Of course, Rorty was aware that this could not be attributed solely to the power of a magic wand, but his attitude nonetheless consisted in attributing to words (to language) a power that Dewey never granted them because he was much more attentive to the conditions, both natural and social, in which language exerts its effects. On the contrary, Dewey would probably not have disputed the powers of words over our ways of thinking and, consequently, our beliefs, habits, representations, and behaviour. The grammar of our language, in the Wittgensteinian sense, plays an undeniable role in this respect. The language we use to express ourselves is never innocent and always has an effect. Without looking far for examples, the popularity – in French – of verbs such as 'réguler', 'gérer', and 'négocier' or nouns such as 'opportunité', in a wide variety of contexts, including intimate matters, helps to shape our desires, our thinking, and our behaviour in a way that accords with the inherent aims of commerce, competition, and the individual adapted to them. *Homo liberalis* has his own language, and this language contributes to the ends and interests it serves. Would a change in 'vocabulary' be enough to change this state of affairs? Of course not. If this state of affairs evolves, if our ways of life move away from those favoured by the powers of money today, or if they abandon them, we will change our language. We may return to vocabularies that we have abandoned and allow more freedom to the imagination, but these changes will follow or accompany processes that will be played out simultaneously on a different social, economic, and political stages.

To me, these simple considerations seem to draw a distinction between some of the major shortcomings of the philosophy of language and a conception, like Dewey's, that gives way neither to the reification of language nor to its magic. Language is far too important for that (and perhaps too important to be left solely in the hands of specialists, since it is our common good).

Insofar as the position I have tried to make explicit is intended to characterise a pragmatist conception of language (which is substantially deflationary), one might be tempted to see it as comparable to the conceptions mentioned from time to time under the heading of 'pragmatics'.[27] A pragmatics of language in fact differs from the conceptions that I have undertaken to criticise in light of Dewey's suggestions by emphasising what makes language depend, in a

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[27] Centred on the notion of the *speech act*. Today, pragmatics encompasses a wide variety of works that are only distantly related to pragmatism. In any case, the philosophical sources are different. The starting point is the work of John Austin and Paul Grice.

communicative context, on a set of factors relating to utterance and the contexts of utterance. Insofar as pragmatism places language in light of conditions of that kind, we might be tempted to think that pragmatism is part of such an attempt. There are, however, important differences between 'pragmatics' and 'pragmatism'. Pragmatist philosophers are not specifically interested in the conditions that informs the uses of language, even though for them the consideration of *uses* takes precedence over that of language as a *system*.[28] But above all, as in Dewey's case, they are primarily concerned with highlighting the conditions and social components, in continuity with the processes rooted in the phenomena of life. This is a very different perspective.

The main target, in any case, is a view that comes up against the question of the role of language in communication, as if it were a persistent difficulty (how to explain that very substantial deviations from ordinary use can nevertheless not completely compromise communication?), and that of *change* (how to explain that what seems to be subordinate to rules can, once again, deviate from them and lead to new rules?).

Strangely enough, these two questions – to which, I believe, Dewey's philosophy provides an answer for reasons I have partly outlined – receive a very similar response from Donald Davidson, at least on what seems to me to be the essential point. For Davidson (as for Dewey), communication is one thing, language is another.[29] To master a language is to master a set of learned rules – to know how to apply them. The criteria for this are public (but they are not linguistic in nature; rather, the fact of following a rule is assessed in a context of action or related conditions). But the rules do not operate mechanically and communication (understanding) is not entirely subordinate to them. The conditions of communication are social, and while this simple consideration may not be enough to explain changes in language or society, it at least makes the possibility conceivable. If language and its rules were not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition for communication, we would find it impossible to think about it. If we add to this the fact that one of the major concerns of Dewey and his philosophy was to think about change and, above all, to preserve and think about the possibility of it, we can admit that the principles on which the philosophy and theories of language are based were unlikely to be found in his writings, so much do they go

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28 Language, says Dewey in *Experience and Nature*, is "the tool of tools" (Dewey 1981, 134, 146).

29 It is not that they have nothing to do with each other; rather, the former is not reducible to the latter: "[There are] clear reasons to doubt that language, if language is taken to imply shared ways of speaking, is essential [to human communication]" (Davidson 2005b, 15).

against the grain of what he never ceased to denounce in philosophy.[30] The study of language is the study of our verbal, linguistic practices; the rules that make it possible to describe regularities are not 'laws' in relation to which utterances (*la parole*) are instances or occurrences – so much so that it has been said that language speaks through us.[31] As Davidson wrote:

> Those who insist that shared practices are essential to meaning are half right: there must be an interacting group for meaning— even propositional thought, I would say—to emerge. Interaction of the needed sort demands that each individual perceives others as reacting to the shared environment much as he does; only then can teaching take place and appropriate expectations be aroused. It follows that meaning something requires that by and large one follows a practice of one's own, a practice that can be understood by others. But there is no fundamental reason why practices must be shared. (2005b, 125)

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30   The Parmenidean tendency within the metaphysical tradition is one of the main objects of Dewey's analysis in *Experience and Nature*. On this subject, Dewey writes, for example: "[T]he thoroughgoing way in which Aristotle defined, distinguished and classified rest and movement, the finished and the incomplete, the actual and potential, did more to fix tradition, *the* genteel tradition one is tempted to add, which identifies the fixed and regular with reality of Being and the changing and hazardous with deficiency of Being than ever was accomplished by those who took the shorter path of asserting that change is illusory" (1981, 48).

31   This idea has accompanied the adherence to structuralism in linguistics as much as in philosophy, in conjunction with challenges to the notion of the subject.

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Experience, Language, and the Qualitative
Developing Jean-Pierre Cometti's Legacy

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Abstract In this paper, I provide a sketch of Jean-Pierre Cometti's original interpretation of John Dewey's approach to language, emphasizing that it is grounded on a continuistic picture of language as a development of human experience, a naturalistic but non-naturalized conception of experience itself, and a strong focus on the primarily social structure of language and its connection to coordinated action. In the meantime, I suggest that Cometti's continuistic thesis should explicitly address the issue of the 'qualitative' in experience, which is a major theme in both James' and Dewey's works. I suggest integrating his view through a broadly bio-cultural approach to the qualitative dimensions of experience, as distinct from the widespread idea that it is subjective, as well as more primitive and intrinsically foreign to language.

Keywords Language. Qualitative experience. Biocultural approach. Pragmatism. John Dewey.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Tertium datur: *Dewey's Approach to Language as an Integral Part of Experience*. – 3 Qualitative Experience: From Problem to Resource.

1   Introduction

Jean-Pierre Cometti was a brilliant mind and was able to see with great clarity the potential problems posed by the shift from experience to language that the linguistic turn supported (Cometti 2010; Cometti 2024). The issue was particularly relevant to the transition from Classical Pragmatism to Neopragmatism, although it was not limited to these groups of scholars. It is widely known that, within Pragmatism, the decision to move into the field of language and to abandon the territories of experience was motivated by the need to avoid any foundational tendency that might still be present in the thought of James and Dewey, according to Rorty's provocative claim (Rorty 1982). More generally, Wittgenstein's philosophy, or rather a certain reading of it, was seen to lie at the origin of this momentous philosophical displacement that characterizes analytical philosophy compared to the empiricist tradition.

Cometti realized that this strategy could involve a serious risk: his refined knowledge of Wittgenstein's approach made him particularly attentive to the danger of assuming language as an autonomous field by isolating it from common experience and considering its functioning as separate and independent from the human world. This risk has been great in mainstream philosophy of language, as well as in most linguistics – both inspired by Saussure and by Chomsky, as has become increasingly clear from alternative points of view.[1]

As a scholar focused on a view of meaning as use and on the very idea of following a rule as arising and inseparable from a given practice, Cometti cultivated an approach to language as structurally embedded in the complex web of human coordinated actions, in ways of life and in a culturally shared world. It was on the basis of this important legacy that he was able to introduce Rorty's work in France, sensitive to its philosophical challenges on the one hand, and critically aware of its somewhat dangerous implications on the other. He also introduced Richard Shusterman's interesting critique of Rorty's position, which dealt precisely with the alleged opposition between language and experience – in his case mostly bodily experience (Shusterman 2000, particularly the chapters "Pragmatism and Interpretation" and "Beneath Interpretation").[2] Cometti could see the

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[1]   Within linguistics, the claim against treating language as an independent field of specific objects and procedures is increasingly criticized by supporters of the so-called "languaging approach" and "radical embodied ecolinguistics" such as Nigel Love, Stephen Cowley, and Didier Bottineau (cf. Steffensen, Cowley 2021). For an overview of the concept of languaging, see Raimondi 2019.

[2]   In addition to being a brilliant philosopher, Jean-Pierre Cometti was also an editor and a tireless translator, providing a crucial contribution to the introduction of Rorty's thought in France. He was the editor of the first French translation of Dewey's *Art as*

risks on both sides of the debate and avoid unintended problematic consequences. As he delved deeper into Dewey's thought, he could see from a privileged point of view that the Classical Pragmatists never underestimated the role of language in human life and cognition (cf. Dreon 2022, especially chapters 5 and 6). He understood that their approach to language could be useful for dismantling a certain sterile rigidity in mainstream philosophy of language.

In what follows, I will briefly reconstruct Cometti's view of Dewey's approach, which is based on a continuistic picture of language as a development of human experience, a naturalistic but non-naturalized conception of experience itself, and a strong focus on the primarily social structure of language and its connection to coordinated action (cf. § 1). In the second section, I will suggest that Cometti's continuistic thesis, which I endorse, should explicitly address the issue of the 'qualitative' in experience, which is a major theme in both James' and Dewey's works. I will consider the probable reasons for Jean-Pierre Cometti's marginalization of this issue in relation to Dewey, and suggest integrating his view through a broadly bio-cultural approach to the qualitative dimensions of experience, as distinct from the widespread idea that it is subjective, as well as more primitive and intrinsically foreign to language (§ 2).

2　Tertium datur: *Dewey's Approach to Language as an Integral Part of Experience*

In his essay *Le pragmatisme et la question du langage: les mots et le reste*, published in English translation in the current issue of this journal, Cometti's point is very clear from the title itself: the 'rest', namely the primarily social world in which human language develops, is what it makes it work, insofar as language consists in linguistic interactions within common life contexts and situations.[3] Certainly, language can be isolated and abstracted from communicative practices in a shared world for specific purposes, but this distinction must be seen as derived from human cooperative interactions and uses, rather than the other way round – as happens when pragmatics is seen as the application of a pre-defined syntax.

Commenting on *Experience and Nature*, Cometti claims that while John Dewey highlighted the human material and social environment

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Experience, published by Gallimard in 2010, a good 76 years after its first English edition. He certainly played an important role in introducing Classical Pragmatism and Neopragmatism into France.

3　In this section, references are to Cometti's *Le pragmatism et la question du langage*, unless otherwise indicated.

as the effective condition of speech, insofar as it represents the complex development of organic-environmental interactions, these connections have tended to be neglected or marginalized by the so-called 'linguistic turn'. In emphasizing the merits of Dewey's "ecological" approach to language, Cometti has two main polemical targets. On the one hand, he opposes the mainstream analytical philosophy of language, grounded in a hypostatization of meanings as pre-existing entities, independent of linguistic practices and interactions – the traditional picture of meanings as mental or psychic entities, or Platonic ideas *à la* Frege, stigmatized by Wittgenstein in the so-called "myth of the museum" (Perissinotto 2002, VII). A complementary assumption is a form of propositionalism, namely the idea that the function of language is essentially to convey propositional content.

On the other hand, Cometti criticized Rorty and the Neopragmatists, who, while focusing on linguistic practices, had denied a role for experience in order to avoid any alleged residue of foundationalism in Dewey's metaphysics (Rorty 1982). In this way, they inadvertently converged with the analytic philosophers of language, as well as with the Saussurian and Chomskyan linguists, in assuming that the conditions of communication are essentially intra-linguistic. In other words, they ended up by neglecting the structural connections of speech acts with the natural and naturally social environment characterizing the human form of life.

Cometti's claim is that it is the artificial contrast between experience on the one hand and language on the other that produces this kind of misunderstanding – Platonism or mentalism about meaning, propositionalism, and the idea of syntactic autonomy as opposed to semantics and pragmatics, the self-sufficiency of *la langue* as opposed to *la parole*.

Cometti shows the inadequacy of the dualistic paradigm that portrays the Classical Pragmatists as the supporters of experience in contrast to Neopragmatists's preference for language. This alleged opposition does not fit with Dewey's approach to language, which conceives of the meanings of words as arising from and within social practices and cooperative interactions, while at the same time adopting a continuistic view of verbal interactions as developing out of vital adaptive processes. This means that there is no 'language' *per se*, says Cometti, quoting Donald Davidson, namely there is no language apart from human practices: language does not intervene as a medium (or an obstacle) between an independent subject and an allegedly merely 'external' reality. In contrast, Dewey saw language as an integral part of human experience, assumed to take place primarily in the real world rather than in the allegedly merely internal theatre of the mind.

Dewey's primary focus on cooperative actions as the setting in which words are meaningful easily resonates with a scholar trained

in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: words are not labels, as Locke said, because meanings arise in social interactions and are inseparable from them – or better, they can be isolated afterwards, but it is a 'philosophical fallacy', in Dewey's words, to forget that they are the result of an analytical process serving a specific purpose, and to assume that meanings are independently defined before linguistic practices occur, and to regard the latter as a simple means of conveying the former. This improper operation is bound to produce 'philosophical cramps', in Wittgenstein's words. Cometti points out that for both Dewey and Wittgenstein there are no purely intralinguistic necessary and sufficient conditions for communication; language does not constitute a closed and separate universe that functions as a precondition for communication. On the contrary, the conditions of communication are social, and linguistic utterances are subordinated to social contexts and interactions, they are part of doing things together and acquire their meanings in the shared contexts of such practices. Hence, a number of non-cognitive and non-propositional elements play a role in communication, which appears to be a complex, multifaceted phenomenon: illocutionary force, prosody, aesthetic, and emotional aspects enter into the meaning of human interlocutions. Cometti, insofar as he was a scholar of Musil (Cometti 2001) and deeply interested in linguistic expression, was sensitive to these features of human language, although he did not develop them with specific reference to the legacy of Dewey and the Pragmatists, as I will argue in the next section.

A few more words must be added here on the complementary aspect of the claim that meaning is a function of linguistic interactions and social agency, namely the idea of a continuity of linguistic interactions with living beings' processes of adaptation to their environment. This naturalistic emphasis is clearly more explicit in Dewey's philosophy than in Wittgenstein's approach,[4] since the former essentially views humans as living beings whose lives are constitutively dependent on the environment in areas ranging from more basic organic functions such as breathing or digestion to more complex behaviours such as seeking companionship or caring for someone. Both the concept of experience itself and the concept of language are framed within a naturalistic, but not reductive, theoretical framework, and are consequently conceived as continuous with organic-environmental transactions that constitute living beings. From this point of view, language is seen as the peculiar, accidental, yet crucial development of organic interactions within the human world. This

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4 Of course, there are also naturalistic interpretations of Wittgenstein's philosophy (e.g. McGinn 2010; Moyal-Sharrock 2016; Macarthur 2018), but my point here is that Dewey undeniably adopted a stance in favour of naturalism.

result was ultimately derived from the influence of Darwin, which characterized the pragmatist movement from the outset (cf. Pearce 2020), and in particular from a progressive, anti-deterministic reading of his theory provided by Dewey, as Jean-Pierre Cometti argues in another unpublished manuscript from 2015, entitled *Le naturalisme pragmatiste*. This was originally the topic of a course he delivered in Venice, Ca' Foscari, where he had been invited as a visiting professor in 2012 by his colleague and friend Luigi Perissinotto.[5] In this essay, Cometti emphasizes the many consequences that Dewey (cf. Dewey 2007) and the other Classical Pragmatists draw from Darwin's arguments against the previously dominant idea of the fixity of species: the clear renunciation of a view of evolutionary development as conforming to a teleological plan and, consequently, the recognition of the role of chance and random selection, as well as the refutation of the very idea of searching for an eternal or a priori cause or principle beyond what is happening here and now. Against this background, the Pragmatists reorient the concept of experience along with the concept of behaviour. On the one hand, Cometti reads Dewey's early essay on the *Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology* as a criticism of the empiricist view of behaviour in mechanical, physicist terms, namely as a causally linear association of purely perceptive stimuli and motor responses. In contrast, Dewey developed an organic model of behaviour and was able to naturalize the concept of experience by grounding it in vital processes, namely the structural interactions between organisms and their environment, through which life is constituted and contributes to the dynamic transformation of the environment from within. In this way, Dewey even got rid of the solipsistic view of experience that dominated phenomenology and later on most analytic philosophy: experience is not the succession of *Erlebnisse* or mental states in the mind of the subject – a noxious view that produced the artificial philosophical problem of the medium connecting subjective experience with external reality.[6] Dewey instead adopted an idea of experience as residing in what happens in the world out there, in the course of the countless organic-environmental exchanges that make up life. From this point of view, language itself takes on a naturalistic character. It appears as a peculiar, random but crucial development of organic-environmental interactions, insofar as they occur within a naturally social environment. It is part of the adaptive processes, Cometti claims, that operate under the conditions of shared

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5 I was fortunate enough to attend Jean-Pierre Cometti's lectures, and I still remember some of the exchanges I had with him after the class, which were particularly significant for me and my reading of Pragmatism.

6 See Pierre Steiner's extensive work on the use of intentionality for this purpose (Steiner 2022).

experience. In other words, language is primarily a function of life and an active tool for interacting in a highly social environment. Consequently, meanings arise out of the communicative context of actions and reactions through which humans do things together, literally by making something common (Dewey 1989).[7]

Jean-Pierre Cometti stressed that for Dewey, meaning and language are primarily social in nature, shaping and being shaped by peculiarly human ways of living and acting. He also pointed out the connection between the bodily, sensorimotor dimension of action and linguistic interaction.[8] However, in his reflections on the pragmatist view of language, he tended to marginalize the qualitative, aesthetic, or affective dimension of experience, which is, on the contrary, a crucial issue in the Classic Pragmatists' conception of experience – especially James' and Dewey's – and, as I will argue in the next section, is particularly important for overcoming the alleged divide between experience and language.

3 Qualitative Experience: From Problem to Resource

Jean-Pierre Cometti dealt extensively with the qualitative dimensions of language, with particular reference to the topic of expression and the expressiveness of words in Musil and Wittgenstein (see Steiner in this issue). However, his references to the qualitative or aesthetic characterization of experience among the Pragmatists are limited, as already indicated. Yet, the Classical Pragmatists' emphasis on qualitative experience can hardly be underestimated. This is a recurrent claim in William James' writing: in *The Principles of Psychology*, he famously called for the "reinstatement of the vague" to its proper place in philosophy (James 1981, 246), and referred to the "aesthetic sphere of the mind" (James 1884, 188), as the dimension neglected by philosophers and psychologists, who mostly concentrated on its cognitive features; in his *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, he openly argued for the place of "affectional facts" in experience (James 1976, Ch. 5); and throughout his work he emphasized the crucial role of feelings, interests, and temperament as selective principles orienting human

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[7] Although Cometti does not refer to the debate on scientific naturalism and the naturalizing trend in analytic philosophy, his interpretation makes it very clear that Dewey's naturalism is far from such an approach. Dewey described his own stance as cultural naturalism, emphasizing the continuity between nature and culture as well as the emergent character of cultural features and their feedback effects on earlier forms of organic-environmental interactions (Dewey 1991). On this point, see Margolis 2002; Godfrey-Smith 2014; Dreon 2019; Bernstein 2020.

[8] On this issue, see the recent work by Di Paolo, Cuffari, De Jaegher 2018 in the field of enactivist research.

beings' experience of the surrounding environment (cf. Bordogna 2001). Dewey's work is also characterized by a strong commitment to a complex view of experience, including its primarily qualitative, affective, or aesthetic features. Limiting the focus here to *Experience and Nature* – Dewey's masterpiece, on which Cometti himself chose to concentrate in the paper, published in English translation in this issue of the journal – the emphasis on qualitative or primary experience and its 'esthetic' qualities is impressive. As is well known, Dewey endorsed an instrumental view of cognition, which took into account the crucial role of inquiry. In his view, it represents the reflective phase in experience, through which people analyse the various features that make up raw experience as a whole and find a solution when situations become problematic and they do not know what to do or how to behave. In other words, reflective experience begins with the raw material of experience itself and returns to it to test it and predict things, to regulate it for practical purposes, and to enrich and extend its meanings. Nevertheless, Pragmatism is far from exhausting itself in a form of instrumentalism. The other side of the instrumental view of cognition is that it does not cover the complex variety of experience: things are perceived primarily because they have an immediate effect on the life of the organism; first of all, they are experienced qualitatively – they are tender, colourful, uncomfortable, and irritating – they are suffered or enjoyed, immediately blamed or praised, or simply tolerated. This reference to feeling and being felt as affecting one's life, rather than knowing in the sense of inquiring – feeling pleasures, pains, and the wide variety of possibilities in between them – explains Dewey's use of the word 'esthetic' to characterize qualitative experience.[9] At the same time, 'quality' does not refer to properties that belong either to objects or to the subject, but to the kind of actual interaction that takes place between a living being and its environment. In sum, Dewey and James called for explicit philosophical attention to the human experience of things as part of real situations which, in their entirety, include the living beings who are having the experience and, consequently, are to a greater or smaller degree at stake in them. But when situations become indeterminate and past habits of interaction no longer work, immediate enjoyment or suffering is postponed and more reflective phases of experience open up, in which objects are isolated from the whole situation, refined, and reorganized for practical purposes.

So, what are the reasons for Jean-Pierre Cometti's marginalization of the Deweyan issue of qualitative experience, which, from his

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[9] Note that Dewey adopted the word 'esthetic' rather than 'aesthetic' in both Dewey 1981 and Dewey 1989.

point of view, constitutes both the background to the processes of inquiry and their final outcome?

Certainly, Cometti was very wary of the risks posed by a claim in favour of immediate experience – an assumption that could provide a strong argument for Rorty's interpretation of Dewey's *Experience and Nature* as a metaphysical, i.e. still foundational, attempt. Cometti feared a slide into a kind of phenomenological perspective,: although Dewey's conception of qualitative experience is larger than bodily experience, Cometti makes this point explicit in his essay on pragmatic naturalism, when he warns that the emphasis on somatic experience could represent the umpteenth version of the myth of direct access to "the (alleged) original". In considering this threat, Cometti refers explicitly to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the flesh, as well as to positions à la Foucault that revolve around the idea of an allegedly primary (but inevitably lost) corporeal experience, tragically confiscated by language and its use at the service of political power. In these references – which oversimplify both Merleau-Ponty's and Foucault's views, but without misinterpreting their spirit – another threat emerges, namely the idea that the original is ineffable, that it is foreign or at least prior to language. The risk, then, is to interpret the Deweyan distinction between qualitative experience and reflective experience as a distinction between perception and language or between experience *tout court* and language (cf. Cometti 2002).

Although there have been readings of Dewey's primary experience as pre-linguistic and alien to language (Johnson 2007; Henning 2022), I suggest that his philosophy offers a different way out.[10] The point is to show that language is not divorced from the qualitative, from what he calls immediate or primary experience; on the contrary, linguistic interactions involve important qualitative features, while, conversely, human qualitative experience occurs within an enlanguaged environment, shaped by and shared through broadly linguistic practices. To avoid this last version of the dualistic opposition between experience and language, some important resources can be drawn from the Classic Pragmatists' philosophical contributions.

Firstly, Dewey did not adopt a mystical or dogmatic conception of the qualitative in experience, as something more original than reason and language, and fundamentally alien to them. Rather, he assumed a broadly biological view of the qualitative features of experience, along the line already traced by William James, I believe, and essentially derived from the influence of Darwin's theory. Humans

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[10]   Of course, the question of interpretation is very complex. Among other things, Dewey himself uses the term "ineffable" in one circumstance to qualify primary experience, but at the same time he excludes that this expression could be read as having "mystical" implications (Dewey 1981, 74-5). For a deflationary interpretation within a more detailed account of the issue, see Dreon 2014.

feel the situations in which they are embedded primarily as friendly, dangerous, comfortable, welcoming, harmful or boring, because they are not independent subjects in a void, but living beings whose lives depend on their interactions with their environment at a variety of levels, from mere survival to flourishing. Hence, the natural and naturally social environment in which and through which human beings constitute themselves always has a stronger or weaker impact on them, is immediately felt to have an impact on their lives, and is immediately praised or blamed as such (Dreon 2022). Of course, the immediate enjoyment or suffering of the surroundings can be deferred and analytically reconsidered if something does not work in habitual behaviour and interactions. But the results of a reflective engagement with a primarily holistic experience – knowledge that is intended as a sediment of shared meanings, beliefs, and habits of response, rather than as an ongoing process – will become part of the experience as it is directly enjoyed or suffered, contributing to its enrichment or to impoverishing it by reaffirming hardened meanings and dysfunctional habits.

Secondly, in the case of human animals, it is crucial to acknowledge that organic sensibility does not take place in a silent world, but within a network of broadly linguistic practices and cooperative interactions that are already in place when individuals begin to perceive the world around them, and to which they are entrained from the very beginning. Following Dewey's insight that behaviour is not only a function of the individual organism, but also of the environment (Dewey 1988), it should be concluded that being embedded in a world of enlanguaged, enculturated practices has crucial consequences for human sensibility. Hence, it could be said that organic sensibility has been transformed by the advent of speech (Lorimer 1929), that it has been fortuitously but irreversibly reshaped by human beings' peculiar ecology (Dreon 2022).

Moreover, the Classical Pragmatists, especially George Mead, supported a view of verbal communication as a development of affective conversations of gestures, in which emotions function as regulative principles for coordinating one's own conduct with the interlocutor's actions. From this point of view, language appears to be continuous with aesthetic-emotional communication and still largely operates through sensitive, aesthetic, affective, or qualitative features. This is not to revive the traditional idea that ordinary speech, as well as poetry at a more refined level, expresses emotions in the sense of conveying allegedly purely pre-linguistic states of mind. Rather, the emotional tone of a conversation remains central to the regulation of conduct and mutual interactions, even when syntactic and semantic registers become dominant, or when vocabulary becomes highly sophisticated.

Ultimately, Dewey's distinction between primarily qualitative and reflective experience is dynamic and functional, which is to say that it cannot be taken as defined once and for all (Johnson, Shulkin 2023). On the contrary, what we have here are different phases in the continuum of experience and, as noted above, the results of past inquiries are incorporated into new kinds of interactions that can be suffered or enjoyed in turn. More precisely, I would argue that the distinction should not be interpreted as linear and hierarchical – namely, by considering qualitative experience as more fundamental than reflection and cognition. In contrast, Dewey and the Pragmatists (particularly Mead and Frank Lorimer) saw that the emergence of language produced changes in the continuum of life and a reorganization of organic sensibility in a highly socialized and enculturated environment. Hence, qualitative and more reflective phases of experience appear to be mutually conditioned, and their relations appear to be circular.

More importantly, for the issue at stake in this paper, the distinction between qualitative experience and inquiry should not be seen as equivalent to the alleged opposition between experience and language, but rather concerns different phases of human enlanguaged experience, sometimes overwhelming, as in the case of an intense quarrel with one's partner, or more focused on analytical details, as in the case of having to translate a Latin text. In both cases, there is a kind of dynamic oscillation and mutual influence between the two registers, which contribute in different ways to making the interaction meaningful.

To conclude with a final claim, Cometti was right to say that Dewey did not succumb to the reification of language and its magic. To his brilliant insight I add that Dewey did not even succumb to a dogmatic, ineffable conception of the qualitative in experience. Jean-Pierre Cometti's naturalistic reading of Dewey and the Pragmatists should be recovered and further developed to provide a richer picture of human experience and a more complex view of human language.

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Jean-Pierre Cometti: A Wittgensteinian Philosopher

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Abstract The purpose of this text is to clarify and explain the sense in which Jean-Pierre Cometti can be defined as a Wittgensteinian philosopher. In particular, it emphasises how Cometti's interest in Wittgenstein's thought was never purely exegetical. On the contrary, Cometti sought in Wittgenstein stimuli for a philosophy that he always understood, following in Wittgenstein's footsteps, as a work of clarification. However, it also emphasises how, thanks above all to the Wittgensteinian spirit that animates it, Cometti's philosophy was, on the one hand, capable of critically engaging, without dogmatism, with the philosophy of his time, from the thought of Heidegger and his followers to Derrida's deconstructionism, and from analytical philosophy to the hermeneutic tradition; on the other hand, to incorporate into his thinking suggestions and attitudes from American pragmatism.

Keywords Wittgenstein. Philosophical methods. Language. Philosophy of psychology. Metaphysics.

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1. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein was Jean-Pierre Cometti's philosopher. He dedicated several books and many essays to Wittgenstein, and he also translated many of his works into French to promote their dissemination in France – a country that had shown some resistance, so to speak, to the reception of Wittgenstein's thought.[1] Of course, Cometti was not only a scholar, interpreter and translator of Wittgenstein. Suffice it to mention his works on Robert Musil (see, for example, Cometti 1997 and Cometti 2001), on aesthetics and the philosophy of art (see, for example, Cometti 2012 and Cometti 2016a), or his very important works on pragmatism and John Dewey's thought (see, among many others, Cometti 2010 and Cometti 2016b). But it was to Wittgenstein that Cometti always returned, and it was with Wittgenstein's philosophy that he consistently identified. From this point of view, it may be interesting to note that one of the most important and comprehensive books Cometti devoted to Wittgenstein (Cometti 1996) is not entitled something like *La Philosophie de Wittgenstein*, but – much more significantly – *Philosopher avec Wittgenstein*, i.e. philosophising with Wittgenstein.

2. In any case, it was as a scholar of Wittgenstein that I first encountered Cometti, and it is his philologically accurate and theoretically engaging works on Wittgenstein that I know best and have drawn inspiration from more than once in my own work. For this reason, I will use the few pages at my disposal to make some general observations on how Cometti has interpreted Wittgenstein and engaged with his thought.

I would begin by observing that Cometti's Wittgenstein is not the Wittgenstein of many analytic philosophers (he is not, for example, Saul Kripke's Wittgenstein), but neither is he the Wittgenstein who was discovered at a certain point and partly appropriated by the hermeneutic-philosophical tradition or by so-called 'post-structuralist' thinkers. By this, I do not simply mean to suggest that, according to Cometti, Wittgenstein cannot be confined to any single philosophical tradition or movement, as if the question of what kind of philosopher Wittgenstein was could only be answered, as many Wittgensteinian gladly do, by saying that Wittgenstein is Wittgenstein. After all, even if, as Cometti seems to concede, there is much in Wittgenstein with which an analytic philosopher can identify and see themselves reflected, this does not mean that, for example, a comparison between Wittgenstein and Derrida – one capable of highlighting similarities and differences between "Wittgensteinian therapy" and "Derridian

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[1] For an analysis of the difficulty French philosophy has encountered in accepting Wittgenstein's ideas, see, for example, Bouveresse 1998, 119-41. This is a question, moreover, to which Bouveresse returned more than once in his writings.

deconstruction" – is absurd and completely unfeasible, as most an-
alytical philosophers seem to think (see Cometti 1994, 215-27). We
could put it that way. However, if we take seriously Wittgenstein's
assertion that a philosopher is someone who "is not a citizen of any
community of ideas (*Denkgemeinde*)" (Wittgenstein 2007, § 455), as
Cometti seems to do, what comes to the fore is not the question of
what philosophical assumptions and theses we share with Wittgen-
stein (or which he shares with us), but whether we can or want to phi-
losophise with Wittgenstein – that is, whether we can or want to en-
gage in that work of clarification which, according to Wittgenstein,
is the very purpose of (his) philosophy or, rather, of (his) philosophis-
ing (see, for example, Wittgenstein 1974, prop. 4.112 and Wittgen-
stein 2009, I: § 130).

Of course, one might object that this emphasis on philosophy as
a means of clarification is not at all neutral, nor free of presupposi-
tions. I believe, however, that Wittgenstein (and Cometti) would read-
ily have admitted this. It is true that certain statements by Wittgen-
stein on philosophy, and not only those in the *Tractatus*, sound very
peremptory and may lead us to think that, in order to philosophise
with Wittgenstein, one must first of all share his theses on philoso-
phy and his metaphilosophy – or, to use Williamson's phrase (William-
son 2023), his philosophy of philosophy. But if we take a closer look at
what he tells us in his various *Prefaces*, we may recognise that Witt-
genstein's intended interlocutor is someone who is driven to philos-
ophise by the same or similar anxieties that motivate Wittgenstein.

3. Indeed, in many of his works on Wittgenstein, Cometti begins by
asking himself, "[i]n what sense was Wittgenstein a philosopher [...]
[a]nd what did philosophising mean to him?" (Cometti 1996, 24).[2]
However, according to Cometti, these questions are not the questions
that a scholar seeking to better understand Wittgenstein would ask
themselves, but rather questions that must be asked by those who
seek "in his work, a reasonable way out of the impasses in which we
[contemporary philosophers] find ourselves" (Cometti 1996, 25). This
once again shows that Cometti's reading of Wittgenstein is motivat-
ed not by historical-philosophical considerations alone, but by broad-
er philosophical concerns. In short, we could say that the questions
Cometti asks about Wittgenstein – as we have just seen – are also the
questions he asks himself: what kind of philosopher am I? Or rather,
what kind of philosopher would I like to be, and could I be? It is also
worth noting that Cometti never asks these questions in general or
abstract terms, as if he believed that philosophy has an essential (or

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[2] The passages from Cometti quoted here have been translated from the French by
the Author.

timeless), but always frames them in relation to what he considers to be the state or condition of philosophy in his (and our) time. One can only be a philosopher by responding to one's own time – though this does not imply, following a historicist view that Cometti, regarded as alien to Wittgenstein[3] – that philosophy is or must be an expression of its time (whether in the form of celebration or rejection). In any case, Wittgenstein was certain that philosophical problems were neither eternal nor universal. As Cometti writes, "in Wittgenstein's view, philosophical problems were the expression of conditions that were, all things considered, contingent" (Cometti 1996, 29). In short, we can distinguish Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy "in the clearest possible way from conceptions that attribute to philosophical problems and to philosophy itself a meaning that lies at the heart of an original and universal human experience" (Cometti 1996, 28). As Cometti has clearly demonstrated on several occasions, it is precisely this lack of philosophical emphasis that distinguishes Wittgenstein from many other philosophers, such as Heidegger, and explains why many philosophers, both analytic and otherwise, distrust his philosophy or philosophy of philosophy (see Cometti 1996, 28).

4. Of course, as Cometti often points out, Wittgenstein acknowledges that some philosophical problems are, if not eternal, then certainly long-lived. However, this does not signify the universal importance of philosophy, but rather indicates "the persistence of the severity of a malaise that philosophy alone could not resolve", as these are problems that arise from language, but do not "reflect discomforts that are also linked to ways of life" (Cometti 1996, 28-9). Cometti is well aware that many philosophers might react with annoyance and incredulity to this attitude (and indeed, many have). Is not philosophy something much more essential and profound than this? Does it not seek to answer the crucial questions about what exists, who we are, what we can know and how we should live? Wittgenstein's answer, as Cometti understands it, seems to be twofold. On the one hand, he seems to be addressing not philosophers in general, but rather those who, like him, believe that philosophical problems are not scientific problems; they are not the kind of problems that science seeks to answer by formulating hypotheses and developing theories. It is not ignorance or lack of knowledge that motivates these philosophers, but an anxiety that knowledge alone cannot erase. On the other hand, and in a similar spirit, Wittgenstein never claims that his philosophy is the only authentic way of philosophising. Instead, he seems to suggest that his approach is one way of philosophising, connected in various

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3 According to Cometti, Wittgenstein's appreciation of Spengler is not sufficient grounds for attributing any historicist inclination to him (see Cometti 1996, 40).

ways – through both similarities and differences – to what has been called 'philosophy' throughout the centuries. Cometti writes:

> Nothing authorises us to think that Wittgenstein meant by philosophy something that could be linked to a common *essence*. Nor does anything oblige us, on the contrary, to subject the use of this word to this condition. What we classify under this designation are related practices and discourses […]. This is why, to a certain extent, even if Wittgenstein believed that his way of philosophising could be linked to what we have called 'philosophy' in our tradition based on family resemblances, he was in no way obliged to regard the nature of philosophical problems, as he conceived them in the light of the type of description he endeavoured to give them, as having an ahistorical or universal meaning, capable of extending to everything we are likely to call 'philosophy', whether in the past or in any imaginable future. (Cometti 1996, 33-4)

At the end of the *Preface* to *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009, 4), Wittgenstein takes pains to remind us that the time in which his work is being published – and in which he addresses its readers – is marked by "poverty" and "darkness". This remark should be taken seriously, not merely as something incidental. In this sense, philosophy belongs to its own time even when, as seems to have been the case with Wittgenstein, that time is perceived as "alien and uncongenial" (Wittgenstein 1998, 8). Obviously, we must ask ourselves what time Wittgenstein is referring to here or, to put it slightly differently, what Wittgenstein's time was. It is sufficient to note here that if we compare the *Preface* to *Philosophical Investigations* dated "January 1945" with the *Sketch for a Foreword* of 1929, we must conclude that this time is the period when what Wittgenstein calls "the progressive civilization of Europe and America" (Wittgenstein 1998, 10) imposed itself in all areas and fields. As Cometti has repeatedly pointed out, this does not mean that Wittgenstein philosophises with his gaze (nostalgically) turned to the past or that he expects, like Heidegger, "an other beginning" (Heidegger 1989, 504). Significantly, after declaring the spirit of his book to be different, alien and uncongenial to that of "the prevailing European and American civilization", he adds that even if its aims are different from those of that civilization, "this civilization is perhaps an environment necessary for this spirit" (Wittgenstein 1998, 8-10).[4]

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[4] It may be interesting to recall a long conversation I had with Cometti and Brian McGuinness in Venice in 2013. We discussed whether, in the *Preface* to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein also intended to refer to the historical and political conditions (Nazism, the Second World War, etc.) of the years in which he was writing the book. It should be noted that the *Preface* is dated "January 1945". McGuinness

5. At this point, we could say that one of the things Cometti has no doubts about is that philosophising with Wittgenstein means taking seriously – and striving to fully share – his refusal "to consider philosophy as knowledge" (Cometti 1996, 10). This means not only refusing to regard philosophy as a science in the sense as physics, for example, but also, and above all, refusing to consider it a *super*-science or *meta*-physics. In any case, it must be acknowledged that nothing could be further from Wittgenstein's philosophical spirit than the idea that philosophy is about making "discoveries", such as the discovery that behind language there are language games "that could be used to outline the contours of an *essence* or a *foundation*" (Cometti 1996, 11). As Cometti writes, "Wittgenstein did not believe that it was the task of philosophy to penetrate the shell of things, or of words, in order to access a hidden *truth* or *meaning* that was not immediately available" (Cometti 1996, 3). The concept of the language game, for example, is not part of a (philosophical or scientific) theory of language, but is a tool belonging to the work of philosophical clarification; it arises from a comparison between "the use and rules of language" and "the practice of games such as chess" (Cometti 1996, 10-11) and, in turn, allows new comparisons to be made. In this sense, it can be said that for Wittgenstein, philosophical activity is "an activity that does not claim to establish anything beyond what constitutes it as an *activity* and what it aims, as such, to bring to light". For this reason, it can also be said that there is a sense in which "Wittgensteinian inventions [such as the concept of linguistic game] are not destined to survive beyond the philosophical problems they make it possible to address" (Cometti 1996, 12).

Cometti is well aware – and the French philosophical (and intellectual) environment in which he lived could only have heightened this awareness – that many philosophers are reluctant to give up the idea that the philosopher has a "privileged point of view" and that philosophy possesses "special powers" (Cometti 1996, 35). We are faced with what Cometti calls "philosophical vanity" (Cometti 1996, 39), which he, along with Wittgenstein, considers to be one of philosophers' cardinal sins. There are two sides or aspects of this vanity that particularly interest Cometti. On the one hand, there is the idea that philosophy somehow holds the "secret" (see Cometti 1996, 3) of being – in the form, for example, of a philosophy of history capable of discerning the meaning and laws or principles of historical development. On the other hand, there is the related idea that philosophy determines, either positively or negatively, what the world (and we along with it) is, can be or fails to be. This is what Cometti

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categorically ruled out this being Wittgenstein's intention, arguing that his was, a more "epochal" reference, so to speak. Cometti and I were less peremptory on this point.

calls "intellectualist sophism" (Cometti 1996, 40), a tendency not only of classical metaphysics but also of many thinkers (among others, Derrida, Vattimo and Lyotard) who, in various ways, continue to celebrate the death of metaphysics (see Cometti 1996, 39-41). From this point of view, Cometti approvingly quotes a passage in which Hilary Putnam criticises Derrida and the deconstructionists, observing that "deconstructionists are right in claiming that a certain metaphysical tradition is bankrupt; but to identify that metaphysical tradition with our lives and our language is to give metaphysics an altogether exaggerated importance" (Putnam 1992, 124; see Cometti 1996, 40). Reasoning in this way, as Putnam immediately points out, means seeing metaphysics as "the *basis* of our entire culture, the pedestal on which it all rested; if the pedestal has broken, the entire culture must have collapsed – indeed, our whole language must lie in ruins" (Putnam 1992, 125). In the same spirit, Cometti directs many critical, ironic observations at all those philosophers "who pretend to celebrate the death of metaphysics, yet clearly conceive of no alternative but to prolong the celebration or renounce […] what only metaphysics allowed them to establish" (Cometti 1996, 41). In this quote, Cometti effectively employs – with reference to certain 'post-modern' philosophical trends – what Wittgenstein repeatedly sought to make us understand about his philosophy. We might say that, for Wittgenstein, there is nothing that his philosophical work forces us to renounce; on the contrary, Wittgenstein's concern is that we manage to ask ourselves why it seems to us that there is something great and important that we would be forced to renounce if we were to demolish the 'buildings' of metaphysics. This is exactly what is explained to us in § 118 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> Where does this investigation get its importance from, given that it seems only to destroy everything interesting: that is, all that is great and important? (As it were, all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) But what we are destroying are only houses of cards (*Luftgebäude*), and we are cleaning up the ground of language on which they stood. (Wittgenstein 2009, I: § 118)

6. Of course, we must not forget that the philosophical era in which Cometti worked for most of his life is now largely over or in decline. Today, on the one hand, we are witnessing a resurgence – variously motivated and defended – of metaphysics and more or less extreme forms of metaphysical realism; on the other hand, we are seeing the spread in philosophy of a form of naturalism that seems antithetical to Wittgenstein's desire to keep the philosophical work of clarification distinct from the hypotheses, theories, and explanations of science. Cometti has engaged with these trends as they have appeared or

reappeared in philosophy, especially in relation to the philosophy of mind and what has been called the 'cognitive turn' (Cometti 2004, 9).

There is no space here to explore this very important aspect of Cometti's work in depth. However, it is worth mentioning at least one of the convictions that guide his considerations on Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology. Cometti believes that Wittgenstein's philosophical work of clarification can be extended to the philosophy of mind that developed after Wittgenstein, especially following the emergence of cognitive science and then neuroscience – fields that Wittgenstein obviously could not have known. So while it is true that the psychology criticised by Wittgenstein for its confusions (behaviourism, introspectionism, etc.) is largely outdated and no longer in vogue, it is also true that Wittgenstein's philosophical work (his approach to psychological concepts) can (and must) be tested against the new paths and pursuits that have characterised psychology since the early 1960s. For example, Cometti seems to think that psychology and cognitive science could benefit from two aspects of Wittgenstein's work that are often interpreted as criticisms of psychology as such. On the one hand, there is the distinction between causes and reasons, which seems so important to Wittgenstein that some scholars (though not Cometti) have taken it not merely as a heuristic or descriptive distinction, but as a genuine dichotomy (Cometti 2004, 201-8). On the other hand, the reference is to Wittgenstein's constant critique of introspectionism. As Cometti observes, Wittgenstein could teach today's psychology and philosophy of mind that, in order to investigate the mind, "it is advisable to appeal to means clearly dissociated from the models of interiority" that have long prevailed in philosophy and psychology (Cometti 2004, 200). From this point of view, as Cometti suggests, it would be useful to consider the way in which Wittgenstein criticises every attempt to overcome the divide between the Inner and the Outer by simply eliminating one or the other – i.e., the Inner, as classical behaviourism does, or the Outer, as mentalism, or what Cometti calls "introspectionism", does. But, as is clear to Wittgenstein (and Cometti with him), in order to overcome the divide between the Inner and the Outer, it is not enough to delete one of the two terms, since the deleted term continues to shape how the preserved term is understood (see Cometti 2004, 114-16).

As any attentive reader will see, Cometti does not underestimate the limitations and ambiguities of Wittgenstein's remarks on psychology,[5] but nevertheless believes – and, for what it is worth, I

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5 For example, Wittgenstein makes statements such as the following, which Cometti (2004, 211) does not hesitate to describe as "totally surprising": "It is thus perfectly possible that certain psychological phenomena *cannot* be investigated physiologically, because physiologically nothing corresponds to them" (Wittgenstein 2007, § 609). This is clearly such a "radical" observation that one may wonder what kind of philosophy

agree with him – that psychology would have much to lose by ignoring Wittgenstein's work on psychological concepts. Similarly, Wittgensteinian philosophers would be mistaken to assume that Wittgenstein's criticism of the conceptual confusions of psychology can be applied directly, without changes or rethinking, to the field psychology and cognitive science as they have developed in the decades since his death.

7. As Cometti often points out, Wittgenstein's philosophy, as set out in both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, is closely linked to the importance he assigns to language. In short, Wittgenstein fully belongs to the so-called 'linguistic turn'. This does not mean that Wittgenstein was or considered himself a philosopher of language, but rather that, for him, philosophy had to do with language because it is precisely from language that those fundamental confusions arise with which all of philosophy is riddled (see Wittgenstein 1974, prop. 3.324). Now, one of the things that Cometti never fails to emphasise is that, for Wittgenstein, at least in the *Investigations* and other texts from the same period, language can never be considered in isolation: to say 'language' is always to say 'uses' (in the sense of common or social practices), and to say 'uses' in this sense is to say 'ways or forms of life'.[6] This means that it is completely illusory to hope to free oneself from philosophical confusion by coming to terms with language once and for all – even if, as Cometti seems to believe, this was the illusion of the *Tractatus* – because there is no language with which to come to terms once and for all. Thinking differently, i.e. thinking like the *Tractatus* if Cometti is right, would mean, despite all statements to the contrary, claiming a privileged perspective and 'object' for philosophy (see Cometti 1996, 33). To make this point clear, Cometti refers to a passage in the *Big Typescript* (Wittgenstein 2013, 305) in which Wittgenstein states that "[a]ll that philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not creating a new one" – not even, Cometti adds (1996, 61), what for some has been, or still is, the idol of Language (written with a capital L).[7] We could also say that what Cometti finds particularly interesting in Wittgenstein – and what he sees as a genuine, non-extrinsic connection to the pragmatist tradition – is that "attention [...] to the instrumental

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could possibly support it. Are we not faced with "an extreme form of linguistic idealism" (Cometti 2004, 211-12)? According to Cometti, this is not the case, and Wittgenstein's observation is less paradoxical and anti-scientific than it might seem. However, there is no doubt that it could be understood as Cometti believes that, on closer inspection, it should not be understood.

6 See Cometti 2013 on the pragmatic value of this line of thinking.

7 Wittgenstein's passage ends with the words: "say in the 'absence of an idol'" (Wittgenstein 2013, 305).

dimension of language", which allows him to escape "the aporias that sometimes tend to favour an 'idealistic' conception of language, and at other times a 'realistic' one, defined in relation to a world or a reality that is considered independent" (Cometti 1996, 61).

This is a very important point that would deserve more space than is available here. As Cometti often recalls, the assertion that "language is not an instrument" or a tool is a sort of leitmotif in the thought of Heidegger and in philosophical hermeneutics throughout the second half of the twentieth century. It also plays a significant role "in structuralism, in Lacan's view of the unconscious and in Derrida's deconstruction" (Cometti 1996, 53). If we associate the linguistic turn with this anti-instrumentalism and the "organic and reified vision of language" (Cometti 1996, 53)[8] that accompanies it, we must also acknowledge that Wittgenstein did not make any linguistic turn; indeed, "[t]his famous 'linguistic turn' in philosophy [...] could exemplify the conception that many of Wittgenstein's remarks on language [certainly those in the *Philosophical Investigations*] are directed against" (Cometti 1996, 52). It is in this context that we can situate, for example, the many critical observations that Wittgenstein began making in the first half of the 1930s concerning all those positions that regard meaning as something prior to and independent of use (see Cometti 1996, 54). Here, we are faced with what Wittgenstein considers to be a veritable "mythology of symbolism" (Wittgenstein 1980, 53), which consists in the idea that the rules of a sign (e.g. of the negation sign) derive from something we can call its 'meaning'. Against this 'mythology', Wittgenstein repeatedly asserts that it is the rules that determine, fix or constitute meaning. Thus, continuing with the example of negation, the rule of double negation does not follow from the supposed meaning of negation; rather, it is this rule that determines (fixes or constitutes) the meaning of the negation sign.[9]

But there is also another aspect that Cometti highlights in this context, drawing on Georg H. von Wright's valuable observation that

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8   This also explains why Cometti has always looked favourably upon what he regards as Donald Davidson's provocative claim that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed" (Davidson 2005, 107).

9   "It looks as if one could *infer* from the meaning of negation that '~ ~ p' means p. As if the rules for the negation sign *follow* from the nature of negation. So that in a certain sense there is first of all negation, and then the rules of grammar" (Wittgenstein 1980, 53). "We would like to say: 'Negation has the property that when it is doubled it yields an affirmation'. But the rule doesn't give a further description of negation, it constitutes negation" (Wittgenstein 1980, 52). Obviously, care must be taken not to escape the mythology of meaning only to fall into the mythology of rules. Coming to terms with the mythology of rules is one of the crucial tasks that Wittgenstein undertakes in the *Philosophical Investigations*. On this, see also Cometti 2011.

"problems of philosophy have their roots in a distortion or malfunctioning of the language-games", which "in its turn signalizes that something is wrong with the ways in which men live" (see von Wright 1982, 207 quoted in Cometti 1996, 29). Now, as Cometti comments, this is a way of recognising the limits of philosophy. After all, it is clear that, for Wittgenstein, "it would be completely absurd […] to attribute [to philosophy] the power to act on ways of life" (Cometti 1996, 29), even if it is precisely through "a change in the way we live" that we might expect philosophical problems, as he understood them, to become "superfluous" (Wittgenstein 1998, 70 quoted in Cometti 1996, 29). Here we are faced with one of Wittgenstein's basic convictions about philosophy. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein was aware of the importance of philosophy as a work of clarification, not only for himself, but also for others who were inspired to philosophise by an impulse similar to his own. At the same time, however, he always sought to avoid what Cometti called "philosophical vanity" (Cometti 1996, 39). In short, Wittgenstein never forgot the remark he made in one of the most philosophically dense passages of *Culture and Value*:

> If there were a 'solution to the problems of […] philosophy […]' we should only to caution ourselves that there was a time when they had not been solved (and then too it must have been possible to live and think). (Wittgenstein 1998, 69)

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Language as (a Mode of) Experience

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Abstract   Are language and experience two distinct domains that ought to be related? In his text and in other venues, Jean-Pierre Cometti aptly insisted how much this question came with arguable assumptions. In this text, I propose to develop some remarks on what it is to experience meanings (Wittgenstein) provided one sees language as a *mode of experience* (Dewey).

Keywords   Experience. Meaning. Language. Pragmatism. Mode.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Language as a Constitutive Mode of of Experience. – 3 Language and the Experience of Meaning. – 4 Conclusion

1   Introduction

As with fine wines, time does not spoil insightful philosophical texts. In his characteristic style of lucidity, sharpness, and irony, Jean-Pierre Cometti's essay addresses an issue that is more relevant than ever to contemporary questions. The issue is the relationship between language and experience.[1]

Cometti rightly criticizes one form of pragmatism (Rorty, for example) for discarding experience too easily. Contemporary pragmatism and analytic philosophy tend to focus on language at the expense of experience. It is as if the only ways to study language properly are to exclude experience from philosophy or absorb it into language. The symmetrical excess is conceiving experience as language, meaning, or saying something; or turning it into the foundation or origin of language (some forms of phenomenology come to mind here). In both cases, the continuity between language and the rest is lost, including our social and political practices. This continuity does not mean reduction or juxtaposition (as when one speaks of experience *and* language). Rather, continuity is precisely what is at stake in experience when one frees this concept from empiricist, analytical, or phenomenological interpretations. In a series of lectures he gave in Venice in 2012, Cometti defined the issue as follows:

> Should we therefore play language against experience or experience against language? The terms of the debate are confusing: they are even likely to ruin the efforts undertaken by pragmatists to uproot the presuppositions linked to them. (Cometti unpublished, 17)

An important presupposition is the idea that 'experience' is a private, subjective, and sensory event. For pragmatists, however, experience encompasses everything involved in *transactions* between organisms and their environments. For Cometti, experience is not necessarily an individual achievement; experiences are public, social, and political processes. In this sense, America itself may be seen as an experience (Cometti 1998). From this perspective, linguistic interactions only make sense when included in transactions that extend beyond language and communication to encompass our actions, procedures, and interactions with the environment and others. As Cometti wrote in his book *Philosopher avec Wittgenstein*,

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[1] See also the issue of the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* entitled "Language or Experience. Charting Pragmatism's Course for the 21st Century" (Volume VI-2, 2014).

the fact of having learned a language, if that means having assimilated its rules, does not in itself provide the guarantee of real understanding, because knowledge of the language alone does not provide knowledge or experience of everything that does not depend exclusively on language, although it is linked to it. (Cometti 1996, 122)

In his text, Cometti mentions Donald Davidson's "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" and his provocative idea that "there is no such thing as language" if it is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed (Davidson 1986, 446). More precisely, Davidson criticizes theorists for reducing language to a system of principles, conventions, or theories. He invites us to "give up the idea of a clearly defined, shared structure that language users acquire and apply to cases". He also claims that we should erase "the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally". Pragmatists have a name for "knowing our way around in the world generally": experience. The knowledge at stake here is, of course, not theoretical. Rorty would see it as a way to cope with our environment and fellow humans. However, by severing the connection between language and experience, Rorty arrives at an impoverished view of language as "strings of marks and noises that organisms use as tools to get what they want" (Rorty 1991, 3-4; see also 63).[2]

The point in what follows is not to add a supplementary component of subjectivity, feelings, or sensations to this picture in the name of experience and thus maintain an artificial separation between language and experience. Experience is not restricted to subjectivity and added to language as if they were two autonomous domains. Rather, the point is to emphasize that our various uses of language cannot be limited to merely functional strings of sounds and symbols. These uses directly involve experience. If they are properly understood, the experiential dimensions of language and meaning are dimensions in which the variability and openness of language are manifested.

In the 2015 text I referred to above, Cometti repeatedly uses the expression "le langage est une partie prenante de l'expérience". 'Stakeholder' is the literal translation of the French 'partie prenante.' As applied to language, however, this translation is unfortunate since, in English, a stakeholder is a physical or moral person. 'Constitutive part' would be more appropriate. However, the idea that language is a part of experience comes with a mereological view and the subsequent idea of language's possible autonomy. For this reason, I will use the term

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2   As the quotations below will show, both Dewey and Wittgenstein explicitly argue that linguistic phenomena are not merely strings of physical units.

"constitutive mode" and attempt to develop the idea of language as a constitutive mode of experience, starting from one of the many ideas found in Cometti's text. In many cases, linguistic rules are neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding: in his essay, Cometti mentions the cases of literature, poetry, and humour. This is an idea we may also find in Wittgenstein, according to whom there might be one sense of "understanding" according to which the ability to understand a sentence is not equivalent with the ability to replace it by another sentence, having the same functional role. Understanding poetry or a musical theme is one example of such understanding (1953, § 530-2).

In another passage, Wittgenstein leaves room for a plausible understanding of what it would be to 'experience meaning':

> "If you didn' t experience the meaning of the words, then how could you laugh at puns?" We do laugh at such puns: and to that extent we could say (for instance) that we experience their meaning. (Wittgenstein 1982, § 711)

I would like to explore this line of thought concerning the place of experience in language (Wittgenstein), which is the counterpart of the status of language as a mode of experience (Dewey). I will start with the latter idea.

2 Language as a Constitutive Mode of of Experience

As mentioned earlier, some neo-pragmatist philosophers, particularly Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom, have struggled to understand what classical pragmatists could seriously mean by 'pure experience' (James) or "primary experience" (Dewey) and why they placed so much philosophical value on it. For Rorty, the defect of the pragmatist appeal to experience is that it occurred *before* the linguistic turn. The linguistic turn is not the end goal of philosophy. However, once foundationalism and representationalism of language are rejected (as Davidson and Wittgenstein propose), the linguistic turn offers better tools and descriptions of knowledge, eliminating the immediacy and sensory justification still present in 'experience':

> 'language' is a more suitable notion than 'experience' for saying the holistic and anti-foundationalist things which James and Dewey wanted to say. (Rorty 1985, 40)

In his essay "Dewey, between Hegel and Darwin" (1995), Rorty takes notice of the pragmatist criticism of empiricism, but he considers that pragmatism on experience does not break the ties with metaphysical commitments on experience, as in radical empiricism or in

the Deweyan idea of the immediacy and regulating role of experience. When Dewey for instance spoke about the "heterogeneity and fullness", the "coarseness and crudity" of primary experience (1925, 22, 298, 300, 401, 39), and argued that "the immediate existence of quality" was the "point of departure and the regulative principle of all thinking" (1929/ 261), neo-pragmatists interpreted those descriptions and claims as remnants of foundationalism, representationalism or even solipsism. Experience should be eliminated out of the vocabulary of pragmatism, or at best being minimized to a set of sensory causes. Experience is to be understood as "a matter of physiological events triggering a disposition to utter various non-inferential reports" (Rorty 2000, 186). If experience were to enter into our theories of language and knowledge, it should be defined in terms of inferential content. It is in this sense that Wilfrid Sellars – a crucial influence of neo-pragmatism – claimed that "all awareness is a linguistic affair" (1956, 63).

Neo-pragmatists and classical pragmatists did not use the same notion of experience. The former had an empiricist definition of experience (experience is a matter of sensations, intuition, or *sense data*), while the latter had an experimentalist understanding of it. Furthermore, they did not mean the same thing by 'language'. Conceiving of language as primarily a set of sentences or vocabularies that are holistically structured might be committing what Dewey called the "philosophical fallacy": turning a functional result of experience into a primary and autonomous factor that governs the process of experience. In contrast, Dewey's conception of language was first and foremost anthropological:

> Language is taken in its widest sense, a sense wider than oral and written speech. It includes the latter. But it includes also not only gestures but rites, ceremonies, monuments and the products of industrial and fine arts. (1938, 51-2)

For Dewey, language was both a product and a constitutive mode of experience as transaction. It was not above experience, or in front of it. The aim of language is not to express or to represent experience. Consequently, the relations between experience and language are not relations between two autonomous domains. The same applies to 'meaning': if meaning is reduced to the inferential role of words, we escape the pitfalls of representationalism but are still in a framework where the proximity between meaning and experience sounds artificial. For Dewey, meanings are existential properties first:

> Meanings are rules for using and interpreting things; interpretation being always an imputation of potentiality for some consequence. (1925, 147)

Meaning is a relational property: the meaning of something, for Dewey, is a matter of how it connects to past, present and future experiences and events. Meanings are not primarily a matter of truth conditions, Fregean senses, representations or inferential roles (1925, 307). Being a tool is already having a meaning: a tool is not a piece of matter that would need some meaning-conferring act by a person for being used.

Meaning is a type of quality, but not all qualities are meaningful. The qualities that primarily matter and exist in experience are not subjective effects or objective causes, but rather qualities of the situation of experience, or experience as an organism-environment transaction:

> The world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive, succeed, and are defeated is pre-eminently a qualitative world. What we act for, suffer, and enjoy are things in their qualitative determinations. This world forms the field of characteristic modes of thinking, characteristic in that thought is definitely regulated by qualitative considerations. (1929, 243)

In order to emerge, be produced, and be considered and discussed, objects, propositions, essences, logical categories, theories, and ideas must come from a qualitative background. This qualitative world cannot be reduced to knowledge. In fact, the more you try to exhaustively represent, name, or identify it, the more you rely on an implicit background of qualities that frame the sense of relevance and interest in the distinctions and operations performed in the situation. Of course, Dewey's vibrant descriptions of the qualitative world must be handled with care, especially when Dewey associates to the qualitative world a power of *regulation*, *coherence*, *unification* and *control* on the world of discourse and science. The problem appears when one turns these qualitative resources into transcendental conditions, or epistemic foundations (Shusterman 1994).

The dependency of thinking upon the qualitative world also applies to language. In order for a word to mean or to refer to something, you just do not need more words (holism) and rules, you need a situation in which the meaning act *makes sense*:

> Discourse that is not controlled by reference to a situation is not discourse, but a meaningless jumble, *just as a mass of pied type is not a font much less a sentence*. A universe of experience is the precondition of a universe of discourse. Without its controlling presence, there is no way to determine the relevancy, weight or coherence of any designated distinction or relation. (Dewey 1938, 74; emphasis added)

If one is reducing language to a set of abstract sentences, inferences and words, or to a referential or representational device, the relations between language and experience will appear to be ancillary. But language is not primarily 'linguistic' in this sense. It is first a matter of doing things in situation with others, by sharing *meanings*. As "the medium in which culture exists and through which it is transmitted" (Dewey 1938, 28), language is not added to experience, as a new layer, or as it would be parachuted in experience from nowhere. Its emergence transforms experience from the inside (it establishes new relations, new experiences, new activities). Experience is enlanguaged (Dreon 2022, chapter 5) as much as language is a mode of experience. Notably, language both expands and limits experience. It is an expansion because it allows us to do and experience things that would otherwise be impossible. As a new mode of interaction, language opens up new relations with things, situations, and events. However, language can also be a limitation because our use of it may include 'systematic misleading expressions' as Gilbert Ryle named them. Misunderstanding these expressions can lead to impoverished views of experience. For example, we may restrict experience to an inner, private domain. These impoverished views of experience transform the ways we define ourselves, relate to others, and interact with the environment. For example, consider how an understanding of words such as 'I,' 'mind,' or 'consciousness' as denoting inner events or feelings leads to an experience of ourselves as being *individuals* first, individuals defined by their intrinsic attributes independently of linguistic and social practices.

This is also the case of the expression 'experiencing the meaning of a word or expression'. With Wittgenstein, let us see how this expression suggests there is more in linguistic understanding that the functional mastery of words and sentences. Without falling into the traps of a hypostasis of this experience, Wittgenstein acknowledges both the dependency of language on experience *and* the capacity we have, in virtue of language, of clarifying the nature of this dependency.

3 Language and the Experience of Meaning

Wittgenstein presented cases in which linguistic activities have a qualitative dimension. These cases reveal that experience is present in language not as a sign or symptom of an experiential reality which would be foreign to language, but as an irreducible property of language. They also reveal that language is a constitutive part of experience as an organism-environment transaction, so that language games open up new forms and senses of 'experience'.

Inside of linguistic activities, Wittgenstein underlined the importance of aspects, 'physiognomies,' 'secondary meanings,'

'atmospheres,' 'souls,' or the *expressive* character of words and expressions, bringing them closer to musical themes, faces or paintings:

> *I don't see mere dashes (a mere scribble) but a face (or word) with this particular physiognomy.* (Wittgenstein 1958, 174; my emphasis added)

We never meet mere strings of words that we would interpret in virtue of a conventional meaning-conferring act.

> While any word – one would like to say – may have a different character in different contexts, all the same there is one character – a face – that it always has. It looks at us. –For one might actually think that each word was a little face; the written sign might be a face. (Wittgenstein 1980a, § 322)

Some cases of 'experiencing meaning' involve the 'secondary sense' of words (1953, part II, section XI, 216). The secondary meaning of a word is the experiential or affective sense one associates with it. The secondary meaning is *not* a metaphorical meaning (something you might translate or paraphrase into other words), yet this 'secondary meaning' can be described with several metaphors: aroma, atmosphere, physiognomies, faces... We also use certain expressions "in a secondary sense" for *expressing* our experiences of meaning. But those expressions are not statements of a special sort of fact (Diamond 1967, 199). These experiences are not experiences which would accompany the understanding of the primary meaning. The occasional fact that, sometimes, we experience the meanings of words does not imply that every time we understand words or find them meaningful, we live an experience. The ways words are used, in so far as those ways institute and exemplify meanings, does not depend on how some individual understands or experiences them in a specific moment in time. Nevertheless, the experienced properties of words and utterances matter to us, and play an ineliminable role in the way we understand, but also select our words:

> The familiar physiognomy of a word, the feeling that it has taken up its meaning into itself, that it is an actual likeness of its meaning--there could be human beings to whom all this was alien. (They would not have an attachment to their words.) -And how are these feelings manifested among us? - By the way we choose and value words (...) How do I choose among words? Without doubt it is sometimes as if I were comparing them by fine differences of smell. (Wittgenstein 1953, part II, section XI, 218)

> The employment of certain words for the sake of the rhythm of a sentence. This might be far more important to us that it actually is. (Wittgenstein 1980a, § 298)

> Can anything be more remarkable than this, that the rhythm of a sentence should be important for the exact understanding of it? (Wittgenstein 1980a, § 1090)

Wittgenstein compares the fact of choosing and appreciating a word (1953, § 307) with that happens when a musician is searching for the right pitch, or when the tailor looks for the right fit of a cloth. It is in this sense that Wittgenstein says that "understanding a sentence is much more like understanding a musical theme as we use to believe" (1958, 167).

One should not assume that Wittgenstein introduces these cases of "experiencing meaning" in order to supplement a first, functionalist account of meaning in virtue by appealing to 'feelings', 'qualia' (Zemach 1995), or to an elusive form of experience. The circumstances in which one may say that *meaning is experienced* do not reveal a relation between language (understood as a functional or formal system) and some domain outside of language (be it private experience or organism-environment transactions). These circumstances show how, right from the start, language involves more than the functional use of words, and that it *enacts* new possibilities of experience (it is not the object of previous forms of experience). The experience at stake when one "experiences meaning" is not the sensory experience of meaning-as-use, but an experience (and a secondary use of 'experience'!) which depends upon language. Let us see that in greater detail.

Wittgenstein describes in various places what is preserved and what is lost in a language-user (the *meaning-blind person*) who would be unable to experience the meaning, the rhythm or the physiognomy of words and sentences. Wittgenstein's inspiration here comes from *soulblindness*, a phenomenon discussed by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890). James himself borrowed the terms and some of the discussed cases to other authors. The term 'Seelenblindheit' was indeed coined in 1881 by the German physiologist Hermann Munk, for naming a phenomenon caused by a cortical lesion and leading to some forms of visual agnosia. It is not a physiological or retinal blindness: the patients receive visual stimulations, but these stimulations are unable of being integrated with memory and language. The result is a loss of familiarity with visual stimuli, of 'symbolic understanding', and of affective value towards words and objects. Fritz Mauthner, a German philosopher read by Wittgenstein, proposed the expression 'Bedeutungsblindheit' in his 1903 book *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (a book Wittgenstein quoted in the *Tractatus*) for naming the phenomena of 'Seelenblindheit'. Indeed, organisms are

not deprived of cognitive faculties such as perceiving; they are rather unable to make sense of what they perceive.

At first glance, the meaning-blind person would be deprived of the lived experience of meaning (*das Erleben der Bedeutung*; *Bedeutungsgefühl*), but he would be able to participate to a new language game as long as it is purely functional:

> There might also be a language in whose use the 'soul' of the words played no part. In which, for example, we had no objection to replacing one word by another arbitrary one of our own invention. (Wittgenstein 1953, § 530)

When hearing a proper name, the meaning-blind may associate a face, and in another circumstance another face. But he would not have the *feeling* that names are distinct in virtue of some imponderable something (Wittgenstein 1980a, § 243).

Is the meaning-blind person condemned to miss important features of language?

Sometimes, Wittgenstein's verdict is negative:

> The experience of meaning seems to have no importance in the *use* of language... the meaning-blind could not lose much. (Wittgenstein 1980a, § 202; see also § 232)

Meaning-blind people would not be deprived from meaning understanding, or from a sensory modality. They would have a *prosaic* use of words and would sound like prosaic people (Wittgenstein 1980a, § 342; Wittgenstein 1967, § 145). Sometimes, Wittgenstein compares their behaviour with the behaviour of an automaton (1980a, § 197-8) and of a robot (1980a, § 324). The meaning-blind "does not feel that a word lost its meaning and became a mere sound if it was repeated ten times over" (1953, part II, section XI, 214).

If meanings and understanding were experiential and psychological processes, if the experience of words were essential for their understanding, the meaning-blind person would be unable to participate to our language games. But this is not the case. Indeed, in Wittgenstein's cases, the meaning-blind person may communicate and participate to language games: his mastery of primary meanings is not affected. In this sense, what Wittgenstein imagines is the opposite of the psychological and physiological traditions! Nevertheless, if language were limited to what meaning-blind persons do and live, it would not be similar to *our* uses of language, which include experiences of physiognomy and familiarity with words. As Yasuhiro Arata says, "even if meaning-experience and meaning-blindness are

neither fundamental nor essential for speaking and understanding language, they are for *a language's being ours*" (2015, 122).[3]

The meaning-blind person is not blind to meanings as functional roles, but to meanings as physiognomies; he lacks an experience, but 'experience' in a new sense. His mastery of primary meanings is preserved, but what about 'secondary meanings'? As a matter of fact, the crucial point is not in the 'primary meaning'/'secondary meaning' distinction, but in the *different* meanings of "experience" at play when we say that *primary* meaning is *not* an *experience* and that *secondary meaning* is the object of an *experience*.

Until now, we have associated meaning-blindness with an inability to have a *phenomenal* or *lived* experience (*Erlebnis*) of words and their use. However, this is a limited sense of 'experience', which is quite irrelevant for linguistic intercourse (Wittgenstein 1980a, § 184). Wittgenstein urges us to understand 'experience' differently in order to grasp what is important in the cases he discusses. Among other things, we must pay attention to the concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) and its relation to our other concepts of experience (1953, part II, section XI, 208). If meaning is lived, it is a special form of experience; it is not lived as, for instance, a visual image is lived (1980a, § 261). It is not a matter of sensory impressions (1980a, § 259).

If 'experience' encompasses not only phenomenal or sensory capacities, but also more broadly, perceptual capacities, such as the ability to perceive aspects and changes in aspects, then we may observe connections between 'seeing an aspect' and 'experiencing the meaning of a word' (1953, part II, section XI, 214). Meaning-blindness appears to be a form of aspect-blindness (*Aspektblindheit*).

In aspect-blindness, what is lacking is not the capacity to see something as something, but the capacity to see or notice a change of aspect *now*, and so to *jump* from one aspect to the other (1953, part II, section XI, 214). The meaning-blind also fails to notice some events. He is lacking the experience of transition to aspect (1988, 108). For example, the meaning-blind practically masters the inferential difference between 'bank' as a building and 'bank' as a part of a river; but he will fail to notice or perceive the sudden transition between these two meanings. When a meaning-blind person says "Go to the bank" in front of a river and then looks at a bank building, he may intend to change what he says by this utterance, but he will not notice or experience some change in terms of punctual meaning-acts (1988, 182; 1980a, §175, §184). Like the aspect-blind person, the meaning-blind

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3   See also Ter Hark (2011, 509): "Conceived as experiences in the primary sense, experiences of meaning are irrelevant for linguistic intercourse. Conceived by analogy with aspect-seeing, in particular change of aspect, experiences of meaning do play a role in (special) linguistic intercourse".

person is also unable to integrate her perception of words into her personal experience. Just as an aspect-blind person may see a picture *as a cube*, but not as *such-and-such cube* (1953, part II, section XI, 213), her meaning-blind counterpart will be unable to say the word 'bank' by privately and punctually meaning *the bank in the middle of the street* (1980b, § 571).

The meaning-blind person does not lack the mastery of meaning of a word *as its use*. Does he lack another form of meaning to be confused with experience as *Erlebnis*? Ultimately, we would conclude that there are two forms of meaning that parallel each other and that experience can foster or carry a form of meaning.

The meaning-blind person lacks not a sensory organ but a sensibility, which is understood as the capacity to make distinctions, such as having a musical ear (1953, part II, section XI, 214), or having an attachment, concern, or interest in words (1967, §124). Given that the use of words involves a history of transactions, it is not surprising that many words become associated with gestures, faces, colours, or architectural styles for us, rather than presenting themselves as mere strings of words. These connections between words and experiences are particularly evident in puns, jokes, poetry, and shifts in perspective. In these cases, "the substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique" (1953, part II, section XI, 208). Our experience is manifested through our abilities, which are connected to our interests, appreciations, and values. Experiences of meaning and understanding are not additional sensory processes that accompany hearing or reading words. Rather, they are what happens when our use of words is integrated with our abilities, concerns, and interests. The 'experience' at stake here is not a sensory experience that precedes and is independent of language; it is a form of experience enacted by language. Therefore, this experience cannot play the role of a foundation for language or meaning. Rather, it presupposes and enriches meanings and our uses of language.

There is no depth behind the surface of words, in the sense of an inner phenomenon or a specific object. Everything lies in the use of words within a field of abilities, including gestures and expressions. To understand what meaning-blind people lack, we must look beyond the functional use of meaning (which they master) *and* avoid searching for something elusive inside their heads. Instead, we should examine how their linguistic behaviour is articulated or not articulated with transactions. The expressivity of some productions (and its perception) does not resort to exteriorizing interiority or subjectivity, but rather, articulating it with our practices. It is neither surprising nor misleading to consider the idea that *words have a life* (Cometti 2002), provided one considers language as a feature of our transactions and their open character, which is more elemental than conventions and communication:

The way music speaks. Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information (Mitteilung), is not used in the language-game of giving information. (Wittgenstein 1967, § 160)

The impression a word or a musical theme makes on me hangs together with things in its surroundings – eg. with the existence of our language and its intonation; but that means: with the whole field of our language games. (Wittgenstein 1980a, § 433; see also 1967, § 165, § 175)

"The whole field of our language games": as Cometti insisted, this field is not primarily about words or sentences, but rather, language-involving transactions. We can now better avoid the false dichotomy that experiences of meaning are either outside the realm of words or non-existent. To account for the atmosphere or feel that words may have, it is not necessary to go beyond the idea that the meaning of a word is how it is used in language. This is possible provided that language is not reduced to inferential moves or rule-governed performances; the whole field of language is acknowledged as a dimension of experience; and it is acknowledged that language transforms our experiences.

4 Conclusion

Let us consider five claims.
1. Meaning is neither an experience nor a phenomenal property, mental entity, or process.
2. Experience, in the form of sensations, sense data, or impressions, does not establish meaning or norms of justification.
3. Linguistic meaning and knowledge originate from, and are oriented and controlled by, a background of non-cognitive experience.
4. Linguistic meaning is not limited to the functional roles of words and sentences; it also includes experiential dimensions.
5. "Experience" is a notion which has a local meaning to be maintained and developed in philosophy, in order to describe important features of our linguistic, political and social practices.

Claims (1) and (2) can be attributed to both Dewey and Wittgenstein without debate. Dewey also held (3), with all its ambiguities. In this text, I focused on (4), building on remarks Cometti made in his text with the help of Dewey and Wittgenstein. (5) is the broader horizon of these considerations.

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