

## DEWEY, SELLARS AND THE GIVEN

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### 1. Introduction

In “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, Sellars attacks –with the characteristic tools of an analytic philosopher- what he calls “the Myth of the Given”. Some decades before, Dewey presented his own criticism to traditional empiricism on the base of an empirical conception of experience. I think that Sellars’ and Dewey’s criticisms can be understood as pointing at the same target; thus my purpose in this article consists of reconstructing Dewey’s criticism of classic empiricism as a criticism of the Myth of the Given. My aim here is *not* exegetical, but reconstructive: I think that a reading of Dewey’s criticism of classic empiricism as a criticism to the Myth of the Given can shed light on a) the relevance of Dewey’s philosophy for philosophy of mind and epistemology<sup>1</sup>; and b) some advantages of Dewey’s position over Sellars’. In section 2, I briefly reconstruct the Myth of the Given such as it is characterized by Sellars in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”. In section 3, I present Dewey’s experimental conception of experience and his main criticisms to traditional empiricism. In section 4, I show how Dewey’s notion of experience can be understood as involving a rejection and criticism of the Myth of the Given. Finally, section 5 summarizes the results of the previous sections.

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty, who has done a lot to show the importance of Dewey’s work nowadays, considers, however, that the Deweyan notion of experience should be put aside. See Richard Rorty, “Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey”, and “Dewey’s Metaphysics”, in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); and “Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin”, in Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). As Bernstein says, Rorty’s pragmatism is “pragmatism without experience”. See Richard Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010). In contrast, I think that Dewey’s notion of experience can be useful for some contemporary debates in epistemology and philosophy of mind.

### 2. Sellars and the Myth of the Given

Although his attack mainly concerns the theory of sense data as the paradigm of the given, Sellars says that the framework of the given also includes material objects, universals, propositions and first principles<sup>2</sup>. According to Sellars, the category of “the given” has been introduced into epistemology in order to explain how empirical knowledge can be based, ultimately, in a certain kind of non-inferential knowledge. The Myth of the Given is the idea according to which a certain sort of non-epistemic facts about the epistemic subjects could imply epistemic facts about them (an error –Sellars says- which is similar to the so called “naturalistic fallacy” in ethics)<sup>3</sup>. The expression “non-epistemic facts” refers here to the immediate appearance of objects to the mind, objects about which the mind can be directly conscious. Thus, for instance, according to the theory of sense data (which is one of those theories that makes the emergence of the Myth possible), the apprehension of mental contents can take place without the mediation of language. Mind is the realm of the immediately known. In this way, *to perceive sensory contents* (a characteristic that we share with pre-linguistic creatures) and *to be conscious* (something which is an item of

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<sup>2</sup> Sellars’ criticism has had a great influence on analytic philosophy and new pragmatism. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); and John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) and *Having the World in View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). For a criticism of Sellars’ article, see William Alston, “What’s Wrong with Immediate Knowledge?”, *Synthese*, 55, 1983; and Daniel Bonevac, “Sellars vs the Given”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LXIV, n 1, 2002. Peirce’s criticism to Cartesianism can be considered as an earlier criticism to the Given. See Peirce “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” and “Questions concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man”, in James Hoopes, (ed) *Peirce on Signs* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> In “Sellars on Perceptual Experience”, McDowell interprets “epistemic” as equivalent to “that involves concepts”; thus, he thinks that, according to Sellars, we should not assume that we can understand epistemic episodes in terms of the actualization of mere natural capacities. See John McDowell, *Having the World in View*, p. 5.

knowledge and, in consequence, presupposes the capacity of justifying assertions) are made equivalent.

Now, if we take the case of the theory of sense data as a paradigmatic example, it is possible to characterize the Myth of the Given in virtue of the following elements:

- a) The idea that there are certain inner episodes (i.e. sensations of red), which are necessary for having experiences (i.e. that a physical thing is red), and which can occur in the mind without having concepts;
- b) the thesis according to which those episodes constitute a case of non-inferential knowledge; and
- c) the foundationalist thesis according to which such episodes provide the ultimate foundation of all our empirical knowledge.

Now, Sellars' criticism is not directed at the very idea of non-inferential knowledge (for he claims that observational reports, such as "This is red", are legitimate examples of non-inferential knowledge), but to the spurious assumption that there is non-inferential knowledge which is independent from conceptual capacities (acquired by using language) and that, besides, could ultimately justify all our empirical beliefs. His criticism aims to show not only that the notion of non-conceptual knowledge is incoherent, but also that the foundationalist thesis according to which there is non-inferential knowledge that does not presuppose any sort of knowledge about other factual issues, is unattainable.

Against the Given, Sellars opposes his psychological nominalism, which affirms that:

*All awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc., in short, all awareness of abstract entities – indeed, all awareness even of particulars- is a linguistic affair. According to it, not even the awareness of such sorts, resemblances, and facts as pertain to so-called immediate experience is*

*presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of a language*<sup>4</sup>.

There is not any kind of knowledge that does not involve the mastery for using concepts; and, since Sellars identifies the possession of a concept with the mastery of the use of a word, there cannot be knowledge without the capacity to use language. For Sellars, knowledge is propositional in character, and propositions come with the mastery for using language. In Rorty's words: "there is no such thing as a justified belief which is non-propositional and no such thing as justification which is not a relation between propositions".<sup>5</sup>

Against traditional empirical foundationalism, Sellars claims that the pretended authority of the "ultimate" knowledge rests, actually, on the knowledge of other factual issues (singular and general)<sup>6</sup>. The authority of a report such as "This is green" comes, not only from the fact that the report must be a symptom of the presence of a green object in standard conditions, but also from the fact that the perceiver must know that tokens of "This is green" are symptoms of the presence of green objects in appropriate conditions. Thus, observational knowledge presupposes that one knows general facts, such as "The report 'This is green' is a reliable symptom of the presence of a green object in standard conditions".

It is not important here to reconstruct in detail Sellars' arguments against the Myth, nor what exactly the theoretical alternative that he proposes is. The purpose of this brief presentation of the epistemological core of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" has been to characterize the target of his criticism and to indicate, roughly, the way to avoid, according to him, the Myth. Let's see now how Dewey criticizes traditional empiricism.

<sup>4</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 183

<sup>6</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, # 35 y ss.

### 3. Dewey's criticism of traditional empiricism and the experimental conception of experience.

The philosophy of John Dewey can be understood as a new form of empiricism<sup>7</sup>. Dewey's reconstruction of the notion of experience takes into account two factors: (1) the emergence of experimental sciences, and (2) the development of psychology based on biology<sup>8</sup>. Although Dewey recognizes the importance of the traditional empiricist notion of experience (as the final court of all pretensions of empirical knowledge), he states, notwithstanding, that empiricists have failed in developing a conception of experience that is in tune with the experimental spirit of science. In particular, they have failed in their aim of presenting a notion of experience that is fitted to the experience, for, according to Dewey, they have introduced an insurmountable divorce between reason and experience which is not faithful to the facts<sup>9</sup>. In contrast, attention paid to the methods and results of experimental sciences, together with the biological orientation of psychology, help us realize –Dewey points out– the intimate continuity that exists between experience and reason.

In the traditional conception, experience is described as:

- (1) Primarily a matter of knowledge;
- (2) Something psychic and subjective;
- (3) Linked to what has happened in the past;
- (4) Composed of particular entities (simple ideas), which implies that connections and continuities come from outside of the experience; and

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<sup>7</sup> See Richard Bernstein, *John Dewey* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Letterpress & Offset Inc., 1966), p. 45. I think that Dewey's empiricism is close to McDowell's empiricism on this point: both authors try to rehabilitate the epistemic character of experience without falling into the Myth of the Given. See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, vol 12, 1920, Ed by Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see also William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

- (5) An antithetical instance of thought, which means that inferences –alien to the experience– involve a jump outside of it<sup>10</sup>.

On the contrary, the reconstructed notion of experience states:

- (1') Instead of a knowledge-affair, experience is “an affair of the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment”;
- (2') Experience involves “a genuinely objective world which enters into the actions and sufferings of men, and that “undergoes modifications through their responses”;
- (3') Experience “in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with a future is its salient trait”;
- (4') Experience, “that is an undergoing of an environment and a striving for its control in new directions”, instead of being a collection of atoms articulated by an external reason, “is pregnant with connections”;
- (5') Experience “is full of inference. There is, apparently, no conscious experience without inference”<sup>11</sup>.

Let me consider each point briefly.

- (1') Experience is primarily a process in virtue of which we are affected by the environment as a consequence of our actions in it. The organism is never a mere spectator, but an agent who tries to change her medium to reach her purposes<sup>12</sup>. We distort our experience if we conceive it as directed exclusively to knowledge. Experience

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<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy”, McDermott, J. (ed), *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy”, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy”, p. 78. In p. 84-85 he says: “The thing to be known does not present itself primarily as a matter of knowledge-and-ignorance at all. It occurs as a stimulus to action and as the source of certain undergoings. It is something to react to (...) and also something that reacts unexpectedly to our reactions.

serves primarily to the coordination of action, to adaptation<sup>13</sup>. When the relationship between the organism and its environment is fluid and its activity is developed without obstacles, experience provides stimuli for the automatic adjustment of behavior. In this case, attention is paid to the very activity, not to what experience reveals to us. It is what we could call “experience in action”, because in those cases experience only provides stimuli to do the activity we are doing<sup>14</sup>.

However, experience can acquire a cognitive value<sup>15</sup>. This takes place when the object of experience is considered consciously as such. Attention to a certain stimulus arises when the situation becomes indeterminate<sup>16</sup>. Because of indetermination, the

organism does not know how to react<sup>17</sup>. Reflective thought begins when the organism needs to know what the nature of the stimulus is and what the appropriate reaction to it is. Attention is not on the activity, but on the qualities of objects of the experience. In this case, action is at the service of experience, for the only way of determining the stimulus consists of taking note of what is revealed in the consequences of our actions referred to the object considered. It is what we could call, in contrast to the former attitude, “action in experience” because now the activity is at the service of the discovery of the qualities in the environment that prevent a fluid relationship with it.

(2') Dewey's starting point is the organism in its natural and social environment. It is there where experience should be examined empirically. The traditional conception, in contrast, begins by considering experience speculatively as a certain sort of mental state that pertains to an epistemic subject who is “outside of the real world of nature”<sup>18</sup>. In such circumstances, experience is thought of as an inner and private state of the subject, with a privileged epistemic status, and which can be characterized independently of the external world. For Dewey, in contrast, the doctrine of biological continuity has showed the empirical irrelevance of the traditional empiricist notion of experience. From his perspective, the subject of experience is an organism situated in the world. The content of experience is given by the same world with which the subject interacts. There is no problem about the external world. Experience is not “subjective”. The subject of experience is the entire organism in its interactions with the natural

<sup>13</sup> When Dewey says that experience is non-cognitive, he is only pointing out that the primary aim of it is not knowing. See Richard Bernstein, *John Dewey* (Atascadero, Ridgeview Letterpress & Offset Inc., 1966), p. 62

<sup>14</sup> In my opinion, there is here space to conceive this primary form of non-cognitive experience, and the abilities involved in it, as conceptual in a similar sense to that emphasized by Noë and McDowell. See Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), chap. 6, and John McDowell, “What Myth?”, in John McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). As I interpret this point in Dewey's philosophy, when we are involved in certain activity, the sensations and objects which are experienced allow us to adjust our movements to the environment because they have certain meaning for us. Their meaning come from the fact that they are in a whole that is the activity we are doing. Consider Dewey's example: the visual and tactile sensations that we have when we use a pencil. Certainly, they allow us to adjust our movements; but the adjustment requires that we note what a pencil is, what a piece of paper is, and some properties of each object (for instance, that the pencil can be taken by our hand, etc.). I think that this point is not incompatible with the ontological thesis according to which there is an “absolute, final, irreducible, and inexpugnable concrete *quale*” in every experience. See John Dewey, “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism”, in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1965), p. 234

<sup>15</sup> On the distinction between the experience as adaptation or adjustment, and the experience as something cognitive, see John Dewey, “The Need...”, p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> “As a *conscious* element, a sensation marks an interruption in a course of action previously entered

upon”, John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, p.130.

<sup>17</sup> “The response is not only uncertain, but the stimulus is equally uncertain; one is uncertain only in so far as the other is”. John Dewey, “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology”, p. 106, *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882-1889*, vol. 5, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy”, p. 71.

and social environment<sup>19</sup>. When we consider that the subject is situated in the world from the beginning, and we realize that it is primarily a practical subject, who should cope with the environment, knowing becomes a derivate mode of interacting with reality<sup>20</sup>.

(3') Experience is not a mere affection, a passive reception of stimuli. In contrast to "the spectator model"<sup>21</sup>, according to which the subject of experience passively and without any interest contemplates the world, experience is –Dewey says– "a matter of *simultaneous* doings and sufferings"<sup>22</sup>. This is the so-called "experimental conception of experience"<sup>23</sup>: there is no experience without action, because the environment reveals its properties to us only when we act on it. Since the organism should introduce certain changes in its environment in order to adapt to it, since experience is a manner of interact with the medium, and since there is no control of the medium without anticipation and expectations, experience is indissolubly connected to action and, as a consequence, to the future: "Anticipation is therefore more primary than

recollection; projection than summoning of the past; the prospective than retrospective"<sup>24</sup>.

Points (4') and (5') emphasize the organic character of experience. In contrast to classic empiricism, which holds that experience is constituted by a collection of simple ideas or sensory qualities that must be integrated by laws of association, experience is –for Dewey– an organic totality inferentially articulated. The doctrine according to which ideas and sensations are separate existences has not been derived –Dewey notes– from observation or experimentation<sup>25</sup>. As soon as we pay attention to what experience in fact is, it is clear that experience is, by itself, organized. This point of view makes unnecessary the intervention of a supra-empirical reason that, as in the Kantian system, synthesizes the sensory diversity. For Dewey, "experience carries principles of connection and organization within itself"<sup>26</sup>. Action is stimulated and controlled by sensations; and they acquire their meaning in virtue of the consequences of action. It is in this point where the role of inference arises. When an organism is able to take a sensation or a fact as a *sign* of another thing, of something that is not given in the present, of something that will be revealed in the consequences of action, it is able to infer that future fact from its actual experience. In that way, the organism acquires the capacity of controlling the future<sup>27</sup>.

#### 4. Dewey and the Myth of the Given

In what sense does Dewey's conception of the experience imply a criticism of the Myth of the Given?

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<sup>19</sup> For a close version of this notion of experience, see James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Experience* (New Jersey: Laurence Earlbaum Associates Publishers, 1979); and Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> See John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy", p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 4: 1929, ed by Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy", p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> See John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, chap. IV. On p. 129 he says: "The organism does not stand about (...) waiting for something to turn up. It does not wait passive and inert for something to impress itself upon it from without. The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings. As a consequence, the changed produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behavior. This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience".

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<sup>24</sup> John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy", p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy", p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy, The Middle Works*, p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> "The extent of an agent's capacity for inference, its power to use a given fact as a sign of something not yet given, measures the extent of its ability systematically to enlarge its control of the future". John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy", p. 69.

Remember that the core of the Myth is constituted by the idea according to which inner episodes that do not involve concepts would be, notwithstanding, items of knowledge and, consequently, could be used for ultimately justifying states with contents conceptually articulated such as beliefs.

Now, if we pay attention to Dewey's conception of experience, we will see that the idea of something merely given in the experience, which does not presuppose any relation with other sensations, ideas or sentiments, cannot be knowledge at all. Plus, because there is not immediacy or something merely given in cognitive experience, experience cannot be the ultimate foundation of empirical knowledge such as traditional empiricism had in mind<sup>28</sup>. It is in virtue of these two points –I claim– that the Deweyan notion of experience involves a criticism and rejection of the Myth of the Given.

Although Dewey rejects the Kantian idea of an *a priori* conceptual synthesis of the sensory diversity, he thinks that sensations are mute if they are not connected to each other; or if objects of the experience are not linked to the possible consequences that would take place if we interacted with them. There is, then, a Kantian element in Dewey's theory of experience, though naturalized: the idea that experience is a "synthesized", interpreted, organized totality. This "synthesis" is not produced by a non-empirical reason, as in Kant's philosophy, but by the very actions of the organism that interacts with its environment<sup>29</sup>. In a similar way to Kant, though without

the idea of a transcendental sphere, Dewey recognizes, then, that experience supposes thought<sup>30</sup>. However, in his case, the organization provided by thought consists of connecting present experiences with future ones which would take place if we interacted with the world in certain ways. We have here two linked thesis: the thesis according to which experience consists of *acting* and *undergoing* the consequences of actions; and the idea according to which the sense of what is experienced comes from its connection with other objects which could be experienced as well. The agent's action and undergoing is what makes that connection possible. Without acting there would not be sufficient materials in experience to understand; and, at the same time, without the connections between what is experienced in the present and what could be experienced in the future, action would be blind, would lack of what Dewey calls "intelligence"<sup>31</sup>.

Action opens a web of meanings<sup>32</sup>; it gives meaning to what is experienced only when we realize what sorts of consequences are associated to our actions:

Experience (...) is primarily what is undergone in connection with activities whose import lies in their objective consequences –their bearing upon future experiences (...) What is just "there", is of concern only in the potentialities which it may indicate. As ended, as wholly given, it is of no account. But as a sign of what may come, it becomes an indispensable factor in behavior dealing with changes, the outcome of which is not yet determined<sup>33</sup>.

Here is the reason why the idea of something merely given is alien to Dewey's notion of experience<sup>34</sup>. Any object, event, sensation or property that is experienced

<sup>28</sup> The Given is only a Myth when it is understood as a type of knowledge. When we speak about non-cognitive experience, there is no problem –according to Dewey– with the given (understood in some phenomenological lived sense).

<sup>29</sup> See John Dewey, "Experience and Objective Idealism", in John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1965), p. 211. There he says: "The constructive or organizing activity of 'thought' does not inhere in thought as a transcendental function, a form or mode of some supra-empirical ego, mind, or consciousness, but in thought as itself vital activity".

<sup>30</sup> John Dewey, "The Need...", p. 70

<sup>31</sup> John Dewey, "The Need...", p. 69.

<sup>32</sup> See John Dewey, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology", J. McDermott, (ed), *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 141 and 146.

<sup>33</sup> John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy", p. 68-9.

<sup>34</sup> See also John Dewey, "The Experimental Theory of Knowledge", in John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1965), pp. 82-83 and 90.

has a sense (or meaning) –for the organism- only when it indicates or is a sign of another object, event, sensation or property that could be experienced in the future<sup>35</sup>. The sensation, alone and isolated, which is simply there, without any connection to another thing, has no meaning at all. It is, at best, a stimulus. Perceptual knowledge involves constitutively a collection of references that connect what is experienced with what could be experienced if we acted in certain ways. In fact, the contents of experience could be specified –as a cognitive experience- by appealing to conditionals that connected, in their antecedents, the actions or operations to be made on an object and, in their consequents, the results of those operations<sup>36</sup>. Every perceptual experience, when its content has a meaning to the agent, presupposes a web, more or less extensive, composed by that kind of conditionals which link possible actions on an object to possible consequences as their result<sup>37</sup>. The content of experience outstrips what is merely given because it involves certain expectations about the behavior of the experienced objects, expectations about the different ways in which those objects could affect us and each other if we made certain operations. The connections between what is experienced and what could be experienced make inferences (from what we experience in the present) about what could happen in the future possible. This is

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<sup>35</sup> The Deweyan thesis according to which the objects, properties and events, when they are experienced, can be signs of other objects, properties and events, is present in many places in Dewey's works. See "The Experimental Theory of Knowledge"; "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy"; and *The Quest for Certainty*.

<sup>36</sup> This idea is explicit in Lewis, Clarence I., *Mind and the World Order* (New York: Dover Publications, 1929), chap. V.

<sup>37</sup> It could be objected here that the mentioned conditionals are not constitutive of the content of experience; rather that they reveal a causal interdependence between experience and action. However, Dewey's point –such as I interpret it- is that we would not know what we experience if we did not know some (at least) of such conditionals. For instance, who knows none of conditionals involved in the experience of an apple (such as, "if I bite the apple, I will feel such and such savor", etc.), she cannot know what object she is experiencing.

of crucial importance to cope with things in an intelligent way and to know the world as well<sup>38</sup>.

Holism is a point stressed, though in a different way, by both Sellars and Dewey. Sellars says, for instance,

One couldn't have observational knowledge of *any* fact unless one knew many *other* things as well (...) Observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g. that this is green, presupposes that one knows general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*. And to admit this requires an abandonment of the traditional empiricist idea that observational knowledge "stands on its own feet"<sup>39</sup>.

And Dewey claims

There is no apprehension without some (...) context; no acquaintance which is not either recognition or expectation (...) Acquaintance always implies a little friendliness; a trace of re-knowing, of anticipatory welcome or dread of the trait to follow<sup>40</sup>.

One can bring both positions closer if one underlines the fact that all recognition or re-knowing, all anticipatory attitude, presupposes that one knows some regularities which connect what is experienced in the present with what will be experienced in the future if one behaved in certain ways. Notwithstanding, there are important differences between Dewey's and Sellars' positions as well. Perhaps, one of the most striking is due to the different role that language plays in each theory. As it was remarked in section 2, Sellars considers that all awareness is a linguistic affair. Accordingly, he claims that experiences involve sensations and propositional claims<sup>41</sup>. This motivates the following question: how do sensations and propositions relate to each other in order to make the experiences of physical objects possible?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy", p. 69-70.

<sup>39</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>40</sup> John Dewey, "The Experimental Theory of Knowledge", p. 79-80.

<sup>41</sup> See Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 39 and ss.

<sup>42</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Robert

Interpreters disagree on this point. For example, Rorty and Brandom think that, for Sellars, sensations only cause observational reports. McDowell, in contrast, thinks that, for Sellars, experience presents the world to us<sup>43</sup>. Notwithstanding, whatever the correct interpretation is, the question remains: how do inner episodes such as sensations, combined with propositional claims, produce experiences of physical objects?

In contrast, Dewey can be plausibly understood as a direct realist in theory of perception<sup>44</sup>. It can be said that, according to him, experience opens the world to us; in the cognitive experience we are not immediately aware of sensations, but of the objects and events of the environment with which we interact. The content of experience does not necessarily require of language, but of our capacity to take certain objects, properties and events as signs of other objects, properties and events. This means that the objects themselves can acquire the status of a sign for the experiencing organism: an odor can be recognized as a sign of the presence of certain meal; the heat felt in the hand can be recognized as the fire that we will see, etc. In that way, language is not necessary to have perceptual experiences. This, however, does not mean that experience does not have, for Dewey, propositional content. Certainly, if the term "proposition" is understood as the content or meaning of a declarative sentence, then it can be said that, for Dewey, the content of experience does not involve –as in the case of Sellars– a propositional content. However, if the term "proposition" is understood as what is able to grasp a state of affair –whether it is expressed by a sentence or by another sort of sign– it could say that, for Dewey, there is no impediment to conceive of the

experience as having propositional content. In that sense, the heat felt in one hand can be a sign of certain state of affair: the presence of fire in the surroundings.

Another example of Dewey's holism and anti-foundationalism can be found in his paper "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth". There, in response to certain objections presented by Russell to his conception of inquiry<sup>45</sup>, Dewey objects to the thesis according to which "there are propositions known in virtue of their own immediate direct presence"<sup>46</sup>, such as "Redness-here". In opposition to Russell's atomist and foundationalist aims, Dewey objects: (i) that "here" has an autonomous (or self-contained) meaning, completely independent from the meaning of "there". The distinction between "here" and "there" involves determinations that exceed anything given directly; (ii) If, as Russell claims, the foundational character of the so called "basic propositions" rests in the idea that objects such as "Redness-here" are direct sensible presences, then –Dewey argues– it seems that the certainty about the truth of a proposition such as "Redness-here" depends on knowing that the alleged sensible presences which justify it are, in fact, sensible presences. But this – the argument goes on– presupposes an elaborate psychological theory which must explain a) what the processes that connect causally the basic proposition to the direct sensory presences are; and b) what the connection between a *sensum* and the sensory apparatus in virtue of which the given quality is determined as a *sensum* is. Since a) and b) presuppose inferential processes, the thesis according to which there is something such as "knowledge by acquaintance" of certain sensible qualities, and basic propositions which are the base of the edifice of empirical knowledge, becomes untenable.

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Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> See John McDowell, *Having the World in View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), and *Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> See J. Smith, *America's Philosophical Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 31.

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<sup>45</sup> Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> John Dewey, "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth", *Later Works of John Dewey*, Jo Ann Boydston (ed), (Carbondale y Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), vol. 14, p. 170.



## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, from Dewey's point of view, what is merely given in experience has no value or meaning at all. If something experienced is not taken as a sign of another thing, if it does not indicate another thing that could be experienced, it cannot be part of the cognitive life of the organism. To be conscious –in the experience- of something is to realize that it will behave in such and such way if the opportunity takes place, that the present trait of a thing is associated to others that will be revealed in the future if certain operations are executed. Since experience always refers to other experiences, since it is full of expectations and inferences, there is nothing in itself that guarantees the ultimate certainty of empirical knowledge.

Nonetheless, Dewey's theory differs from Sellars' in, at least, the following points:

1) The meaning of what is experienced does not necessarily require language. The experiential consciousness of the world presupposes, rather, the understanding of non-linguistic signs that make the identification of something as such possible.

2) In the context of the inquiry, experience has a clear epistemic connotation. Although not all experience is cognitive, it can be cognitive in reflective contexts, when inquiry takes place. In contrast, in Sellars' works it is not clear at all whether experience is *per se* cognitive or not. As it was remarked, interpreters of Sellars disagree about this point. But even if it were conceded that, for Sellars, experience is in itself cognitive (and not the mere cause of a belief, as some think), this difference would persist: for Dewey, we directly experience the objects of our environment; Sellars, in contrast, should explain how sensations, combined with propositional claims, make experience of external objects possible.

If the main thesis of this article is correct –that Dewey's criticism to classic empiricism can be understood as a criticism of the Myth of the Given- then we have, not only a powerful and current line of criticism of foundationalism in the work of one of the most important pragmatists, but also a theory of experience which could illuminate some recent debates in epistemology and philosophy of mind.