
Pragmatism and Experience in Contemporary Debates

Antje Gimmmler^{*1}, David Hildebrand^{*†}, Joseph Margolis^{*‡}, and Bjørn Ramberg^{*§}

¹Aalborg University [Aalborg] (AAU) – Nyhavnsgade 14, 9000 Aalborg Denmark, Denmark

Abstract

Since the linguistic turn and Wilfred Sellars' critique of the myth of the given, the notion of experience had a bad reputation in contemporary philosophy. Richard Rorty amplified Sellars' critique of experience and turned it against the very pragmatists in whom he found the most inspiration, John Dewey and William James. Robert Brandom's recent work extends and develops Rorty's neopragmatist turn against experience and affirms, proudly and explicitly, that experience should be abandoned as a mythical, confusing, and useless notion.

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Coordinators: David Hildebrand (University of Colorado Denver, US), Antje Gimmmler (University of Aalborg, Denmark)

(hilde123@gmail.com)

(gimmmler@learning.aau.dk)

General Abstract

Since the linguistic turn and Wilfred Sellars' critique of the myth of the given, the notion of experience had a bad reputation in contemporary philosophy. Richard Rorty amplified Sellars' critique of experience and turned it against the very pragmatists in whom he found the most inspiration, John Dewey and William James. Robert Brandom's recent work extends and develops Rorty's neopragmatist turn against experience and affirms, proudly and explicitly, that experience should be abandoned as a mythical, confusing, and useless notion.

Still, experience may not be so easy to eliminate. Not only has the notion played a fundamental role in the historical development of pragmatism, we find it still being deployed in many ways across a wide range of disciplines. Richard Shusterman, for example, has used

^{*}Speaker

[†]Corresponding author: hilde123@gmail.com

[‡]Corresponding author: josephmargolis455@hotmail.com

[§]Corresponding author: b.t.ramberg@csmn.uio.no

the notion of experience to broaden and extend the subject matter and method of aesthetics. In philosophy of mind and cognitive science, Mark Johnson integrates philosophical theories of experience (from classical pragmatists) along with recent scientific discoveries (from anthropology, psychology, and neuro-physiology) to show how meaningful experience is both in mind and in body. In the social sciences the notion of experience is currently experiencing a second career in form of so-called 'practice theories.' Here scholars like Bruno Latour or Theodore Schatzki emphasize the role of materiality, not exclusively as material culture, but in the way it entangles with our actions.

This panel contributes to this Conference's theme (to advance understanding of pragmatism's relevance to contemporary debates in the humanities, social and natural sciences, and communities of practice) with presentations that (a) explicate and analyze the current state of the experience/language tension in contemporary pragmatic theory and (b) provide concrete examples of how experience is playing an indispensable role in contemporary debates.

Panel Contributors:

- Bjørn Torggrim Ramberg (Oslo University, Norway)
- Joseph Margolis (Temple University, Philadelphia)
- David Hildebrand (University of Colorado, Denver)
- Antje Gimmmler (University of Aalborg, Denmark)

Abstracts:

Bjørn Torggrim Ramberg (University of Oslo, Norway)

(b.t.ramberg@csmn.uio.no)

Agendas of pragmatism and the concept of experience

Neo-pragmatists (Rorty, Brandom, Price and others) are often accused of neglecting or denying the significance of the concept of experience and of over-emphasizing the significance of language and linguistic behavior. Thereby, critics claim, neo-pragmatists betray key commitments and lose central insights of classical pragmatists. I suggest that this charge ought to be assessed in light of specific and different agendas that neo-pragmatists are pursuing. To this end, I distinguish three such agendas; (i) the meta-philosophical critique of representationalist epistemology; (ii) the naturalist redescription of the powers of human agency; (iii) the development of rhetorical strategies in service of political progress. I wish to argue for the following: with respect to (i), a thoroughly skeptical attitude toward the concept of experience is mandatory; with respect to (ii), the differences between minds with language and minds without is independently interesting but actually has little bearing on the pragmatist critique of an epistemologically salient notion of experience; and, finally, with respect to (iii), that the Rortyan idea of redescription in fact and unsurprisingly presupposes a rich notion of experience. This, I claim, is how it should be, as the notion(s) of experience that we necessarily invoke and rely on in taking philosophy as a form of cultural politics are indeed strengthened once we distinguish them clearly from the objects of historicist and naturalist critique targeted in (i) and (ii). Such critique will remain, in my view, an integral aspect of a post-metaphysical pragmatism committed to (iii)-that is, committed in its practice to a hope for justice and democracy.

Joseph Margolis

(josephmargolis455@hotmail.com)

Richard Rorty contra Rorty and John Dewey

Dewey's concept of "experience" has baffled many a reader. It is, however, assuredly the key to Dewey's distinctive philosophical contribution. It owes a measure of verbal daring to James's free-wheeling usage, in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*; but, doctrinally, it's entirely Dewey's invention, in the form it takes in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* and *Experience and Nature*. The first chapters of these two books confirm their common theme, though their respective treatments are very different indeed.

The main thrust of the *Logic* is to explain the subordination and the reason for the subordination of the would-be rational resources of canonical logic, standard science, and their merely enabling instrumentalities, within the more "organic," humanely orienting powers of what Dewey names "the logic of inquiry." Existentially (as we may say), "inquiry" is effectively coextensive with "experience," which applies to all the vicissitudes of the career(s) of what Dewey calls a "situation," which begins inchoately, though "organismically"-as "indeterminate," that is, marked by some diffusely "suffered" dysfunctionality (pointedly applied to the entire "situation")-essentially "noncognitive," even "nonconscious" at first.

Inquiry may be construed as a situation's power of self-discovery, mediated by the "problematizing" of its initial dysfunctionality, which issues gradually in "denoting" transient, instrumentally passing "objects" and "processes" that lead, under favorable circumstances, to its becoming suitably "determinate" (the resolution of the initial "dis-ease"). The point of this extraordinary usage (call it heuristic or mythic) is to signal that the human career is itself a contingent articulation of some sort within the formative and transformative contexts of "situations," that is broadly self-regulative in a respect that cannot be independently "denoted" by the instrumental powers of logic and science. Failure to grasp this conceptual (and organismic) dependency accounts for the underlying disorientation and widespread ills of human life (which, culturally, democracy effectively combats). *Experience and Nature* provides a corrective picture along natural and cultural lines, brought to bear, particularly, on inadequate philosophies that succumb to the classically disabling "dualisms" of what Dewey identifies as a "spectatorial" metaphysics and epistemology.

Notoriously, Rorty urges that Dewey would have been well-advised to abandon "experience: in favor of "discourse" (that is, the "linguistic method of philosophy"), which he draws largely from Davidson and Sellars. For various reasons, Rorty betrays his deep misunderstanding of Dewey's pragmatism, the lack of any close relationship between Sellars's notion of the "given" (as a philosophical target) and Dewey's notion of the saving discovery of what is "denoted" (in inquiry) as the "given"; and the extremely problematic (possibly even incoherent) treatment of linguistic meaning in Davidson's most pertinent papers (which Rorty seems to regard as pragmatist in an important sense and is guided by). In any event, neither Davidson nor Rorty can be rightly supposed to extend or improve Deweyan pragmatism: Rorty, in fact, explicitly and unconditionally repudiates the "linguistic turn"; and Davidson finally subverts the very theory of language on which any reading of Rorty's "pragmatist" account of Davidson's theory of meaning would be at all feasible. The exposé of these disorders may contribute to a more careful formulation of the pragmatist undertaking, which lies elsewhere and depends on a measure of convergence between Dewey and Peirce.

David Hildebrand (University of Colorado, Denver)

(hilde123@gmail.com)

"A Case, with Examples, for Experience in Contemporary Pragmatism"

Thirty-plus years ago, Richard Rorty published *Consequences of Pragmatism*. One consequence of that book-along with other subsequent work by Rorty-has been to challenge the centrality of "experience" for pragmatism's conceptions of truth, morality, and reality. Rorty denigrated "experience" and argued that the notion should be eliminated from pragmatism. He criticized pragmatists like Dewey and James for either lapsing into bad faith (offering experience as a substitute for "substance," or "mind," etc.) or for simply lacking the linguistic

tools (devised later by analytic philosophy) to escape philosophical dead ends.

Rorty's challenge, one may safely assert, created both space and motivation for the development of a more language-centered pragmatism, sometimes called "neopragmatism" or "new pragmatism." This language-centered strategy has become important in the work of figures such as Robert Brandom, Huw Price, Cheryl Misak, Michael Williams, and Bjørn Ramberg. However, while Rorty was trying to eliminate experience from pragmatism, contemporaries of Rorty (e.g., John J. McDermott and Richard Bernstein) were elucidating the notion and arguing for its indispensability to pragmatism. In a *The Pragmatic Turn* (2010) Bernstein argued that a pragmatic conception of inquiry requires experience: "[Rortyan] redescription," Bernstein writes, "no matter how imaginative, is not enough." Bernstein traces this lesson to Charles S. Peirce's view that "experience involves bruteness, constraint, 'over-and-againstness.' Experience is our great teacher. And experience takes place by a series of surprises." (Bernstein, R., 2010, *The Pragmatic Turn*, Polity Press, Cambridge, p. 132)

Bernstein's point was that without the element of experience, experimental inquiries lack friction. While this is surely correct, the case for the centrality of experience needs to be made more broadly and more forcefully. Many, indeed, have been working in this vein. This paper will contribute to those arguments not with more theoretical parsings of "experience" and "language," but rather by offering a range of illustrations and examples. The examples come from various arenas, including the technological (medical, educational, communication), the aesthetic, and the religious. Specific examples may include: social "companion" robots, social media such as Facebook or Instagram, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC's), obstetrical ultrasounds, Native American wisdom quests, and the challenge posed to the epistemological hierarchy of the senses by recent developments in the aesthetics of cuisine. Theoretical frameworks for these examples will come from recent work in the philosophy of technology (Peter Paul Verbeek, Larry Hickman, Sherry Turkle), the philosophy of mind (Mark Johnson), and aesthetics (Thomas Alexander, Raymond Boisvert).

Again, the goal of these examples is primarily to expand our imaginations about the roles pre- or non-linguistic experience can play in meaning-making. By showing how meaning can and does rely upon such experiences, the more abstract argument about the necessity of "experience" to pragmatism is given additional weight. This reliance, we might say, strengthens the claim that experience occupies a normative role in pragmatism (indeed, in life), one that cannot be fulfilled by "language" or its cognates. The paper will end with the critical observation that a reliance on experience shows (though I won't have space to spell out this in the paper) the inability of linguistic pragmatisms to accommodate these practices. Existentially, that is, such pragmatisms are too "thin."

Antje Gimmler (University of Aalborg, Denmark)

gimmler@learning.aau.dk

What experience does and language not - and the other way round

That classical pragmatism is not really on top of what counts as philosophical method in the traditions of logical empiricism and the following analytical philosophy has become a common opinion. This has been fueled by Rorty's interpretation of Dewey as well as comments by Robert Brandom. The point seems to be that classical pragmatism has not performed the linguistic turn, thus classical pragmatism has not understood that philosophical problems have to be analyzed in terms of the language one uses to formulate them. Instead classical pragmatism does - and here John Dewey is the most persistent protagonist - insist upon to use such an old-fashioned concept as experience.

But do we have to choose between language and experience? First of all, for classical pragmatism, language is also a central concept, but it takes a different role than in analytic language philosophy. However, *we need to know what is at stake with the alleged alterna-*

tive between language and experience. This is a meta-philosophical question and so what is at stake is the understanding and role of philosophy itself. To put the question very bluntly: do we follow Dewey and the reconstruction of philosophy he recommends (which basically includes a transformation of philosophy); or do we add on a practice perspective to the more recent linguistically focused philosophy - analytical philosophy *cum* practices - in order to broaden the scope of analytical philosophy? The transformation Dewey argued for is originally not directed towards language philosophy; rather, Dewey's reconstructionist philosophy is schooled in critical debate with the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition and its ideal of theory. Does this critique also apply to analytical philosophy? These questions comprise an orientating framework for the following questions which the paper shall pose and discuss:

1. What kind of concept of experience does Dewey advocate? In Robert Brandom's outlines, Dewey's concept of experience has Hegelian traits. This first part discusses the different dimensions of Dewey's concept of experience and concludes that experience from Dewey's viewpoint should not be conceptualized as a purely epistemological concept.
2. This leads to the second question: Is a consistent anti-representationalist position in epistemology possible without also accepting anti-foundationalist consequences and - this is the crucial point - wouldn't that also include the notion of experience in a way where it is neither an empiricist remnant nor a new (mythological, residual) category?

These first two questions are formulated from the viewpoint of philosophy: an inner, philosophical discussion.

3. The third part takes a different perspective. What does Dewey's reconstructed philosophy offer to other disciplines? In social science and political theory, Dewey's philosophy has gained new popularity. It is exactly his theory of inquiry and experience that seems to be most attractive to practice theory (Schatzki, Latour) and non-ideal political theory (Anderson). This part will show that Deweyan pragmatism interprets 'practices' more radically than most of the approaches united under the umbrella term "practice theory."

Still, experience may not be so easy to eliminate. Not only has the notion played a fundamental role in the historical development of pragmatism, we find it still being deployed in many ways across a wide range of disciplines. Richard Shusterman, for example, has used the notion of experience to broaden and extend the subject matter and method of aesthetics. In philosophy of mind and cognitive science, Mark Johnson integrates philosophical theories of experience (from classical pragmatists) along with recent scientific discoveries (from anthropology, psychology, and neuro-physiology) to show how meaningful experience is both in mind and in body. In the social sciences the notion of experience is currently experiencing a second career in form of so-called 'practice theories.' Here scholars like Bruno Latour or Theodore Schatzki emphasize the role of materiality, not exclusively as material culture, but in the way it entangles with our actions.

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Keywords: language, experience, representationalism, Dewey, practices