

**IN SEARCH OF LOST BODY:
ON PRAGMATISM, EXPERIENCE, AND LANGUAGE (*)**

Ángel M. Faerna

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

Angel.Faerna@uclm.es

ABSTRACT: Modern accounts of knowledge do not make much of the fact that we are bodily beings. First, Cartesianism assigned cognitive functions exclusively to the mental. Then the linguistic and the pragmatic turns in philosophy moved away from mind-centred approaches to these functions and focused on meanings and discursive practices, but these were also seen as somehow independent of the physical/material reality of speakers and of signs themselves. In this context, classical pragmatism stood as an alternative account that stressed corporeality as essential to knowledge processes. An illustration of it is John Dewey's appeal to "immediate experience," which I interpret in this connection as a statement about the epistemological significance of the somatic.

The first section of this paper summarizes some traditional sources of the philosophical neglect of the body. In the second section I argue for an alternative starting point that takes the "lived body" as a sort of philosophical premise—a contention suggested by some Wittgensteinian remarks together with some interesting findings by the neuropsychiatrist Oliver Sacks. The third section discloses the affinities between such view and the notion of "immediate experience," and why the latter is not necessarily committed to a dichotomy between language and experience. In the last two sections I face two objections that linguistic pragmatists typically rise against immediate experience—i.e. its alleged commitments to prelingualism and to foundationalism—and try to show that they miss the target.

Keywords: epistemology; immediate experience; lived body; (neo)pragmatism; (non)discursive practices

In an ordinary sense of the terms "experience" and "reality," both our experience and our sense of reality persuade us that we are bodily beings. If someone believes that she can walk through a wall, materialize and dematerialize at will, transport herself to a distant place leaving her body behind, and things of the like, we say that she is a half-wit and does not live in the real world. And if she insists that she has experienced such things, we conclude that her senses are somehow disturbed. Even those who believe that they will live after death as disembodied souls place that way of existence in a reality that transcends ours, and make their belief rest on faith, not on human experience. However, philosophical discussions of these very terms, "experience" and "reality," tend to pay little attention to the human body. One can understand that "metaphysical revisionists"—as Peter Strawson (1959) called the philosophers who try to replace the structure of our ordinary general concepts with an allegedly better one—depict reality in a way that, when deprived of its philosophical justification, resembles that of the deranged person. One can also understand that philosophers who do not credit experience as a means to assess the real indulge themselves with statements that experience would easily revoke.¹ But it is cause for surprise that philosophers who oppose such revisionisms and try to dismiss them have not taken more advantage of the connection amongst the body, the real, and the experienced, that our common speech so clearly embraces.

(*) This work is sponsored by the research program FFI2017-84781-P, co-funded by the Spanish Research Council and the European Regional Development Fund. A first version of this paper appeared in Spanish in Pablo Rychter (ed.), *Realismo y experiencia*, Valencia, Pre-Textos, 2016, pp. 73-90. The English version appears here, with slight modifications, with permission of the Spanish editors. I wish to thank Sierra Nilsson for her corrections to the English manuscript. I am also grateful to two anonymous referees for their useful commentaries.

¹ But one can share at the same time Paul Feyerabend's perplexity regarding these philosophical efforts: "Why are so many people dissatisfied with what they can see and feel? Why do they look for surprises behind events? Why do they believe that, taken together, these surprises form an entire world, and why, most strangely, do they take it for granted that this hidden world is more solid, more trustworthy, more 'real' than the world from which they started?" (1999: vii).

1. The lost body

The neglect of the human body within the mainstream of Western philosophy goes back to Plato, whose influence pervaded Neoplatonist doctrines and then was rapidly subsumed in the early philosophical systems of the Middle Ages. The influence was so strong that it eclipsed other Ancient schools, like the Cyrenaics, the Stoics, or the Cynics, where concern with the body was taken as a central issue. As a matter of fact, Plato's influence was so determinative that it cast a shadow even over Socrates's opinion, phrased by Xenophon in the following terms:

The body is valuable for all human activities, and in all its uses it is very important that it should be as fit as possible. Even in the act of thinking, which is supposed to require least assistance from the body, everyone knows that serious mistakes often happen through physical ill-health (quoted in Shusterman 2000: 267-8).

In Modern philosophy, Descartes admittedly consolidated the isolation of thought activities from bodily processes by construing the relationship between them as that of a (problematic) communication between two different, self-sufficient entities. Thus a "metaphysical problem" emerged —and we all know that the adjective "metaphysical" evokes as pessimistic prognoses when applied to problems, as the adjective "lethal" does when applied to diseases. Descartes, however, did not ignore that an ill condition of the body can cause serious mistakes in judgment. This was precisely one of the reasons for him to distrust the senses as a reliable source of knowledge —like the Ancient skeptics did before him. But he did not draw the seemingly obvious conclusion that a good condition of the body should count therefore as a necessary, though probably not a sufficient, condition of reliable judgment. Descartes acknowledged that without sense experience we would not be able to complete our scientific picture of the world in all its particularities (1998: 249), but he firmly believed that the first principles of the world order

revealed themselves to pure reason only, "pure" meaning a faculty that does not depend upon bodily operations.

Most contemporary epistemology is —or purports to be— anti-Cartesian in two important respects: it condemns foundationalist views of knowledge as well as vocabularies that refer ultimately to "the mental." The latter, however, is not accompanied in the least by the conjugate vindication of the corporeal as an indispensable constituent of knowledge. It is quite true that the so-called "strong program" in naturalized epistemology strives to redirect philosophers' attention to the study of the organic processes underlying cognitive functions. But it is hard to see, for those who do not commit to that program, how a better understanding, say, of brain activity would shed any light by itself on such epistemological questions as justification, objectivity, or realism, which in fact are begged in the very use of brain science as a source of relevant answers. On the other hand, and more to my point here, the program does not account for the *inherent* relationship (if there is any) between knowledge and the body. The latter is, I think, the conceptual challenge that Cartesian metaphysics left us to cope with, not the empirical challenge of finding out physical counterparts for mental operations.²

2. "Here is one leg"

Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the contemporary philosophers who can help in coping with the aforementioned challenge; even though his philosophy

² Descartes did not deny that such correlations exist, and he himself looked hard for them. It is a common mistake to think that Descartes held that the self is just a mind or spirit and not, *de facto*, also flesh and blood; this is already evident from the full argument of *Meditations on First Philosophy* and even more so from his work as a whole. Nevertheless, that mind and body are "numerically the same" did not mean for Descartes that they are "essentially" or conceptually one. See footnote 4 below —and, for a full discussion of this point, Ors & Sanfélix 2014.

is not directly concerned with epistemology, it still suggests reasons to think that epistemologists' inattentiveness to the corporeal dimension of human beings has misled them in important ways.

When Wittgenstein states that one cannot doubt whether one has a body (1979: §257), his statement should strike not only Cartesians but also "neurophilosophers." For one thing, if I think of my body as an observable object among others, or as a mere "material thing," it does not seem that the proposition "I am a material thing" has a privileged epistemic status, for the question "What is a material thing?" has not an evident answer. If I take "matter" to mean what physics says about such entities as fields and particles, or such magnitudes as mass, force, or movement, I must accept that my own material nature is no more transparent to me than is the material nature, say, of Mars. In this respect, my being a piece of matter, according to whatever description of matter provided by physical theory, is known to me indirectly and only as far as I commit to that theory. Hence, it is not indubitable knowledge.

Certainly, the notion of matter admits of descriptions that are independent of our present scientific framework, though not independent of any framework of thought whatsoever. A cursory historical survey would show that the meaning of the term "matter" has shifted many times; or, more properly, that to read Aristotle's "hylé," Descartes' "res extensa," and Popper's "first world" (just to mention some representative cases) as if they all referred interchangeably to "matter" is a convenient expedient but not a rigorous view. Now, what is significant about Wittgenstein's above statement is precisely that it does not seem to depend on any particular framework of thought concerning material entities in general.

On the contrary, this statement brings to the foreground the discontinuity existing between what we *know* about things like Mars, particles, or what science generically calls "bodies", on one hand, and the awareness that we ourselves are corporeal, on the

other. According to Wittgenstein, what I know is that about which I can give or ask for reasons, produce or demand proofs, rise or resolve doubts, etc. In a word, knowledge is *discursive*. Then, the statement that one cannot doubt whether one has a body amounts to say that the awareness of our own bodies is *not* discursive, in this sense. This is the reason why we cannot make sense of doubting or proving that we have a body; nor can we use such awareness—as G. E. Moore (1993a) wrongly thought—as a premise in order to prove the existence of "bodies" in general. The question is, then: how *that* body that we indubitably have—not the one that we tentatively know to need oxygen in order to live and neurons in order to think—intervenes in knowledge?

The first thing to be noticed in this connection is that one *experiences* that body. This may sound vaguely esoteric, for this experience is not of the same sort as the one that a physicist, a physician, or a neurologist may have of a human body as an "observable object," and this fact seems to suggest that the kind of experience involved here is out of reach for science. However, some scientists think that the converse is true: it is the reductionism exerted by science when it comes to think of the human body—in what the neuroscientist Alexander Luria labelled as the "veterinary approach"³—that impedes a scientific outlook on the subject. Oliver Sacks, one of Luria's followers, points at the Cartesian bias of this reductionism:

It is clear, first and foremost, that our bodies are personal—that they are the first definers of ego or self. ("The ego is first and foremost a body-ego," as Freud writes.) But none of this has really entered neurology. Neurology still bases itself on a mechanical model [...]. The mechanical model goes back to Descartes, to his dichotomous division of body and soul, his notion of the body as an automaton, with a knowing-willing "I" somehow floating above it.

But clinical and personal experience—an experience such as I relate in this book—is totally incompatible with such a duality; it shows

³ See Sacks 2012: 202.

the bankruptcy of the classical model (2012: 203).

The appeal to “clinical and personal experience,” coming from a scientist, should catch the attention of epistemologists with a naturalistic disposition. On the other hand, it is telling that Sacks thought of Wittgenstein when he underwent the astonishing experience that he recollects in his book: the temporary “loss” of one of his legs as a result of an operation after a mountain accident. His left leg was still there after the operation, but not only was he unable to feel it and unable to move it, but he did not even recognize it as *his*, that it was an integral part of *his* body, or as belonging to *him*. To all *empirical* effects, that inert limb had ceased to be a part of his personal, corporeal reality, and seeing it stuck *to his body* was revolting and terrifying for him. This syndrome had been described earlier in psychiatry books as a mere hysteric disorder, but now Sacks had found out that it had a neurologic basis —it was a mistake in judgment caused by an illness of the body, so to say. Going through that experience in the first person made him understand in what relationship his personal self stood to his body in an entirely new way. In describing the struggle that took place inside him while lying in bed and trying to assimilate intellectually what he was living, Sacks writes:

I heard, in Wittgenstein’s voice, the opening words of his last work, *On Certainty*: “If you can say, *Here is one leg*, we’ll grant you all the rest... The question is, whether it can make sense to doubt it.” (And only later did I realize that my memory, or imagination, had interposed “leg” for “hand.”) “Certainty,” for Wittgenstein, was grounded in the certainty of the body. But the certainty of the body was grounded in action (2012: 65).

The kind of experience described by Sacks (the loss of certainty regarding a part of his observable body) and Wittgenstein’s statement both invalidate the analysis according to which the proposition “I am a body” is the inclusion of an individual term within a general concept, as, for instance, in “Mars is a body.” My corporeity and

that that I can attribute to any other observable thing apart from me are “categorially” different, for I experience other things as being corporeal, while my *experiencing* things (including my experiencing myself) is *somatic* in itself. A way to stress the difference I am pointing at would be to distinguish between “the observed body” and “the lived (or personal) body.”⁴ During his episode, Sacks still could observe his left leg, but he did not live (in) that part of his body any more. Complementary to this, the remark that one cannot doubt whether one has a body conveys our sense that we do not know what it would be like to live a disembodied life.⁵ Now, in adding that the certainty of our own body is grounded in *action*, Sacks is expressing an insight that leads to an alternative analysis of the proposition “I am a body:” namely, the experience of being a body is not a conceptual apprehension, it is immediate, because it is primarily practical.

⁴ It is fair to acknowledge that this distinction did not escape Descartes, who differentiated the body as “united to the soul” from the body as “a determinate part of matter” in one of his letters (February 9, 1645) to Mesland: “First of all, I consider what exactly is the body of a man, and I find that this word ‘body’ is very ambiguous. When we speak of a body in general, we mean a determinate part of matter, a part of the quantity of which the universe is composed. In this sense, if the smallest amount of that quantity were removed, we would judge without more ado that the body was smaller and no longer complete; and if any particle of the matter were changed, we would at once think that the body was no longer quite the same, no longer numerically the same. But when we speak of the body of a man, we do not mean a determinate part of matter, or one that has a determinate size; we mean simply the whole of the matter which is united with the soul of that man. And so, even though that matter changes, and its quantity increases or decreases, we still believe that it is the same body, numerically the same body, so long as it remains joined and substantially united with the same soul” (1991: 242-243). I thank Vicente Sanfélix for calling my attention to this passage.

⁵ Maybe for this reason most Christians believe in a material resurrection with a restored human body, not just in the resurrection of the individual soul. The restoration of the material body is needed to make sense of the idea of immortality as eternal personal *life*.

3. The practical character of immediate experience

Sacks quotes from a letter that Alexander Luria addressed to him: “The body is a unity of actions, and if a part of the body is split off from action, it becomes ‘alien’ and not felt as part of the body” (2012: 166). These words could have well been written by William James—to whom Sacks also refers several times in his book. As a matter of fact, classical pragmatists conceived the practical character of experience precisely in the sense that having an experience is an inherently somatic affair. For instance, when John Dewey spoke of “immediate qualitative experience”⁶ he did not mean a pre-conceptual content presumably given in experience, but the specific way in which each situation, as it is experienced by the subject, evokes an active response—a sensory-motor reaction in the first place—to the contents there presented.⁷ Pragmatically considered, every experience is, so to say, an awareness of the potentialities of the active body within the situation given at that moment.

The most outstanding feature of this pragmatic concept of experience is that it is radically non-solipsistic. Dewey used to remind William James’ remark that the term “experience” is “double-barreled,” for it points in two directions simultaneously:

⁶ See Dewey 1971: 73-74 and Dewey 1991a and 1991b.

⁷ According to Dewey, the fact that experienced situations are invested with a specific quality is also at the basis of the intellectual operations that the subject makes with “ideas” referring to those experiences: “When I think of a nest why does a bird come into my mind? As a matter of contiguity, there are multitudinous leaves and twigs which are more frequently and more obviously juxtaposed than is a bird. When I think of a hammer, why is the idea of nail so likely to follow? Such questions suggest, I hope, that even in seemingly casual cases of association, there is an underlying quality which operates to control the connection of objects thought of. It takes something else than contiguity to effect association; there must be relevancy of both ideas to a situation defined by unity of quality” (Dewey 1991a: 257-258). That unity of quality lies not within the situation itself but in the subject’s active disposition to that situation, as the example of the hammer clearly illustrates.

Like its congeners, life and history, it includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer [...], in short, processes of *experiencing*. [...] It is “double-barrelled” in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality. “Thing” and “thought,” as James says in the same connection, are single-barrelled; they refer to products discriminated by reflection out of primary experience (1971: 10-11).

That is to say, primary (i.e. immediate, qualitative, unanalyzed, non-discursive, practical) experience does not confront us “solipsistically” with our own body, if this means that it does not comprise also the shakes, pressures, and resistances coming from what *is not* our body. It is not accidental that Dewey links “experience,” “life,” and “history,” because “I am a body” entails my being immersed in a temporal course of events, my feeling impacts from the environment as well as my having a sense of traction on it. Could I *not* doubt that I am a body but *do* doubt that it is alive and has a history?⁸ Thus, primary experience, far from committing us to subjectivism, reveals subjectivism to be a misrepresentation of experience itself where the abstract dialectic of concepts overlooks the functional inseparability of single-barreled terms like “subject” and “object,” “act” and “material,” “thought” and “thing,” thus concealing the fact that what is experienced and the act of experiencing it entail each other, just as *what* is lived entails the process of *living* it, or the *happening* of some event entails the fact that it *happens to* somebody—i.e. to some *body*.

It is not hazardous to presume that such epistemological problems as realism, objectivity, or skepticism, would have had a different discussion if their

⁸ Moore himself, when he produced his “list of truisms,” already implicitly linked the existence of a human body with its being a living thing existing in time: “There exists at present a living human body, which is *my* body. This body was born at a certain time in the past, and has existed continuously ever since, though not without undergoing changes” (1993b: 107).

departing point would have been a “somatic experience” of the type sketched here. Next, I will consider two reasons why this trail was not, in fact, followed. In a somewhat paradoxical fashion, both have to do with the anti-Cartesian spirit of contemporary epistemology, for in its laudable effort to evade foundationalism and mind-centered approaches to knowledge, it, however, fell prey to the same oblivion of the body as the Cartesian view did.

4. Body and language

The first reason seems rather obvious: the linguistic turn in philosophy would have precluded the vindication of anything that may present itself as “non-discursive” and, to that extent, extra-linguistic. However, I use the conditional tense because the case is not that simple. Nelson Goodman once summarized the evolution of mainstream contemporary epistemology in the following sequence:

[It] began when Kant exchanged the structure of the world for the structure of the mind, continued when C. I. Lewis exchanged the structure of the mind for the structure of concepts, and [...] now proceeds to exchange the structure of concepts for the structure of the several symbol systems of the sciences, philosophy, the arts, perception, and everyday discourse (1978: x).

According to this narrative, the linguistic turn redirected philosophical scrutiny from the Cartesian mind, formalized later by Kant as a rigid structure of possibilities impressed a priori upon our subjectivity, to the languages that codify the symbol systems that make thought possible in the first place. This way, the mind/body opposition seems no longer fundamental inasmuch as languages are not seen as primary mental realities. Therefore, the linguistic turn did not imply by itself that the old view in which the body was left out of the picture should subsist, but something else is needed to explain why a philosophy that redirects scrutiny to the linguistic remains indifferent to the body. In other

words, the dualism that concerns us now is not that between mind and body, but that between body and language.

This “something else” is the view that language is *essentially* a vehicle for discourse, that is, a view that equates linguistic competence with the ability to connect meanings in terms of truth-functional relations. The most recent and explicit expression of this view is Robert Brandom’s “semantic inferentialism,” which defines language users as individuals that get into normative commitments within the practice of giving and asking for reasons (see 2000); but it has an old ancestry, for it descends from that Modern tradition that made the term “experience” to mean a repository of “impressions” whose whole function and use were to validate “ideas” or “concepts,” that is, a tradition to which experience was philosophically relevant only because of its justificatory relationship to knowledge. Thus, when the structure of concepts was exchanged by linguistic structures, to use Goodman’s phrase, there remained the habit of thinking of the latter as nothing more than a scaffolding for reasoning — a habit, by the way, that Goodman himself avoids, for the symbol systems that he mentions above include systems that are not inferentially articulated, like perception or the arts, along with others that indeed have this articulation, like philosophy or the sciences.

To a philosophy of language that understands the linguistic only as a manifestation of discursive reasoning, the body remains as irrelevant to the comprehension of linguistic practices as it was, before the linguistic turn, to the comprehension of the activities of the mind. However, not everything in language is reasoning, as true as not everything in experience is cognition. As indicated earlier, Wittgenstein remarked that our experience of being a body cannot be conjugated with epistemologically-laden verbs such as “know,” “believe,” “doubt,” or “justify.” For Goodman, on the other hand, the range of language extends to non-inferentially articulated symbol systems like the arts. From the standpoint of these philosophers, thus, the

abandonment of mind-centered approaches imposed by the linguistic turn does not commit us *per force* to a new dualism between (discursive) language and (non-discursive) bodies.

Moreover, such dualism seems explicitly precluded in Wittgenstein's case by his peculiar way of relating linguistic to non-linguistic behaviour —i.e. to bodily movements— within “language-games.” His *Philosophical Investigations* opens with a paragraph of Augustine's *Confessions* where different movements of the body are mentioned at least five times in scarcely ten lines —“corpus ad aliquid movebant,” “ostendere,” “ex motu corporis,” “vultu et nutu oculorum,” “membrorum actu”— as necessarily accompanying the utterances of words (1981: I, §1). And, in the “primitive language” that Wittgenstein imagines in the subsequent paragraph in order to criticize Augustine's concept of meaning, communication between a builder and her assistant consists of a sort of choreography where utterances —“block,” “pillar,” “slab,” “beam”— are combined with the movement of their arms passing the stones from one to the other (I, §2).⁹ Brandom argues (2011: 31), consistently enough with his own theoretical assumptions, that the latter is not in fact a case of linguistic communication, provided that the rules that both participants follow in using words do not involve inferential commitments. However, Brandom's contention that the participants are not *saying*, i.e. that their behaviour is “vocal” but not “verbal,” seems to me a mere stipulation in order to preserve his own restrictive definition of what should count as “language.”¹⁰

⁹ As Wittgenstein's “counterexample” reveals, it is not the intervention of bodily movements what he thinks mistaken in Augustine's picture of the acquisition of language.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, in contrast, limits himself to observe that this would be only “a language more primitive than ours” (ibid.). I have developed more fully this criticism of Brandom's narrow concept of “linguistic practice” elsewhere (see Faerna 2014).

Earlier than Wittgenstein, John Dewey (1987: 67 ff.) had already conceived meaning as inseparable from non-linguistic behaviour, not by imagining more primitive forms of language but simply by observing how linguistic abilities emerge in real contexts of psychological development. Before they are able to speak, children learn how to say what they need or want by crying. They *say* it because their cries are intended to evoke a certain response; that is, these cries are already speech-acts,¹¹ in contrast to the involuntary cries that the baby effects as mere vocal counterparts of its organic condition. In these rudimentary utterances, the primary use of language as a signal-system for human communication reveals itself —a function that could by no means be accomplished without a parallel display of motions, gestures, grimaces, glances, and other forms of body expression. In a substantial sense, therefore, we learn — and teach— to talk with and from our bodies within practical contexts or situations that involve physical action; it is only as a part of such practical situations that “language-games” can take place.

This explains Wittgenstein's dictum that “language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination” (1979, § 475). Anyway, Dewey and Wittgenstein were not thinking from scratch. Dewey, for instance, quotes the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen in support of the idea that language emerged in connection with such physical activities as dancing and singing, where playful dimensions overtake intellectual reasoning.¹² Situations

¹¹ Let me note in passing that not only the approach to language inspired by “the second Wittgenstein,” but also that stemming from John Austin's theory of speech-acts, challenges inferentialist semantics and pays attention to non-discursive dimensions of linguistic behaviour.

¹² “Language originated as play, and the organs of speech were first trained in this singing sport of idle hours” (Jespersen 1894: 355). Dewey's quotation from Jespersen in *Experience and Nature* (where the author's name is misspelled as “Jespersen”) comes from pages 356-357 of the same work: “[Jespersen] says that many linguistic philosophers appear to ‘imagine our primitive ancestors after their own image as serious and well meaning men, endowed with a large share of common sense ... They leave you with the impression that these first framers of speech were sedate citizens with a strong

as those described by Jespersen, Wittgenstein or Dewey, in spite of being pre-discursive —or maybe *because* of this fact— disclose the original use of language tools, namely, to serve as symbolic systems that channel and shape shared practices within human communities.¹³

The philosophers of the linguistic turn proceeded in due course to a “pragmatic turn” that gave pre-eminence to language as practice, but this second turn was not of the type advocated by Dewey or Wittgenstein, where the practice involved was not linguistic through-and-through. Had it been of that type, epistemological inquiries would have been likely readdressed toward problems less concerned with justification and much more involved in what can be loosely called “philosophy of culture.” The naturalization of epistemology would have then turned an eye to disciplines like anthropology, history, sociology, or psychology, instead of plunging into neurophysiology — that “quaint favorite child of the analytic philosophers,” as Jürgen Habermas calls it (1990: 15).¹⁴ This would have been so because the rationale of the practice that supports language as a whole refers ultimately to

interest in the purely business and matter of fact aspects of life.’ [...] He concludes that the ‘genesis of language is found ... in the poetic side of life; the source of speech is not gloomy seriousness, but merry play and youthful hilarity’” (Dewey 1971: 71). It is not unlikely that Jespersen had also partially inspired Wittgenstein’s association of language with games. I thank Nicolás Sánchez Durá for pinpointing the exact reference to Jespersen’s work, which is missing in Dewey’s book.

¹³ Dewey stressed the difference between language considered as a means for communication, this being its primary function as a cultural device, and language considered as a means for inquiry, or as ordered discourse, which appeared later as a result of cultural evolution and intellectual maturation (see Faerna 2014: 365-368).

¹⁴ This shift toward cultural naturalism is being demanded by philosophers nowadays like Thomas Alexander: “It is high time we started thinking about ‘philosophy of culture’ rather than ‘philosophy of mind’ and turned toward anthropology and semiotics rather than physics, neurology, or information theory. One could even speak of reviving the idea of a philosophy of symbolic forms” (2014: 67). Alexander does not see this as a turn *within* epistemology, but rather as a move *away from* it (79-80), but I take this to be a verbal question mainly.

experience in the pragmatic, double-barreled sense: i.e. to situations in which speakers find themselves, to existing needs and ends in view —in a word, to the experience, life, and history of human bodies. This means that linguistic experience and somatic experience are not only merged in origin, but they remain inseparable all the way down. Linguistic meaning and “the lived body” cannot be severed apart. When Wittgenstein anchors language games to “forms of life,” he is thinking of the bodies that we human beings live in no less than of the social habits that we incorporate. For this reason, when he wants to illustrate a situation where linguistic communication is entirely hopeless, he does not ask us to imagine the talk of an alien or a barbarian, but the talk of a lion (1981 II xi: 223).¹⁵

¹⁵ In the same paragraph, just before saying that “if a lion could talk, we could not understand him,” Wittgenstein admits that “one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country’s language. We do not *understand* the people.” He contrasts this with our feeling that “some people [...] are transparent to us,” in the sense that we do not think that there is something “*internal* [in them that] is hidden from us.” For example, “if I see someone writhing in pain with evident cause I do not think: all the same, his feelings are hidden from me.” The second example qualifies, I think, the statement that one person can be “a complete enigma” to another person; note that, if the woman writhing in pain is from a strange country, this does not affect in the least my feeling that I *understand* her. The fact that writhing in pain is a case of body expression supports the point I am trying to make, for it is her being a *human* body that convinces me that she and I share a form of life. It is wholly different with animals; even if we learn to interpret their movements —as intimidating, submissive, attentive, distrusting, menacing, and so on— we cannot know what it is for them to have the corresponding *experience*, even if we avoid conceiving it in solipsistic terms. We cannot say what it would be like to be a lion or a bat, they are not transparent to us (unless we *decide* to think so; see Faerna 2002 for more on this).

5. Experience and the Given

Let us proceed now to the second reason that explains why epistemology after the linguistic turn still remains unconcerned with our bodily dimension. The first reason, I have argued, had to do with the wrong idea that the non-discursive character of bodily experience separates it from public language and confines it to the private sphere of “mental states”. The second one alleges that, even if the language/body dichotomy is somehow overcome by following Dewey’s or Wittgenstein’s account of language, an appeal to experience in any of its forms will take us back to the second mortal sin of Cartesianism: foundationalism.

The concept of experience has been surely the foremost victim of the epistemology inspired by the linguistic turn, ironic as this may be for a tradition that originated in logical *empiricism*. A second irony is that the strongest efforts to obliterate the term “experience” came from philosophers as fond of pragmatism as Richard Rorty or the above-mentioned Brandom, provided that it is hard to pick a single page from James’ or Dewey’s works that does not contain the term several times—not to mention titles like *Experience and Nature* or *Essay in Radical Empiricism*.¹⁶

Rorty’s version of the argument¹⁷ contends that the use of “experience” in epistemological contexts always involves an attempt to make knowledge rest upon something outside language, which means something that transcends the contingency of our vocabularies and reveals how the world really is—or how it can be univocally known. Any attempt of this sort—the argument proceeds—falls prey to what Wilfrid Sellars called “the myth of the Given:” i.e. the idea that something that is pre-conceptually given can provide

evidence for or against propositional (therefore conceptualized) assertions.

It is true that what Dewey or James termed “experience” (or what Wittgenstein called “certainties”) should be taken as something given, for it is not a conceptual elaboration, it is not attained by inference, and it is not the propositional content of a belief. Now, to affirm that there can be something given in this sense is not in itself to commit “the myth of the Given,” for the affirmation does not entail that the given element serves as an independent instance to assess the truth-value of judgments, or as a foundation of knowledge.¹⁸ As stated earlier, to see every experience as conveying knowledge is reductionist, and Rorty incurs this sort of reductionism in assuming that if experience cannot have the role of a foundation in epistemological contexts, then it cannot have any role whatsoever.

To say that experience is something “given” amounts to say only that it is something “had,” as opposed to something that we do or produce.¹⁹ But etymologically the term “given” evokes the Latin word “datum” and so the given seems to refer to a collection of “data.” The dictionary defines “datum” as “something *known* or assumed; information from which conclusions can be *inferred*,”²⁰ and this semantic resonance makes Rorty’s argument appear plausible enough. But the precedent discussion should have made clear that experience in the pragmatic sense has little to do with the artificial, atomistic notion of a “repository of data” for justificatory

¹⁸ “It does not follow [from the argument based on the myth of the Given] that philosophy should never concern itself with the nondiscursive. Drawing this conclusion means assuming that philosophy’s only possible use for nondiscursive experience is in justificational epistemology, and that assumption is neither self-evident nor argued for” (Shusterman 1997: 171-172).

¹⁹ Thomas Alexander has noted that, although pragmatism is generally associated with the primacy of action or “doing”, Dewey considered that “undergoing” is prior: “Undergoing is what Dewey also calls ‘having,’ the qualitative, determinate immediacy of existence as the outcome of a history of events” (2014: 75, see also n. 31).

²⁰ Quoted from Webster’s New World Dictionary, Third College Edition; emphases added.

¹⁶ The most recent summary of the present pragmatist debate on experience is Hildebrand 2014.

¹⁷ Rorty combats the appeal to experience by philosophers prior to the linguistic turn, like Dewey (Rorty 1982a), as well as subsequent to it, like McDowell (Rorty 1998).

purposes, i.e. the concept of experience that Modern philosophy coined in order to foster its foundationalist epistemological agenda.²¹ Thus, this line of argument moves in a vicious circle. In order to break it, we should ask first, not what particular role experience can play within knowledge, but whether it is at all possible to make sense of knowledge pragmatically without that “minimal empiricism” that takes into account what is “given” to us, or what we immediately “have” in the form of situations, needs, and purposes in which our language-games take place. If everything in discursive knowledge reduces itself to a negotiation over meanings, what can account for the existence of discursive knowledge itself *as a practice*? One can dodge this question if one is ready to say that there exists no practice other than linguistic practice. Although some philosophers seem ready to say that, their move does not take us away from the pitfalls of Modern epistemology, but rather takes us back to the long shadow casted by Plato. As Richard Shusterman persuasively puts it:

Textualist ideology has been extremely helpful in dissuading philosophy from misguided quests for absolute foundations outside our contingent linguistic and social practices. But in making this therapeutic point, [...] textualism also encourages an unhealthy idealism that identifies human-being-in-the-world with linguistic activity and so tends to neglect or overly textualize nondiscursive somatic experience. As “the contemporary counterpart of [nineteenth century] idealism,” textualism displays idealism’s disdain for materiality, hence for the corporeal. [...] The whole project of policing the borders between “the logical space of reasons” and the realm of “physical causes” so as to confine philosophy to the former is just one more assertion of the old dualism of separating the concerns of the superior soul from the corruption of the material body (1997: 173-174; the terms between quotation marks are from Rorty 1982b).

²¹ As a matter of fact, it was Peirce who, as early as 1868, gave the foundationalist agenda the deathblow with his criticism of the faculty of “intuition” (i.e. a cognition not determined by previous cognitions) in “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” (Peirce 1992)

The distinction between reasons and causes is one of those conceptual tools that are useful as long as they are not construed as a philosophical dichotomy. It shows its limitations when one tries to take the abandonment of the Cartesian dualism seriously. For if we adopt the pragmatist definition of belief as habit²² and admit that habits belong, per se, to the body, it will be difficult for us to see the reasons that support our beliefs (discursively) as totally independent of the causes that make our bodies acquire their habits (physically).²³

Rorty’s target is the idea that experience is a source of “data” to render the exact, univocal depiction of things, but his argument, in fact, deprives language of the capacity that he himself claims for it when he invites us to create new vocabularies that allow for better forms of life.²⁴ If transforming our ways of speaking can diminish the existing violence and suffering, how can we deny, then, that there is a connection between the meanings we use and the somatic experience that is expressed and reinforced through them? Although the foundationalist ideal of a “tribunal of experience” must be dismissed, the ulterior dismissal of experience at large in accounting for our linguistic practices seems to take things definitely too far.²⁵ Rorty’s and Brandom’s

²² According to Alexander Bain’s famous definition, of which “pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary” (Peirce 1998: 399).

²³ This insight was anticipated by Spinoza, the Modern philosopher that made most to escape the Cartesian dualism of mind and body: “Human affairs, of course, would be conducted far more happily if it were equally in man’s power to be silent and to speak. But experience teaches all too plainly that men have nothing less in their power than their tongue, and can do nothing less than moderate their appetites. [...] The decisions of the Mind are nothing but the appetites themselves, which therefore vary as the disposition of the Body varies” (1988: 496-497).

²⁴ I follow Shusterman (1997: 172-173) on this point. Shusterman observes in the same place that Rorty admitted (in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*) that the distinction between reasons and causes loses utility once we abandon the idea that language “represents” the world.

²⁵ I suspect that Rorty’s criticism of McDowell is biased by the fact that the latter slips the term “tribunal” in his characterization of “minimal empiricism,” i.e. “the idea

mistake is not so much to have despised experience than to have assumed that whoever uses this term is enlisted in doing bad epistemology.

6. Conclusion

Those symbolic systems that Nelson Goodman talked about are generally understood nowadays as aggregates of socially regulated practices, not as mere linguistic objectifications of what previous theories of knowledge had put inside the subject's mind. If one is not willing to repeat the old dualism of mind and body, or the more recent one of language and body, in the form of a third dichotomy between linguistic and non-linguistic games—let me remind that “non-linguistic games” are what really matters if philosophy is to be of any human interest, for they are the arena in which happiness and unhappiness, life and death are decided—, the assessment of such practices should involve something that, in the absence of a better word, can only be described as “experience.” This experience does not reside in mind nor vanish in language; it does not supply us with “data” to adjudicate truth-values among propositions taken one by one; it cannot put us in touch with a univocal reality placed beyond the contingency of our vocabularies; but it is the experience enjoyed and suffered by our material bodies, one that links the

that experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are, as it must be if we are to make sense of it as thinking at all” (McDowell 1996: xii). “Mediate” is a function that admits of non-foundationalist interpretations, but Rorty's reply turns again, all the same, to the distinction between reasons and causes: “One of the ways in which we interact with [things and persons] is through their effects on our sensory organs and other parts of our bodies. [We should] be content with an account of the world as exerting control on our inquiries in a merely causal way, rather than as exerting what McDowell calls ‘rational control’” (1998: 140). I insist that a philosophical dichotomy between reasons and causes is an unnecessarily high price to pay for the rejection of foundationalism, for it renders all the interactions that our bodies have with persons and things completely irrelevant to epistemology, as nineteenth century idealism did.

discourse of knowledge to specific existential conditions, that does not sever justificatory practices from the activity of evaluating, reproducing, and transforming forms of life. This experience links together the space of reasons and the space of causes, without confusing them but also without making of them something too close to the Kantian distinction between “phenomena” and “noumena.”

Experience in the pragmatic sense not only defies traditional and recent dichotomies in epistemology, it also fights cultural divisions as those decried by John Dewey:

Traditional theories in philosophy and psychology have accustomed us to sharp separations between physiological and organic processes on the one hand and the higher manifestations of culture in science and art on the other. The separations are summed up in the common division made between mind and body. These theories have also accustomed us to draw rigid separations between the logical, strictly intellectual, operations which terminate in science, the emotional and imaginative processes which dominate poetry, music and to a lesser degree the plastic arts, and the practical doings which rule our daily life and which result in industry, business and political affairs (1991b: 104).

Particularly, the parallelism that Dewey established between science and the arts becomes more apparent when their respective experiential subject-matters are connected to our bodily existence. If we stop thinking that epistemology and aesthetics are inquiries into something incorporeal (Propositions, Forms), we will start seeing cognitive and artistic activities as parts of one and the same “existential economy” of the lived body, i.e. as forms of organizing the energies of the body in the direction of an enhanced, more meaningful experience.²⁶

To say that epistemological inquiries should acknowledge the tribunal of pragmatic experience is not to say that this is the bedrock where the spade is turned, it is rather a proposal to change the tool, or at least to

²⁶ See Dewey 1987, and also Shusterman 2000.

start digging somewhere else. If we are to be naturalistic and anti-dualistic philosophers, or even simply realistic persons, we must admit that no one mind ever achieved anything without a body, least of all truth and knowledge and a language to express them. The overly intellectualized outlook bequeathed by Plato not only encouraged metaphysical revisionism—a relatively innocuous consequence—it also legitimized an undesirable division of labour between those who think and those who act. As Dewey wrote in an almost Foucaultian mood, “Prestige goes to those who use their minds without participation of the body and who act vicariously through control of the bodies and labor of others” (1987: 27). This issue cannot be pursued within the limits of conventional epistemology, and this very fact proves that those limits were drawn too narrowly. Pragmatists should persevere today in the task of pushing them down.

References

- Alexander, Thomas M. 2014. “Linguistic Pragmatism and Cultural Naturalism: Noncognitive Experience, Culture, and the Human Eros.” In D. L. Hildebrand (ed.), Symposium “Language or Experience: Charting Pragmatism’s Course for the 21st Century,” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 6 (2): 64-90.
- Brandom, Robert. 2000. *Articulating Reasons. An Introduction to Inferentialism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- 2011. *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, & Contemporary*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Descartes, René. 1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume III, The Correspondence*, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1998. *Principles of Philosophy, The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I*, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 177-291.
- Dewey, John. 1971. *Experience and Nature*. Second Edition. LaSalle (Ill.): The Open Court Publishing Company.
- 1987. *Art as Experience, The Later Works of John Dewey (1925-1953)*, vol. 10. Carbondale & Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- 1991a. “Qualitative thought.” In *The Later Works of John Dewey (1925-1953)*, vol. 5. Carbondale & Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 243-262.
- 1991b. “Affective thought.” In *The Later Works of John Dewey (1925-1953)*, vol. 2. Carbondale & Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 104-110.
- Faerna, Ángel M. 2002. “Problemas de comunicación: del Menón a los Encuentros en la Tercera Fase.” *Dáimon, Revista de Filosofía* 25: 131-144.
- 2014. “On norms and social practices: Brandom, Dewey, and the demarcation question.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society. A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 50 (3): 360-372.
- Feyerabend, Paul K. 1999. *Conquest of Abundance. A Tale of Abstraction versus the Richness of Being*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1978. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

- Habermas, Jürgen. 1990. "Philosophy as Stand-in and Interpreter." In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1-20.
- Hildebrand, David L. Ed. 2014. Symposium "Language or Experience: Charting Pragmatism's Course for the 21st Century". *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 6 (2).
- Jespersen, Otto. 1894. *Progress in Language, with Special Reference to English*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. / New York: Macmillan & Co.
- McDowell, John. 1996. *Mind and World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moore, George E. 1993a. "Proof of an External World." In *Selected Writings*, edited by Th. Baldwin. London & New York: Routledge, 147-170.
- 1993b. "A Defence of Common Sense." In *Selected Writings*, edited by Th. Baldwin. London & New York: Routledge, 106-133.
- Ors, Carmen & Sanfélix, Vicente. 2014. "Esprit détaché. El yo en las *Meditaciones*." In François Jaran (ed.), *De la metafísica a la antropología: reinterpretando el dualismo de Descartes*. Valencia: Pre-Textos, 53-68.
- Peirce, Charles S. (1992). "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Men". In *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 1 (1867-1893)*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 11-27.
- 1998. "Pragmatism." In *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2 (1893-1913)*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 398-433.
- Rorty, Richard. 1982a. "Dewey's Metaphysics." In *Consequences of Pragmatism. Essays, 1972-1980*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 72-89.
- 1982b. "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism." *Ibid*, 139-159.
- 1998. "The Very Idea of Human Answerability to the World: John McDowell's Version of Empiricism." In *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 138-152.
- Sacks, Oliver 2012. *A Leg to Stand On*. London: Picador.
- Shusterman, Richard. 1997. *Practicing Philosophy. Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*. New York & London: Routledge.
- 2000. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Second Edition. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Spinoza, Baruch. 1988. *Ethics, The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, edited and translated by E. Curley. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 408-617.
- Strawson, Peter F. 1959. *Individuals. An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1979. *On Certainty*, translated by D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- 1981. *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.