

Language as (a Mode of) Experience

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

Keywords Experience. Meaning. Language. Pragmatism. Mode.

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1 Introduction

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

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

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 (Cometti unpublished, 17)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Language as a Constitutive Mode of Experience

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 Language and the Experience of Meaning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes, Wittgenstein’s verdict is negative:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Conclusion

Let us consider five claims.

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

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

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