

## THE GIVEN, THE TAKEN AND THE INVIOLEABLE

### A pragmatist reconstruction of an Inherited «Myth»

Vincent Colapietro

#### 1. Introduction

*Given* the topic of the given, it would be all too easy to become entangled in highly technical disputes about Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, and other authors regarding how to interpret and, then, assess, their critiques of «myth of the given». Though I am dubious whether we could within the limits of this article move toward resolving any of these questions, such an engagement might nonetheless prove profitable. It would also likely prove to be invigorating, since wrestling with technical issues in a systematic manner carries a unique form of intellectual enjoyment for the properly trained philosopher. Even so, that is *not* my intention today. Rather my aim is simply to sketch, mostly in broad bold strokes, though to some extent also in minute, careful ones, what I take to be a pragmatist approach to this multifaceted controversy. In my judgment, much *still* depends upon coming to a deeper appreciation of one of the central lessons of the pragmatist movement: the recurrent need<sup>1</sup> to articulate a more truly empirical understanding of human experience<sup>2</sup>. Above all else, then, my reflections aim at deepening the contemporary appreciation of the pragmatist take on human experience.

As a result, these reflections constitute, at the very least, an attempt to rescue the rich everyday sense of experience<sup>3</sup> from the one-sided distortions of philosophical theorizing. This sense is indeed implicit in, for example, such everyday German words as *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* even more than the Italian or English words for experience. It is also encoded in such commonplace expressions as the «*experienced equestrian*» or the «*experienced carpenter*»<sup>4</sup>. As

---

<sup>1</sup> Many contemporary philosophers still operate with an impoverished understanding of human experience. The pragmatist tradition is certainly not the only philosophical resource for providing an enrichment of this understanding. The phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions are also invaluable in this respect.

<sup>2</sup> For especially those just coming to the pragmatists, see John E. Smith and Richard J. Bernstein, in particular the former's «The Reconception of Experience in Peirce, James, and Dewey» in *America's Philosophical Vision*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992 and the latter's «Experience after the Linguistic Turn» in *The Pragmatic Turn*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2010.

<sup>3</sup> These everyday words and expressions are intricately interwoven with our commonplace or everyday experience. «Curious how little impression», Peirce notes, «experience too familiar makes upon men's minds, how little attention is paid to it. With an oversecure, not to mention ridiculous, contempt [...] are we despising everyday experience, we specialists and half the world besides – except where its lessons are followed irreflectively. Recondite experiences, whether scientific or autobiographic, are cherished as very precious. They are [indeed] rare» (*Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1931-35, vol.6, par. 563. Hereinafter it will be cited with the usual acronym CP followed by the volume and reference paragraph CP 6.563). But the commonplace are precious despite being commonplace! While we tend to treat familiar phenomena as so many completely «squeezed lemons», hence ones no longer possessing any juice, they are to the phenomenologically oriented philosopher anything but this.

<sup>4</sup> «The scientific man and the philosopher like the carpenter, the physician, and the politician know with their habits not with their “consciousness”. The latter is eventual, not the source. Its occurrence marks a peculiarly delicate connection between highly organized habits and unorganized impulses» (J. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in Id., *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, edited by J.A. Boydstone, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 1976-1988, vol.

much as anything, the meaning of experience needs to be rescued from reduction to the given, as though the experiential excludes the conceptual. More generally, the various senses of a traditional expression need to be disentangled. This indeed is our first task.

## 2. Disambiguating «The Given»

In the course of developing my argument, however, I will be unable to avoid making reference to Sellars and (to a less extent) McDowell. Here is one such place. Not every sense of the given is, as Sellars emphatically notes, untenable or even problematic. Many are innocuous or innocent.

(1) The Untenable Sense (the one in which the given serves to generate a myth about the nature of knowing). At the most basic or *foundational* level, the givenist contends that knowledge is immediate (*not* mediated by concepts or anything else). Such knowledge is often characterized as *intuitive* in a technical sense, making *intuitive* here a synonym for *immediate*. Intuitive or immediate cognition is, moreover, conceived as self-certifying or self-warranting. Such cognition is reducible to a dyadic relationship between knower and known. In turn, this relationship precludes – or is taken to preclude – the possibility of error. That is, the acceptance of this picture of knowing entails espousal of infallibilism or incorrigibilism. The myth of the given, as exposed by Wilfrid Sellars in his famous essay «Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind», weaves together a cluster of positions: foundationalism, intuitionism, incorrigibilism (or, more accurately, infallibilism), and dyadism. It is anything but a simple myth: it is indeed an inherently complex story about human knowing. In my judgment, Sellars' critique of this myth is devastating. But, just as certain exaggerated preoccupations (above all, the dread of error [cf. Hegel]) drove Descartes, Russell, Moore, and arguably James<sup>5</sup> to posit the given, therein mistaking a demonstrably unwarranted figment of the philosophical imagination for the most incontestable fact of human experience, so certain exaggerated preoccupations (above all, the dualism between the natural order of causes and the logical space of reasons) drove Sellars himself to distort certain salient features of human knowing.

(2) Three Innocent senses. There are, as already noted, innocent senses of the given. For our purpose, three of these especially merit identification.

The first of these senses is the «immediately» given as inherently uncertain. «When philosophers have insisted upon the certainty of the immediately and focally present or “given” and have sought indubitable immediate experiential data upon which to build [the edifice of knowledge], they have always unwittingly passed from the existential to the dialectical; they have [without realizing it]», Dewey notes, «substituted a general character for an immediate this». He is quick to give his reason for this claim: «For the immediately given is always the dubious; it is always a matter for subsequent

---

14, p.128. Henceforth *MW* followed by volume number and page number). He goes so far as to claim: «Knowledge which is not projected against the black unknown lives in muscles, not in consciousness» (124).

<sup>5</sup>James was not driven by the dread of error to posit pure experience; rather he was concerned to celebrate the inexhaustible richness of the experiential flux. It is no accident that «ever not quite» and «ever not yet» were his watchwords.

events to determine, or assign a character to, It is a cry for something not given, a request addressed to fortune [...]»<sup>6</sup>. The dubious is, in effect, the oxygen needed for «the candle of consciousness» to maintain itself<sup>7</sup>.

The second of these senses is also indicated by Dewey. After himself noting the ambiguity of the word *given*, Dewey suggests in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938):

That which is “given” in the strict sense of the word ‘given,’ is the total field or situation. The given in the sense of the singular, whether object or quality, is the special aspect, phase or constituent of the existentially present situation that is selected to locate and identify its problematic features with reference to the inquiry then and there to be executed<sup>8</sup>.

This implies that, in the strict sense, the given «is taken rather than given»<sup>9</sup>. And, in turn, this «fact decides the logical status of data»: data are what we, at least at the outset of an inquiry, feel entitled to *take* for granted. Their role is to define as precisely as possible the nature of the problem entangling us.

In an even more encompassing sense than that of the total situation, the *given* might have the scope granted it by Wittgenstein. «What has to be accepted, the given, is – one could say – *forms of life*»<sup>10</sup>. «My life consists», he notes in *On Certainty*, «in my being content to accept many things» (#344). The given as the inheritance – hence, the appropriation – of a form of life and, as a result, the acceptance of countless things far removed from the narrow sense of the given as used by intuitionists and foundationalists.

«No knowledge is», Dewey insists, «ever merely immediate»<sup>11</sup>. No experience itself is ever merely immediate. However much qualitative immediacy *is* an irreducible feature of human experience, such immediacy is never the whole of experience. In an important sense, it is also not the heart of experience. For pragmatists such as Peirce, Dewey, and Mead, confrontation with alterity is the heart of experience. Of even greater salience, such immediacy falls far short of cognition or knowledge. Let us now turn to the attempt of these pragmatists to reconceive (or reconstruct) experience.

### 3. Reconceiving Experience

In *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy* (an essay published in 1917), John Dewey contends,

traditional accounts [of human experience] have not been empirical, but have been deductions, from unnamed [or largely implicit] premises, of what experience *must* be. [Even] [h]istorical empiricism has been [at

---

<sup>6</sup> J. Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, edited by J. A. Boydstone, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 1976-1988, vol.1, p.262 (Henceforth *LW* followed by volume and page number).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> *LW* 12, 127.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford 1958, p.227.

<sup>11</sup> *LW* 1, 243.

best] empirical [only] in a technical and controversial sense. It has said, Lord, Lord, Experience, Experience; but in practice it has served ideas *forced into* experience, not *gathered from* it<sup>12</sup>.

Traditional accounts of human experience have, in addition, been deductions of what experience must be *if it is to serve as a foundation for knowledge*. The epistemological obsession of modern philosophy, in particular, has been one of the main reasons why traditional accounts have offered such distorted pictures of human experience (see, e.g., Taylor; also Rorty). From a pragmatist perspective, at least, the quest for certainty, rooted in Cartesian anxiety (see Bernstein), goes a far distance toward explaining the disfiguration of experience so commonplace in the writings of philosophers. For example, Immanuel Kant's understanding of the manifold of sensation is far less a critical survey of the relevant phenomena than an uncritical acceptance of an unfortunate inheritance from British empiricism<sup>13</sup>. That sensations are utterly discrete *data* calling for transcendental synthesis is, at the level of transcendental logic itself (in contrast to empirical psychology), an unwarranted assumption, a demonstrably uncritical presupposition at the very heart of a purportedly critical project. Part of Kant's genius is revealed in focusing on *judgment* as the minimal unit with which a philosophical account of human knowing should be preoccupied (cf. Delaney)<sup>14</sup>. The allegedly discrete data of sensory impressions are only accessible to us in the form of what might be called perceptual judgments. Part of the betrayal of that genius is, in the context of his philosophy<sup>15</sup>, to follow Hume in taking these impressions to be a manifold of sensation. Accordingly, his transcendental aesthetic is, to a great

---

<sup>12</sup> *MW* 10, 11. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and elsewhere, Dewey helpfully draws a distinction between the *empirical* and the *experimental*.

<sup>13</sup> «Kantianism [...] naturally invoked», Dewey notes, «universal bonds to restore objectivity. But, in doing so, it accepted the particularism [or atomism] of experience [so strenuously advocated by professed empiricists] and [then Kantianism] proceeded to supplement it from non-empirical sources. A sensory manifold being all which is really empirical in experience, a reason which transcends experience must provide the synthesis. The net outcome might have suggested a correct account of experience. For we have only to forget the apparatus [or transcendental machinery] by which the net outcome is arrived at, to have before us the experience of the plain man [or woman] – a diversity of ceaseless changes connected in all kinds of ways, static [or enduring] and dynamic. This conclusion would [however deal a deathblow to both empiricism and rationalism. For, making clear the non-empirical character of the alleged manifold of unconnected particulars, it would render unnecessary the appeal to functions of the understanding in order to connect them. With the downfall of the traditional notion of experience, the appeal to reason to supplement its defect [such as Kant insisted upon] becomes superfluous» (*MW* 10, 13).

<sup>14</sup> Another part of that genius is his unwavering attention to the *normative* dimension of our epistemic practices. This part is, however, not so much betrayed by Kant as traced to the innate endowments of pure reason. But, in doing so, he undermines his very project of reconciling reason and experience, since the transcendental authority of reason is fashioned in reference to such an impoverished understanding of experience.

<sup>15</sup> For the purpose of transcendental logic, perception, not sensation, is primordial. And perception, properly understood, is never anything less than a judgment. For the purpose of empirical psychology, however, the processes and mechanisms of sensation are, of course, legitimate topics of experimental investigation.

extent, an artificial solution to a fabricated *problematique*, one not forced upon us by what experience discloses about itself<sup>16</sup>.

If we *do* gather what experience actually is *from experience itself*, however, we readily realize that it is not first and foremost an instance of knowledge or, arguably, even an indispensable resource for the testing and correction of our epistemic claims. It *is* such a resource, but it is far more than this. Our status as knowers is, in a sense, derivative, our status as agents being primary. The knower is an actor in the world and the world itself is, *for us*, principally an arena of action, if not a «theatre for heroism»<sup>17</sup>. To use Heidegger's term, *Dasein's* relationship to the world is not primarily that of the knower to the known (or knowable)<sup>18</sup>. More than anything else, care (*Sorge*) or concern (see Whitehead<sup>19</sup>) defines this relationship.

Success and failure are the primary «categories» of life [and, hence, of experience]; achieving of good and averting of ill are its supreme interests; hope and anxiety [...] are [moreover] dominant qualities of experience<sup>20</sup>.

But hope and anxiety concern the future. The main focus of traditional empiricism, the present as assured by the past<sup>21</sup>, dramatically shifts to the

---

<sup>16</sup> «The empirical tradition [of especially Locke and Hume] is committed to particularism [or atomism]. Connexions and continuities are supposed to be foreign to experience, to be [hence] by-products of dubious validity. An experience that is [in contrast] an undergoing of an environment and a striving for its control [i.e., experience as conceived by pragmatists] is pregnant with connexions» (*MW* 10, 6). «Some things are relatively insulated from the influence of other things; some things are easily invaded by others; some things are fiercely attracted to conjoin their activities with those of others. Experience exhibits every kind of connexion from the most intimate to mere external juxtaposition» (*LW* 10, 11-12). In other words, experience provides us with more than terms to be related to one another: it is an unimaginably rich resource of dynamic relationships. Discrete data do not constitute the most primitive «stuff» of the experiential flux; rather discriminable objects caught up in alterable relationships do.

<sup>17</sup> W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature. Centenary Edition*, Routledge, London-New York 2002, p.283.

<sup>18</sup> See especially J. Dewey, *Epistemological Realism: The Alleged Ubiquity of the Knowledge Relationship*, «The Journal of Philosophy», vol. VIII, n. 20, September 28, 1911. Reprinted in *MW* 6.

<sup>19</sup> In *Adventures of Ideas* (Free Press, New York 1967), Alfred North Whitehead stresses, the «basis of experience is emotional» (p.176). «Thus the Quaker word 'concern,' divested of any suggestion of knowledge», he very quickly adds, «is more fitted to express this fundamental structure. The occasion as subject has a "concern" for the object. And the concern at once places the object as a component in the experience of the subject, and with an affective tone drawn from this object and directed towards it. With this interpretation the subject-object relationship is the fundamental structure of experience» (*ibid.*). He later adds, «no prehension, even bare sense, can be divested of its emotional tone, that is to say, its character of a "concern" in the Quaker sense. Connectedness is of the essence of perception» (p.180) and of even more primordial processes or states of entanglement with the world.

<sup>20</sup> *MW* 10, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Traditional empiricism has been, Dewey insists, «tied up to what has been, or is, "given". But experience in its vital form is *experimental*, an effort to change what is given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with a future is its salient trait» (*MW* 10, 6; emphasis added). Cf. William James.

defining preoccupation of the pragmatist perspective, «a future implicated in the present»<sup>22</sup>.

Here is another place where referring to Sellars is likely to prove appropriate. Indeed, it is at this point especially worth noting that Sellars' own critique of the myth of the given yields, at least in broad outline, an essentially Peircean picture of human knowing. This is nowhere more apparent than in his insistence,

empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once<sup>23</sup>.

It is also worth recalling that Sellars' critique was anticipated by the young Peirce in a series of brilliant, if rather enigmatic, articles in *JSP* (the first of which was *Certain Faculties Claimed for Man*). There was, implicit in this conception of experience, a critique of what Sellars famously came to christen, in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (1956)<sup>24</sup>, «the myth of the given». What insures the rationality of our claims about the world of experience<sup>25</sup> is, accordingly, not self-warranting cognitions, but rather self-corrective practices.

One of the greatest ironies of intellectual history is that classical pragmatism (i.e., the pragmatism of Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead) has so often been construed as a precursor to, also an ally of, logical empiricism. In truth, the dismantling of positivism at the hands of Popper, Lakatos, Kuhn, (to some extent) Quine<sup>26</sup>, Hanson, Sellars, and others was, in a sense, a *belated* effort. From the perspective of the American pragmatists, these «empiricists» were still too deeply entangled with the main tenets of classical empiricism (cf. John E. Smith).

---

<sup>22</sup> *MW* 10, 9. «The permanent presence of the sense of futurity in the mind», James astutely notes in one of the essays in *The Will to Believe* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1979), «has been strangely ignored by most writers, but the fact is that our consciousness at a given moment is never free from the ingredient of expectancy» (p.67).

<sup>23</sup> W. Sellars, «Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind» in W. deVries and T. Triplett (eds), *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given: Reading Wilfrid Sellars's «Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind»*, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, IN 2000, p.250.

<sup>24</sup> This essay originally appeared in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, volume 1, edited by Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven. All references in this paper are, however, to the reprint in Willem A. deVries and Timm Triplett's *Knowledge, Mind, and the Given*.

<sup>25</sup> The world of our experience is however not to be set in contrast to reality, as though that world is a poor substitute for the real order. «The world *as we experience it is*», as Dewey rightly insists, «a real world. But it is not in its primary phases a world that is known, a world that is understood, and is intellectually coherent and secure. Knowing consists of operations that give experienced objects a form in which the relations, upon which the outward course of events depends, are securely experienced. It marks a transitional redirection and rearrangement of the real. It is intermediate and instrumental. [...]The knower is within the world of existence; his knowing, as experimental, marks an interaction of one existence with other existences» (*The Quest for Certainty*, in *LW* 4, 235-36; emphases added).

<sup>26</sup> In my judgment, Quine is more of a transitional figure than the other ones named here. That is, he stands closer to positivism, while his thought does truly drive in the direction away from the defining dogmas of logical empiricism.

Traditional *and* logical empiricism have appealed to empirical data, in some guise (e.g., Locke's simple ideas, sense data, or observation statements<sup>27</sup>), as providing a secure foundation upon which to build the edifice of human knowledge. Peirce no less than Sellars exposes this appeal as fatally flawed. The appeal to experience, so central to the practice of scientific investigation and, at a more rudimentary level, the engagements of the practical intelligence exercised in everyday life, is anything but an appeal to such data. What is pristinely given, prior to or independent of any conceptualization, cannot fulfill the function with which this given is being charged. The appeal to experience *can* fulfill this function only if our experiential deliverances are something more than brute data. Put positively, such deliverances must have the status of *reasons* and, as such, they need to be, in some measure, inherently intelligible<sup>28</sup>.

As it turns out, the trick here is to do justice simultaneously to their inherent intelligibility and brute coerciveness. At the center of the approach advocated by Peirce and (to some extent) other pragmatists (rather notably by Dewey), then, there is the resolve to string a bow. One extreme of the bow is the secondness of experience, the other extreme is the thirdness. The extremes need to be brought close enough together so that the proper tautness is achieved. For this, the string cannot be too short, otherwise it will break; but, then, it cannot be too long, otherwise it will be too slack. Thus, the constitutive tension between the two extremes is crucial: without this tension, the bow of experience could not function as a weapon of inquiry.

What is at stake here is, in other words, the necessity to conceive experience in such a manner that the role of experience in the pursuit of knowledge is, itself, empirically adequate and logically coherent. But more than this is required, since experience is not exhausted by this role. For the moment, however, let us confine attention to just this role in the drama of self-correcting enterprises. Experience in the guise of the given, as the given has traditionally been conceived, however, is (as should be clear by now) neither empirically adequate nor logically coherent. But even the alternative conceptions proffered by Sellars, McDowell, and others who are working in this lineage seem to be somewhat deficient. To explain the role of experience in purely *causal* terms makes it impossible to see how experience could ever provide us with a *reason* for adopting or challenging a belief. But, then, to explain this role in purely *rational* terms seems to deprive experience of what is arguably its most distinctive feature, its *coercive* force. To strip human experience of its irrational compulsion (what Peirce called its *secondness*) would be analogous to stripping a triangle of its three-sidedness or a unicorn of its horn. To reduce our experience to such compulsion would, however, entail no less a distortion or disfiguration. While the element of secondness *is* predominant in our experience, it is intimately allied to (not simply externally conjoined with) qualitative immediacy and also (at the very least) incipient

---

<sup>27</sup> This is, to be sure, a problematic or contestable example. But the *role* accorded to such statements by the positivists was more often than not that of providing the bedrock on which to erect the edifice of knowledge.

<sup>28</sup> Whether or not this intelligibility is best understood in Sellarsian terms is disputable. My goal here is to suggest an alternative to not only Sellars but also McDowell, one in which the semiotic dimension of human cognition is accorded a more central place.

forms of inchoate intelligibility. Please note: experience *in its secondness* is not simply conjoined with, but is intimately allied to, firstness (qualitative immediacy) and thirdness (immanent intelligibility). Most attempts to locate experience in «the logical space of reasons» make too little (if anything at all) of its secondness, whereas attempts to situate it in the natural nexus of causes, in effect, efface its thirdness. Thus, you can see why I am drawn to the metaphor introduced earlier: Can we grasp one end of the bow and bend the other close enough to be able to insert the bowstring of just the right length?

The form of experiential secondness most relevant to our discussion is that of the indexical sign. In such a sign, the relationship between the sign and its object is based on a causal relationship. «The index», Peirce insists, «asserts nothing: it only says “There!” It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops»<sup>29</sup>. He adds, «Demonstrative and relative pronouns are nearly pure indices, because they denote things without describing them [...]»<sup>30</sup>. An object seizes our attention, but the object is functioning not just *causally*. It is functioning also *semiotically* (it is playing a role in a process wherein a potentially open-ended series of signs is inaugurated, though always against a vast, vague background). Such a background alone secures the salience of both *this* sign and the series almost inevitably generated by the rupturing force of any actual index. The causal relationship here is however not simply (or reductively) a causal relationship: it is also a semiotic one. The thunderclap is functioning in our experience *as a sign* (see Dewey’s *The Need for a Recovery of Experience*). It is of course doing so by virtue of a causal relationship to a certain meteorological phenomenon, one with which it is virtually identifiable.

Whatever else our experience is, it is an uninterrupted stream of indexical signs. But it is a stream in which our practical familiarity with countless objects and events renders the coercive force of these indexical signs attenuated, often extremely so. These signs do not so much shout «There!» as they whisper, almost inaudibly, such announcements. Our practical familiarity is however so deep-rooted that we are delicately attuned to many of their most muted intimations. We unconsciously shift the manner in which we are sitting or the angle from which we are observing the scene enveloping us. And we do so partly as the result of the prompting of indices.

To insist that our experience is, at once, *direct* yet *mediated* is to insist that secondness and thirdness must both be given their due. At the very center of our experience, there is a *direct* encounter between self and other, if only between the self and the self in some dimension of its otherness (e.g., the *clash* between the impulses of one’s desiring self and the reservations of one’s deliberative self). In its most rudimentary form, human experience just *is* this direct encounter and, as often as not, the protracted entanglement resulting from such direct encounters. But *this, here or now* is hardly ever an insular episode; rather each one is inevitably an integral part of an ongoing process wherein the objects and events of indexical signs are functionally identifiable

---

<sup>29</sup> *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: a Chronological Edition*, Volume V 1884–1886, edited by the Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana 1993, p.163. Henceforth *W*, followed by the volume number and page.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.



with those of iconic and especially symbolic signs. That is, experience is nothing less than a continuum or an interwoven cable of continua. The continuity of experience is, however, all too easily misconceived. For emphasis on it all too readily dulls the cutting edge of experiential disruptions. The trick here is to do justice to the thirdness of experience, in all its forms (especially that of continuity), while not losing secondness – to see how experience is, at once, *direct*, yet *mediated*. The dyadic relationship of self and other is not destroyed or displaced by the triadic one of object, sign, and interpretant, experience being simultaneously a brute physical reaction (a purely dyadic affair) and an evolving semiotic process (an irreducibly triadic affair).

Intelligibility requires mediation. The demand for (or expectation of) intelligibility however tends to work against a direct encounter with radical otherness, for the other is too quickly and completely assimilated to the categorical framework with which we render the disclosures of our direct experience immediately intelligible. For example, we *take* this animal to be a cat. As Sellars so helpfully suggests, perceiving cannot be anything less than such a form of taking. Such taking, in turn, draws up a very large repertoire of conceptual resources.

This is one of the places where mediation comes into play. Our experience is not only direct; it is also *mediated*. Moreover, it is mediated in multiple and indeed complex ways. One of the most important ways in which our experience is mediated is connected to what McDowell means by «second nature» perceiving as taking

*Given* our innate constitution and (of greater salience) our «second nature», we are virtually compelled to take certain objects and events in certain ways. There is unquestionably latitude even here. However wide the margins are, some mistakes seem not so much erroneous as incoherent or unintelligible. Whatever else we might say about the enclosure in which we, for example, are now located (and there are indeed countless *other* things we might say about this space), we are virtually compelled to take it as a room. Taking *this* as such and such entails the possibility of being *mis*-taken (taking something for what it is not). Signs are not so much anything with which we might lie (Eco), but anything about which *we* might be mistaken (or deceived).

Our rationality hence *mediates* between our actual selves and encountered others in such a way that the encounter between self and other (in a word, our experience) cannot be explained in purely causal terms. It must, even in the first instance, be described in semiotic terms. The brute compulsions so prominent in human experience are, in effect, indexical signs and, in turn, these indexical signs are intricately interwoven with other types of semiosis, most importantly, icons and symbols.

It is possible, for certain purposes, to conceive of the human organism as a complex machine simply caught in a causal nexus of almost unimaginable complexity. Arguably, we might learn much by portraying ourselves in this manner. But this would be something we do for a purpose.

The complete effacement of purposive agency is, thus, neither possible nor desirable. It is not possible because it renders the activity of giving an account of ourselves unintelligible. In the name of intelligibility, we have effectively emptied our words of their meaning and our theorizing of its

substance. That is, we have rendered ourselves as well as our endeavors and accomplishments utterly unintelligible. It is not desirable because what we are striving to obtain is a self-portrait in which self-correction (the self-corrective practices of self-critical agents) is explained, not explained away.

Between the space of reasons and that of causes, we can place what I am disposed to call the *space of signs*. At one extreme, the space of signs shades into that of causes. At the other, it shades into that of reasons. The relationship between a sign and its object, even in the most rudimentary forms of indexical semiosis, is not reducible to that between an effect and its cause, since it is part of a continuum in which the generation of a potentially open-ended series of interpretants emerges as a possibility. The space of causes gives us too little, that of reasons (at the outset, at least) too much, whereas the space of signs situates the human animal in the natural world without depriving that ingenious agent of either its ingenuity or agency. (It does not deprive us of the world in either its radical otherness or inherent intelligibility). This form of ingenuity is bound up with the utterance and interpretation of signs.

#### 4. Sensation, Perception, and Experience

Our spontaneity does not preclude our receptivity (cf. McDowell). We are not only spontaneously receptive but also irrepressibly spontaneous. This is nowhere more evident than in our perceptual abilities.

Just as it was necessary to disambiguate the given, it is necessary to disentangle *sensation*, *perception*, and *experience*. For the pragmatists at least, sensation is *not* an instance of knowing, whereas perception is. But perception can count as knowing only to the extent that it is an instance of *taking*. Finally, experience conceived as a continuum provides an indispensable corrective to the all too episodic picture fostered by one-sided emphasis on isolated perceptions or even perceptual judgments. Perceptual experience is an inherently complex affair, one in which self-corrective strategies become second nature. It is such an affair because experience is, as much as anything else, a continuum in which the implications of our clashes with otherness are carried forward, in diverse directions.

To perceive anything is evidence of *taking part* in a course of events (e.g., the defender in a game of football perceives the striker moving at a certain angle toward the midfielder in control of the ball). Perceiving is indeed a par-taking along with a taking. Dewey is in fact explicit about this. «To partake and to perceive are», he notes in *Experience and Nature*, «allied performances. To perceive is a mode of partaking which occurs only under complex conditions and with its own defining traits»<sup>31</sup>. Critical attention must be paid to the various «ways in which the [human] organism participates in the course of events»<sup>32</sup>. Dewey offers an extremely illuminating contrast between thin theorizing and thick experiencing.

«When I look at a chair, I say I experience it. But what I actually experience is only a very few of the elements that go to make up a chair, namely, that color that belongs to the chair under these particular

---

<sup>31</sup> LW 1, 259.

<sup>32</sup> LW 1, 261.

conditions of light, the shape which the chair displays when viewed from this angle, etc». The man who has the experience, as distinct from a philosopher theorizing about it, would probably say that he experienced the chair most fully not when looking at it but when meaning to sit down in it, and that he can mean to sit down in it precisely because his experience is *not* limited to color underspecific conditions of light, and angular shape. He would probably say that when he looks at it, instead of experiencing something less than a chair he experiences a good deal more than a chair: that he lays hold of a wide spatial context, such as the room where the chair is, and a spread of its history, including the chair's period, price paid for it, consequences, public as well as personal, which flow from its use as household furniture, and soon.

Dewey is quick to point out that such remarks as these *prove* nothing. They do however suggest just how great the distance is between the picture offered by specialists and that which is being pictured.

Such remarks as these prove nothing. But they suggest how far away from the *everyday sense of experience* a certain kind of philosophic discourse, although nominally experiential, has wandered. Interesting results can be had by developing dialectically such a notion of experience as is contained in the quotation; problems can be made to emerge which exercise their genuity of the theorizer, and which convince many a student that he gets nearer to the reality of experience the further away he gets from all the experience he has ever had. The exercise would be harmless, were it not finally forgotten that the conclusions reached have but a dialectical status, being an elaboration of premises arrived at by technical analysis from a specialized physiological point of view. Consequently, I would rather take the behavior of the dog of Odysseus upon his master's return as an example of the sort of thing experience is for the philosopher than trust to such statements. A physiologist may for his special purpose reduce Othello's perception of a handkerchief to simple elements of color under certain conditions of light and shapes seen under certain angular conditions of vision. But the actual experience was charged with history and prophecy; full of love, jealousy and villainy, fulfilling past human relationships and moving fatally to tragic destiny<sup>33</sup>.

Sensation is not an instance of knowledge. At the very least, perceiving is an instance of taking. But it is best to conceive of perception as a process taking place in the *continuum* of experience. Hence, it is better to focus on perceptual experience (our experience of perceiving an object or event) than isolated perception (to use one of Peirce's own examples, «That chair is yellow»<sup>34</sup>).

---

<sup>33</sup> LW 1, 368; emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> CP 7.635.

Such judgments are critical for establishing facts. But they are not data in the sense intended by givenists. Allow me, then, a word about two apparently closely related words (*datum* and *fact*). Data are that with which we commence an inquiry, whereas facts are that with which we conclude, however provisionally, one. In this sense, data are what we *take* at the outset to be unproblematic or unquestionable, though in the course of investigation this assumption might prove to be erroneous. For example, we return home and our residence is in utter disarray (not at all as we left it only a short time ago). Our datum is: something is amiss. In contrast, the *facts* are what we establish as the result of investigation. As the etymology of the word (rather ironically suggests), we make (or make up!) the facts. They are not gifts, but achievements. Another ironic qualification is that, despite their hardness, any fact is unavoidably an abstraction of a rather distinctive character<sup>35</sup>. Peirce is quite explicit – and informative – about this feature of facts:

A *state of things* is an abstract constituent part of reality, of such a nature that a proposition is needed to represent it. There is but one *individual*, or completely determinate state of things, namely, the all of reality. A *fact* is so highly a precisively abstract state of things, that it can be wholly represented in a simple proposition, and the term ‘simple,’ here, has no absolute meaning, but is merely a comparative expression. (CP 5.549)

What we ordinarily designate as a fact, then, is a feature abstracted from the totality of things. Despite being abstract, this feature is *really* (or «truly») one defining an observable object or event.

Traditional emphasis on *isolated* judgments, *isolated* facts, and inherently discrete *data* present to consciousness prior to, or independent of, conceptualization suggests just how far these philosophical accounts of experience have been from the direct disclosures of experience itself. Concatenation, conjunction, and connections of all kinds, ranging *from* the most external and adventitious *to* the most intimate and integral, define our

---

<sup>35</sup> «The most ordinary fact of perception, such as “it is light”, involves *precise* abstraction, or *precission*. But *hypostatic* abstraction, the abstraction which transforms “it is light” into “there is light here”, which is the sense which I shall commonly attach to the word abstraction (since *precission* will do for precise abstraction) is a very special mode of thought. It consists in taking a feature of a percept or percepts (after it has already been precinded from the other elements of the percept), so as to take propositional form in a judgment (indeed, it may operate upon any judgment whatsoever), and in conceiving this fact to consist in the relation between the subject of that judgment and another subject, which has a mode of being that merely consists in the truth of propositions of which the corresponding concrete term is the predicate. Thus, we transform the proposition, “honey is sweet”, into “honey possesses sweetness”. “Sweetness” might be called a fictitious thing, in one sense. But since the mode of being attributed to it *consists* in no more than the fact that some things are sweet, and it is not pretended, or imagined, that it has any other mode of being, there is, after all, no fiction. The only profession made is that we consider the fact of honey being sweet under the form of a relation; and so we really can. I have selected sweetness as an instance of one of the least useful of abstractions. Yet even this is convenient. It facilitates such thoughts as that the sweetness of honey is particularly cloying; that the sweetness of honey is something like the sweetness of a honeymoon; etc. Abstractions are particularly congenial to mathematics» (CP 4.235).

experience, *as experienced*. But this point recalls the radical empiricism of William James, according to which conjunctions and more generally relations of all kinds are no less *given* in experience than the *relata* (the terms or items related).

### 5. Introducing James - Belatedly

Even so, James appears to have become ensnared in the myth of the given. «Pure experience is», he informs us, «the name which I give to the *immediate* flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories»<sup>36</sup>. Given our habits of conceptualization, it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to regain a lived sense of what pure experience is: «Only newborn babies, or men in semicoma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, although ready to be all sorts of *whats*»<sup>37</sup>. Even so, pure experience is omnipresent underneath our disfiguring conceptualizations: «The instant of the present is always experience in its “pure” state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple that, as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought»<sup>38</sup>.

«What you call “pure experience” is not», Peirce wrote in a letter to James, «experience at all and certainly ought to have a name. It is [however] downright bad morals so to misuse words, for it prevents philosophy from becoming a science»<sup>39</sup>. James in effect makes an aspect of experience into the whole of experience, that aspect being its ineffable suchness or qualitative immediacy. In doing so, he strips experience of secondness, its most prominent feature! This is the main reason why Peirce charges James with violating one of the minimal requirements governing the ethics of terminology. At times, however, James appears to define pure experience in terms of both its qualitative immediacy and its sheer thatness, though paradoxically thatness is in his account powerless to assert itself. At the very least, it is *relatively* powerless: Our creativity, he claims, outstrips its coerciveness. «In our cognitive as well as in our active life we are», James insists, «creative. We *add* both to the subject and to the predicate part of reality. The world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands»<sup>40</sup>. He goes so far as to assert: «Like the kingdom of heaven, it [the world or reality] suffers human violence willingly»<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> W. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Longmans, Green and Co., New York 1912, p. 93; emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> CP 8.301.

<sup>40</sup> W. James, *Pragmatism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1975, p.123. «We carve out groups of stars in the heavens, and call them constellations, and the stars patiently suffer us to do so – tho if they knew what we were doing, some of them might feel much surprised at the partners we had given them. We [even] name the same constellation diversely, as Charles’s Wain, the Great Bear, or the Dipper. None of the names will be false, and one will be as true as another, for all are applicable» (*ivi*, p.121; cf., however, 10c).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*. To be sure, there are passages in *Pragmatism* itself that stand in dramatic contrast to what strikes many readers as an unduly subjectivist position. «Our experience meanwhile is» James proclaims, «all shot through with regularities. [...] Woe to him whose beliefs play fast

*Pure* experience is experience untainted by the slightest trace of conceptualization or interpretation. Peirce is right to insist that this is not experience. He is also right to claim that the *aspect* of experience with which James has so deeply identified himself deserves a name, by which it might be kept distinct from other facets.

Is conceptualization always a disfigurement or even simply a diminution?<sup>42</sup> Might conceptualization and other forms of articulations be what experience demands? Whatever *that* is, it is always a phase in a history. The children of Descartes are however disposed to take it as self-given. But those of Vico insist upon seeing any *that*, however seemingly immediate or insular, as a historically sedimented phenomena. Peeling away the layers of interpretation would not yield a pure *that*; it would rather reveal the onion to be nothing but these layers of significance. At its barest minimum, any phenomenon is more than qualitative immediacy and brute otherness (i.e., is more than firstness and secondness). Some measure of intelligibility, however slight, inchoate, or incipient, is always present. To posit pure secondness or, for that matter, pure firstness apart from the slightest trace of *immanent* thirdness is to fall victim to what Whitehead calls the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. The irony here is that, in the name of concreteness itself, James might have suffered just this unfortunate fate. Insofar as his radical empiricism is an eloquent reminder that all of our conceptualizations and articulations fall short of doing justice to phenomena in their multifaceted richness, it is a necessary corrective to our intellectual hubris. But, insofar as his radical empiricism depicts pure experience as an *inviolable* level of the experiential flux, thereby necessitating that conceptualization or mediation as such are defilements or worse, it contributes to the myth of the given. Facets of experience might be inviolable, but conceptualization or articulation need not constitute violation or violence (cf. Smith).

## 6. The Space of Signs

We cannot help but take for granted (that is, take as given) countless affairs, most of which we can hardly conceive as distinctly or separately identifiable items. The inescapably given is, however, not the inherently certain, but less the *absolutely* certain; it is indeed anything but this<sup>43</sup>. In its most narrow but still innocent sense, the «immediately» given is the inherently uncertain. In perhaps its most characteristic form, it hovers between being, in effect, an imperative and an interrogative. The deer hears a twig snap, the sound in effect elicits the analogue of a question, if only in the animal's behavioral hesitancy, but also issues the analogue of an imperative. «'This', whatever *this* may be, always implies», Dewey insists, a network or «system of meanings focused at a point of stress, uncertainty. [...] It sums up a history, and at the same time opens a new page; it is a record and promise in one»<sup>44</sup>. He adds: «Every perception [...]

---

and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience: they will lead him nowhere or else make false connexions» (ivi, p. 99; cf. p. 101).

<sup>42</sup> «Our habitual experience is», A. N. Whitehead notes in *Process and Reality* (Free Press, New York 1978, p.15), «a complex of failure and success in the enterprise of interpretation. If we desire a record of uninterpreted experience, we must ask a stone for its autobiography».

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., *LW* 1, 262.

<sup>44</sup> *LW* 1, 264.

marks a ‘this,’ and every ‘this’ being a consummation involves retention, and hence contains [or at least implies] the capacity of remembering»<sup>45</sup>. What we cannot help but take as given should, accordingly, be conceived holistically, not atomistically: whatever this turns out to be, it is identifiable and operative only in «a system of meanings». At the very least, then, the given in this innocuous sense should be understood as nothing less than «the total field or situation» in which the problematic or dubious<sup>46</sup> alone can obtain a foothold<sup>47</sup>. Often, it should be taken as encompassing the entire form of life (cf. Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*) in which recognizably human dramas alone unfold, not least of all ones concerning humanity’s relationship to nature.

As it turns out, language is integral to any form of life (at least, to any recognizable form of *human* life). Hence, we must conceive of language also as what we cannot help but take for granted. (This is Kenny’s devastating argument against on Descartes.) Any language always already implicates its users in nothing less than a world (cf. Gadamer), first and foremost, by the indispensable role of linguistic indices. For a linguistic agent such as the human animal, the *Thou* is no less primordial than the *I*. Indeed, the *Thou* might be even more primordial than the *I*. The other (even the internal other) is always as a being who has the power to claim us (at the very least, to claim our attention), also to object to our ascriptions and characterizations. This Other is in effect a Thou, however attenuated is the second-person form of this other on this or that occasion. Such a claim is itself likely to invite any number of objections. Even so, the other in its radical otherness from our modes of understanding, in its insistence upon itself, at once, an ineffable presence, an «active opungnancy», and an all too radiantly luminous intelligibility. In the presence of such intelligibility, our intellectual eyes are, to recall Aristotle’s trope, like those of bats in the presence of the noonday sun. But we are not utterly blind.

The metaphor of the sun has not only a noble lineage but also an unexplored relevance to our central concerns. More often than not, the sun is not the object but the means of our seeing. The sun allows what is other than itself both to be and to be known, at least to become or be rendered knowable. Signs, too, ordinarily disclose what is other than themselves. When they are most effective, they are most self-effacing.

The logical space of reasons is only a part of the rather indeterminate space of signs. The space of signs is a region in which the emphatic markers of indexical signs provide indispensable clues for where we actually are, including especially clues for ascertaining that we are lost (*not* where we supposed we were!). If *not* truly is «the very pivot of thought»<sup>48</sup>, the point around which deliberation and inquiry turn, this is nowhere more dramatically

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> «In the degree to which responses take place to the doubtful *as* the doubtful, they acquire», Dewey suggests, «*mental* quality. If they are such as to have a directed tendency to change the precarious and problematic into the secure and resolved, they are *intellectual* as well as *mental*» (*The Quest for Certainty*, LW 4, 179).

<sup>47</sup> LW 12, 127.

<sup>48</sup> CP 1.324.

evident than in *our experience of ignorance and error*<sup>49</sup>. Indices are crucial for enabling us to detect and correct mistakes. Without them, we would be moving through a dream; *with them*, we are however finding our way through the thickets of nothing less than the world (the world?).

Nothing could be more familiar than the space of signs. It is simply our world, though viewed from a distinctive angle (the angle of the agent for whom the world is, first and foremost, an arena of action and engagement, hence an arena of fateful entanglement and simply unexpected occurrences). Indeed, as actors in such a world, clues, hints, insinuations, traces, and countless other instances of semiosis render this world, at once, familiar and legible in its unfamiliarity. In all but the rarest instances, the *uncertain* import of our perceptual experience, in all of its coercive force, makes an irresistible claim upon our semiotic imaginations. How are we to *take* that which has seized, by means of the brute compulsion of indexical signs, our attention? The vast, vague background against which the everyday dramas of usurped attention take place, however, insures that ‘this’, as it asserts itself in our experience (hence, as it discloses itself in that experience), always implies a network of meanings focused at a point of stress. This point of stress is, in effect, the *not* or otherness around which thought pivots (agents are *not* certain how to take the pressures and promptings of their experience, hence not certain about what to do). Does the sound of the ice cracking beneath my feet *mean* that it cannot bear my weight – do I at least momentarily freeze or do I try to move quickly across the ice before my weight proves too heavy for the surface at any particular point? There are footprints in the sand, or darkening clouds on the eastern horizon, or the sighting of more than a few sparrows as the temperature becomes warmer, and countless instances of perceptible patterns intimating discoverable relationships of indeterminate complexity. These point to the *space of signs*. This space is, in truth, the space in which we live and move and have our being<sup>50</sup>. Even at the most rudimentary level, our exertions might be misguided, our takes might turn out to be mis-taken. A segment of this space is properly identifiable as the logical space of reasons, though portions of

---

<sup>49</sup> «The experience of ignorance, or of error, which we have, and which we gain by means of correcting our errors, or enlarging our knowledge, does enable us», Peirce notes, «to experience and conceive something which is independent of our own limited views; but as there can be no correction of the sum total of opinions, and no enlargement of the sum total of knowledge, we have no such means, and can have no such means of acquiring a conception of something independent of all opinion and thought» (CP 7.345). «This ideal [of self-controlled thought], by modifying the rules [or norms] of self-control modifies action, and so experience too – both the man’s own and that of others, and this centrifugal movement [i.e., this drive toward ever more outward engagement with the world] thus rebounds in a new centripetal movement [i.e., a drive toward ever deeper recesses of self-controlled persons trying to assume radical responsibility for their actual lives], and so on» (CP 5.402n3).

<sup>50</sup> «Now thought lives, moves, and has its being», Dewey contends in «Context and Thought», «in and through symbols, and, therefore, depends for meaning upon context as do the symbols. We think *about* things, but not *by* things. Or rather when we do think by and with things, we are not experiencing the things in their own full nature and content. Sounds, for example, and marks in printed books are themselves existential things. But they operate in thought only as they stand for something else; if we become absorbed in them as things, they lose their value for thinking» since they cease therein to function as symbols (LW 6, 5).



even the space of reasons are, on some occasions, closely connected to the natural order of causes.

Within the space of signs, a sense of the *inviolable* emerges. The integrity of a being sets limits – or is felt to set limits - on how it is to be used. To use it in certain ways entails *violating* the integrity of that being. Moreover, such a being, in effect, demands acknowledgment; and while such acknowledgment might take the form of reverential silence, it might also take the form of poetic utterance (or some other mode of articulation). Our *experience* of the beautiful, the sublime, the sacred and possibly much else forcefully reminds us just how inadequate are our modes of articulation. Each one of these is an encounter with what is other than us, though the defining qualities of these distinct forms of experiential confrontation differ markedly from one another. «Ever not yet» and «ever not quite» (to invoke these Jamesian expressions) ever haunt us. With regard to each one of the phenomena just mentioned, articulation might deepen rather than disfigure the inviolable character of the phenomenon. But it is because we are driven toward expression that we are haunted by a sense of this inadequacy.

### Conclusion

What we cannot help but take for granted, we *can* occasionally call into question, in some more or less definite respect, for some more or less particular reason<sup>51</sup>. We certainly *cannot* call the whole of it into question, all at once, though any part of it might in a certain way, for a particular purpose, prove questionable. Experience, properly understood, indispensably contributes to the ongoing course of our self-correcting practices. As rich, nuanced, and suggestive as are the accounts of experience to be found in the Aristotelian, Hegelian, hermeneutic, and phenomenological traditions, none is demonstrably superior to that so painstakingly crafted by Peirce, James, Dewey, and later pragmatists, especially with respect to questions of the given. Without question, the insights of these other traditions can serve as correctives to certain one-sided emphases by the pragmatists, just as the insights of the pragmatists might serve as such correctives to the distortions found in these other traditions. Indeed, the central notions of the pragmatic tradition, beginning with experience but including practice, habit, experimentation, semiosis, critique, and a host of other ones, cannot be adequately understood by relying solely on the resources provided by this tradition. Even so, the pragmatist understanding of human experience provides an invaluable resource for addressing a wide array of philosophical questions, not least of all «the myth of the given». Any inviolably pristine conception of the given (or, better, any *conception* of an *inviolably* pristine given) is, for the purpose of offering an empirically adequate and logically coherent picture of human knowing, worse than useless: it is rather the source of errors, being anything but the given in an innocuous or innocent sense. While the inviolably pristine needs to be viewed

---

<sup>51</sup> This is true even at the rudimentary level of perceptual experience. «We all know, only too well, how terribly insistent», Peirce stresses, «perceptions may be; and yet, for all that, in its most insistent degrees, it may be utterly false, – that is, may not fit into the general mass of experience, but be a wretched hallucination» (CP 7.647).

Vincent Colapietro, *The given, the taken and the inviolable*

with suspicion, the inherently inviolable is a different matter entirely. This is, at least, what I have hoped to render plausible in this article.