

# DEWEY'S TREATMENT OF LANGUAGE AS ACTION

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In addition to exploring how logic served and could better serve a regulative function in conducting inquiry in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey also saw that his theory of inquiry needed a supportive account of the functions of language in regulating human activity both in relation to everyday interaction and our activities of investigation. This required an instrumental approach to language. In such an approach, language is viewed as part and parcel of our ordering activities and as a form of action with observable consequences. Looking at Dewey's philosophy in this way suggests that we take more seriously its *methodological* functions as a guide to inquiry, and less on its metaphysical implications.

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### Language: A Methodological Approach

The history of the natural sciences, both physical and life sciences, demonstrated to Dewey that major advances in empirical method involved making new aspects of our relationship to the world available for conscious, reflective control. Empirical method depends on our activities of interacting with and ordering original material. Seeing these activities and deciding when and what aspects of them need to be controlled is a continual task and depends on the results of our inquiries. Our *tools* in inquiry which may require control include physical, social and language resources.

An important advance in empirical method that Dewey saw in the natural sciences concerned a greater attention to the manner in which language was used in inquiry. Language was coming to be appreciated for its operational value – its use in helping us organize our observations. With this use a change in status of the basic concepts of physics and life sciences was occurring. No longer could we award an ontological status to our various uses of language and assume they directly represented features of reality. In the natural sciences, it was the operational, or directive, force of a technical term that gave it significance in the process of inquiry. What this means is that most of our major concepts were now being considered to include, as part of their definition, an explicit recognition of the work they are designed to do in inquiry.<sup>1</sup> The importance of language as one of our tools of inquiry was coming to be explicitly recognized.

In the natural sciences this turn toward an instrumental

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<sup>1</sup> Percy Bridgman, *The Logic of Modern Physics* (New York; MacMillan, 1927); Philipp Frank. *Foundations of Physics. International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, 1 (7). (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1946).

treatment of concepts was driven by the necessities of empirical inquiry. In order to adequately make sense of experimental findings it had become necessary, and fruitful, to treat concepts as instrumentalities. Philosophy, on the other hand, does not have this empirical base to drive such a change. Hence it remains stuck in what Dewey referred to as the “ontological context.”<sup>2</sup> This involved the practice of assuming an ontological significance of our concepts and accounts, which functions to hide from view what we are doing with language.

For present purposes the “ontological context” may be seen to entail the conviction that formulating philosophical accounts and resolving logical, conceptual difficulties is equivalent to working directly with reality. This means treating our terms such as “experience” or “language” as substantials and an important objective of inquiry is the definition of their nature. We assume that dualisms and logical inconsistencies must be resolved before we can use a perspective. This is what is meant by awarding our accounts an ontological status. These activities are important because we believe we are defining the nature of the real world.

Dewey considered the awarding of ontological status to our accounts to be an issue of method. It is methodological in the sense that it is a certain practice, involving certain assumptions and having certain consequences. We make distinctions and invent terms and then forget that it is we who made the distinctions in the first place and that we did so for particular reasons. To hide what they are for is to preclude any explicit empirical justification of *why* they were introduced in the first place, it imposes rigid constraints on our

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<sup>2</sup> John Dewey. “Dewey’s reply to Albert G. A. Balz.” In *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953. Vol. 16, Essays, Typescripts, and Knowing and the Known*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

activities of observation and description, and it prevents any analysis or statement of the *work* they are supposed to be doing in an overall project. It does not, in other words, allow us to take language seriously as a tool of inquiry and provide us with any conceptual resources for bringing it under control.

What we need is an approach to language which postulates that when constructing accounts of phenomena that we are involved in an ordering activity, not simply representing reality. The question then becomes how to recognize and control for that ordering.

Dewey's alternative was to take an instrumental point of view and consider language as a form of action. Such a view requires that we view language, whether in inquiry or in our everyday activities, in a context by which we can determine its functions. In Dewey's view, our use of language in inquiry is one component of how we ensure an empirical approach by organizing our original material, define our subject-matter, and regulate our own activities so that effective change in existential conditions made be made. Dewey's project therefore was to develop a conceptual apparatus— itself a language account—that would be of use in empirical inquiry. The criteria for judging the validity of his account would be the consequences that ensue upon its use. For Dewey, the consequences most relevant to inquiry are that 1) our accounts must be formulated and used in such a way that they aid us in the description of actual concrete events and 2) the conceptual apparatus would have to be useful in making our own manner of working with language available for control. This meant relating the distinctions we make in our language accounts to existential conditions. Language was viewed instrumentally, as a tool for exploration.

There have been a few articles explicitly concerned with Dewey's concept of language and which outline his general view.<sup>3</sup> It

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Max Black, "Dewey's philosophy of language," *The Journal of*

is important to compare and contrast Dewey's conceptual apparatus with others and understand how his postulated functions of language may serve to resolve conceptual and dialectical difficulties. However, what we also need is a characterization of what we are doing with language, both as a general topic and as related to the context of inquiry. No treatment so far is explicitly concerned with the methodological, that is, instrumental, significance of Dewey's conceptions of language. *The approach taken here is entirely methodological.* By that is meant that the ideas and conceptions, or more concretely, the words and accounts we formulate serve a directive function in inquiry and so have to be evaluated according in relation to the consequences of their use. This means that Dewey's conception of language must be viewed in terms of his project to bring the empirical method of the sciences to philosophy.

I start with Dewey's postulate that language is an act of organizing the world and our relationship to it. We have to make our ordering activity visible before it can be available for control. As will be seen, controlling our use of language is to reconsider the ontological status we normally award philosophical accounts and view it as an instrument for exploring the world.

We can gain access to the issue by a discussion of the distinction between form and matter which Dewey emphasizes in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.

### **Form and Matter**

When it comes to thinking about mathematics, logic or language it is

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*Philosophy* 59, no. 19 (Sept. 13, 1962), 505-523; Thorus Midtgarden, "Dewey's philosophy of language," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Vol. 62, No. 245 (3), John Dewey (septembre 2008), 257-272; and Roberta Dreon, "Dewey on language: Elements for a non-dualistic approach," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, VI (2), (2014), 109-124.

customary to start with a distinction between form and matter. It is this distinction that encourages us to treat formal systems as ontologically real objects and to consider pre-existing meaning as the prerequisite for communication. Inquiry thus consists of defining the nature of the objects and the meaning they are believed to contain or allow us to express. Dewey identified a rigid reliance on this distinction to be an important hinder to empirical inquiry, even while in certain contexts it is useful as an analytic device. In an ontological analysis attention to the concrete situations in which the formal system is used is not considered relevant to its understanding. Thus we create the problem of how mathematics, logic or language relates to the world. In the sense that such an analysis turns our attention away from existential conditions to the “nature” of a logical construct it is not an empirical approach.

With regard to “language” the empirical consequences of relying on this distinction are clear. Its use directs our attention away from the physicality and temporality of what might more appropriately be called “vocal conduct” to symbolic systems of rules or open-ended worlds of meaning which exist somewhere beyond the actual situation in which talk appears. In this way empirical analysis of the origin, use and functions of vocal conduct is precluded by establishing abstractions as objects of analysis which are independent of the context in which vocal conduct originates and functions.

Whether we are talking about formal systems such as logic or syntax or a concept of pre-existing meaning, the “form” is considered to be our primary subject matter and exists apart from concrete situations. This means that our own formalizations and glosses of meaning are more real than the phenomena we are trying to make sense of. An alternative, instrumental point of view would consider symbolic systems as analytic formulations based on generalization from concrete events, not discoveries. They represent our attempt to

bring order to our subject matter, which is actual behavior. In the theory of inquiry, discovery is considered a matter of being able to show relationships between actual concrete events. The symbolic tools we use to establish the linkages, such as a formal logic, categories of classification or narratives, have no ontological status and do not constitute our subject matter. Their purpose is to aid us in seeing relationships among actual events. In linguistics for example, categories such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics and the rules which we derive from studying these aspects would more appropriately be considered as resources or frames of reference for the exploration and handling of vocal events in social processes. They ought not be taken as essentialist characteristics of language itself.

In his theory of inquiry Dewey had sought to do for logic and philosophy what had been occurring in physics with mathematics. Mathematics had become divorced from metaphysical implications. With the theory of relativity it had become evident that different geometrical systems could be formulated to fit the requirements of new observations. No longer could we identify mathematical, formal systems with reality. It is now treated as a means of controlling our experimental activities.

Giving mathematics an ontological status leads to a situation in which our experiments and findings are subject to dominance by our conceptual apparatus. Instead of modeling reality on our formal systems, we need to investigate how our formal systems are useful in helping us understand reality. The same considerations apply to logic. Logic must be separated from ontological considerations and given an instrumental status, a task Dewey undertook in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, "Logic: The Theory of Inquiry," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol. 12, 1938*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

Dewey also saw that this was not simply an issue specific to logic, but that it was important issue for language in general, of which logic was one particular form. A rectification of the separation of form and matter in our treatment of language was central to the development of his theory of inquiry. In the *Logic* he says, “The adequate development of the theory of inquiry must await the development of a general theory of language in which form and matter are not separated.”<sup>5</sup> If we consider his treatise on logic as the specific theory of inquiry, it would be appropriate to consider such a view of language as the necessary step toward a general theory of inquiry. A postulatory framework for the empirical study of language was developed by Dewey and Arthur Bentley in *Knowing and the Known*.<sup>6</sup>

Our question for investigation shifts from asking about the “nature” of language to the empirical question of what we are doing with language. Perspectives in various domains of the life sciences were suggesting that we need a view of language which emphasizes its regulatory function as part of the way in which we adjust to the environment. It may be thus considered as a form of action that is an important factor in the discrimination of relevant characteristics of the world which are significant for our ongoing activities. It is in these discriminations, carried out in specific contexts of use, that the origin of meaning lies. From Dewey’s work on logic, language, and his own manner of working we may piece together guiding principles for a view of language that does not rely on the distinction between form and matter as an ontological given.

I would like to develop Dewey and Bentley’s notion that language be considered as a form of action and how this allows us to find the origin of meaning in its context of use rather than having to

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<sup>5</sup> Dewey, LW 12:4

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, “Knowing and the Known,” in *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol. 16, 1949-1952*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

be imposed from without. This will also help us understand some characteristics of Dewey's own work with philosophical texts.

### **Locating Meaning in the Situation**

The case of an essentialist semantics or meaning had been taken up earlier in Chapter 5 of *Experience and Nature*<sup>7</sup> in which Dewey analyzed the consequences of treating meaning as an a priori "essence." In this view meaning exists prior to its appearance in actual situations – perhaps as a word or thought in a mind. The problem then arises as to how to get the form, the meaning, into the matter, and here is where various dialectically created faculties are postulated to fulfill that function. The most common hypothesis is that language serves a basic function of expressing thought. "In consequence, the occurrence of ideas becomes a mysterious parallel addition to physical occurrences, with no community and no bridge from one to the other."<sup>8</sup> Dewey argued that it is a view of vocal conduct as serving a primary function of coordinating conduct, that conceptually bridges the gap between existence and essence.

How is that accomplished? It does so by replacing the traditional conception of language as a formal system, the "nature" of which is investigated through logical analysis of a system of rules, with a notion of language as a form of action, the characteristics of which reflects the purposes for which it is used. As a form of action, "meaning" has to be understood by examining vocal conduct in the concrete situation. By postulating a function of social coordination we consider language as a form of action in social processes that has observable and describable consequences.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, "Experience and nature," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol. 1, 1925*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, LW 1:134

<sup>9</sup> The approach to meaning taken here is consistent with Dewey's postulate of

What we need therefore is some general account of what we are *doing* with language. This general account must provide us with the tools to allow us to relate meaning and function to the concrete situations in which it occurs. The problem of postulating a rigid separation of form and matter will be avoided by returning to the phenomenon that is most immediately present, what we see before us - actual talk or written texts.

### **Language as a Form of Action**

*...language is veritably man himself in action, and thus observable.*<sup>10</sup>

Dewey's takes up the general issue of how language is used in inquiry with Arthur Bentley in *Knowing and the Known*. At the beginning of that book, in a chapter entitled *Vagueness in Logic*, the authors discuss the problems encountered in various texts on logic with defining in a clear way what is meant by such terms as "proposition," "fact," "meaning" and so forth. They identify the source of vagueness in the uncritical adoption of a distinction between "(1) men; (2) things; (3) an intervening interpretative activity, product, or medium – linguistic, symbolic, mental, rational, logical, or other – such as language, sign, sentence, proposition, meaning, truth, or thought."<sup>11</sup> We have here the classic distinction between subject and object with the requirement for an intervening mechanism for linking the two. The "vagueness" is due to the conceptual or logical nature of the intervening process and lack of a concrete basis for clarifying the terms referring to this process as well as the characteristics of the world upon which these processes operate. The mistake is to take

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"naturalism." For a more expanded discussion see John Dewey, "Meaning and existence," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol. 1, 1925*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:45

<sup>11</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:9

our logical categories as ontological subject matter. Their alternative is to adopt a simple dichotomous distinction between “men” and “things,” or what might be alternatively said as “men in action”:

[This text] will treat the talking and talk-products or effects of man (the naming, thinkings, arguings, reasonings, etc.) as the men themselves in action, not as some third type of entity to be inserted between the men and the things they deal with. *To this extent* it will be not three-realm, but two-realm: men and things. The difference in the treatment of language is radical. Nevertheless it is not of the type called “theoretical,” nor does it transmute the men from organisms into putative “psyches.” It rests in the simplest, most direct, matter-of-fact, everyday, common sense observation. Talking-organisms and things – there they are; if there, let us study them as they come – the men talking.<sup>12</sup>

Their subject matter is therefore overt behavior. Their approach to language will be to attend to the “words as words” and leave aside questions of underlying or hidden intent, meanings behind the words, personal experience, or metaphysical questions of “exactly what things are.” We are going to strip away the postulation of a subjective world behind talk and look for the observable consequences of using words. For Dewey and Bentley we are *doing* something when we use language. So what kind of action is this that is observable? It can clearly not be a kind of Platonic, cognitive “actionless action,” a phenomenological “interpretation,” or an ontological act of “representing.” Nor are the specific functions or consequences captured by the generalized functions of the ordinary language philosophers.

We find our guide in *The Quest for Certainty*. Dewey characterizes significant human action as the following:

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<sup>12</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:11

It recognizes that experience, the actual experience of men, is one of doing acts, performing operations, cutting, marking off, dividing up, extending, piecing together, joining, assembling and mixing, hoarding and dealing out; in general, selecting and adjusting things as means for reaching consequences.<sup>13</sup>

Applying a principle of continuity of form and function, language may be considered a mode of activity that emerges evolutionarily and developmentally from prior modes. The principle therefore that will guide us is that language is, in the first instance, a specialized behaviour of differentiation and selection that serves the same regulatory functions as all behavior. We see it in the “simple” act of naming, which Dewey and Bentley take to be the primary and most easily observable instance of the “construction” of knowledge:

Naming does things. It states. To state, it must both conjoin and disjoin, identify as distinct and identify as connected . . . . Naming selects, discriminates, identifies, locates, orders, arranges, systematizes.”<sup>14</sup>

Language is therefore considered as an extension of what we do with our bodies. It is a highly refined form of the characteristic human activity - that of cutting, pasting, ordering, etc. As such we would say that it is part and parcel of the manner in which we regulate ourselves and our relationship to the world, including other persons.

When we name we bring something out of the background and into the fore, we establish relationships among the myriad

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<sup>13</sup> John Dewey, “The Quest for Certainty,” in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol.4, 1929*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:134.

aspects of a situation. We do not simply “denote” and represent what was previously there as if it had closed meaning. We identify what something *is* at the same time as what something *is not*. When we name we distinguish. We fixate events and objects out of continuous processes. Naming does not only distinguish; it immediately links and pulls together phenomena, that is, it *relates*, it groups, and is therefore part and parcel of our ordering activity. There are no words for particular things, as Dewey says in the *Logic*. We indicate the particular from the general by the use of articles – *this* chair. To *name* is immediately an act of distinguishing and relating. A word, in this view, is a kind of open-textured format (its use is a kind of “habit”), a kind of generic or universal category, which is adapted to the particular situation as a way of managing the work to be done in coordinating behavior. Its meaning is therefore *indexical* of an entire situation. Its use is an act of selection and reflects the ongoing activities and concerns of the person. Because naming both distinguishes and relates, I will use a more general locution, *partition*, to refer to this basic function of language.

Language is therefore indexical of more general processes of creating information and meaning by a partitioning of the surroundings. Note that it is the action, the naming itself which creates information or meaning because the action of doing so occurs and functions within a particular context. Therefore, there is no need for an a priori distinction between word and thing, which requires something to put them together. Words are actions, are embedded in broader postural actions, and the actions partition aspects of the situation making possible further actions. Without specifying the actual conditions in which talk appears we are always operating on the “generic” or conventional level of dictionary abstractions. Language always functions in concrete situations. Its primary “referent” is to the situation in which it does its work – whether the content is ostensibly about events in the past, the

present, or the future. This is the case in social interaction as well as in work with textual materials.

By focusing on naming as an action we provide an empirical justification for the above account. What we “see” is a behavior of naming; we do not “see” a distinction between word and thing, or sign and referent. Our subject matter is a behavioral event involving an act of designation using a word. An understanding of the action therefore requires examining that behavior in the context where its appearance has meaning. It would perhaps therefore be more appropriate to replace the noun “sign” with the verb “to sign,” or to refer to the act of “signing.”

The unity of sign and referent is thus a characteristic of behavior. The distinguishing of sign and referent is a reflective action on our part. When we remove the terms from the behavior and make them into substantive nouns we are entering into the realm of ontology and we create all kinds of logical problems regarding the relation of word and thing. Midtgarden<sup>15</sup> discusses many of the logical issues created by this distinction, referring to the work of Black, Carnap, Morris, and others.

Dewey unfortunately gave us another kind of justification by comparing his own characterization of the “nature of experience,” or “qualitative thought,”<sup>16</sup> with that of more traditional accounts found in philosophy. I take this as an example of a practice that Dewey later came to regret – that he had often treated “experience,” or in this case “qualitative thought,” as a substantial “thing”. This may be a source of much of the subsequent debate about Dewey’s “metaphysics.” The criteria by we justify the postulate that sign and referent are unified

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<sup>15</sup> Midtgarden, “Dewey’s philosophy of language.”

<sup>16</sup> John Dewey, “Qualitative thought.” *John Dewey: The later works, Vol. 5: 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 245-252. Ratner, Altman and Wheeler, *John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley*, 124.

should be in reference to the behavior, rather than to inherent characteristics of experience or thought.

Despite the new potentialities that arise when we move from communication to language, we must still consider the latter in the context of action. All the elaborations of behaviour that language represents – symbolic communication, the capacity for abstract thought, etc. emerged out of these prior functions of selection and choice. These original functions are not replaced with later functions, but the later functions conform to the basic schema, even when new properties and possibilities emerge.

Talk, we might therefore say, is the tip of the iceberg within a broader context of bodily postural and attentional resources for partitioning the surround—as we orient to the surround posturally and attentionally we make distinctions necessary for the possibility of action. This activity takes place within the framework of partitioning that has already been done: culture.<sup>17</sup> Its communicative function of is that of coordinating activity with others via the mutual, shared partitioning of the surround, creating a shared attentional focus and context.

As a form of behavior language greatly expands our ability to control our relationship with the world. We regulate this relationship through the greater attention to details and we

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<sup>17</sup> A comparison with Mead is useful here. In making such a comparison, Black discussed the extensive similarities between Mead and Dewey but noted that Dewey did not refer to Mead's notion of "taking the stance of the other." His conclusion was that Dewey's perspective was a diluted form of Mead's. However, this ability is too easily cognitivized. For Dewey, taking the stance of the other *has largely already been accomplished* and does not require a special cognitive mechanism. A shared biological and cultural morphology means that much of the work of social interaction—the basic system of partitionings reflected in behaviors of attentional control and focus—has already been put in place during the process of development. Midgarden points out that some of this system is determined by the structure of language itself. How the child adopts the cultural partitionings is a matter for empirical investigation. See Max Black, "Dewey's philosophy of language," and Midgarden, "Dewey's philosophy of language."

simultaneously regulate ourselves—our emotional states and activities—as well as inquiry. Conceived in this way, these functions are served by overt, observable activities; hence language is conceived as a form of action that is observable as an activity of partitioning.

The simple act of naming therefore has a “double-fronted” character. Dewey and Bentley draw our attention to how observation (or naming) involves both that which is named and the act of naming:

Observation is operation; it is human operation. If attributed to a “mind” it itself becomes unobservable. If surveyed in an observable world—in what we call cosmos or nature—the object observed is as much a part of the operation as is the observing organism.”<sup>18</sup>

The act of “naming” is therefore to be viewed “transactionally” – the simultaneously holding in view the action on the part of the observer and the event or process being observed. In other words, we are involved in an activity of selection and choice and the distinctions we make are successful or not given our own criteria of their helping us achieve the outcomes we desire. By seeing language as an activity of selection we put the observer back in the picture. In order to keep both the actor and that which is acted upon in view, Dewey and Bentley use a variety of compound terms such as “naming-named” and “knowings-known.” These help us keep in view both domains, the *what* which is known and the *act* of selection by which it is known. Since action does not take place in a vacuum, but in a situation with a myriad of possibilities for partitioning, we must simultaneously hold in view the act as well as that which is being

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<sup>18</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:55-56.

worked upon. This explicit attention to the act as well as the subject matter is particularly necessary at this historical point in the development of philosophy and the human sciences. It assists us in keeping in view our own activities of ordering.

The more traditional hypothesis that language serves a basic function of representation poses a logical problem and is not an empirically testable hypothesis. We must assume that there is some faculty doing the representing and that we could a priori know the nature of an independent world in order to establish criteria for evaluating the veridicality of the representation.

The alternative presented by Dewey is testable. The hypothesis that language is a form of action serving a basic function of discriminating or partitioning and that this activity in turn has implications for social coordination is a hypothesis that requires attention to observable processes.

In the context of inquiry, this means that our concepts, theories and language accounts in general, are treated for purposes of inquiry as tools we use for regulating our exploratory activities. Viewed in this way, our concepts and theories do not ontologically define our subject matter or tell us what is “out there,” they are instruments in helping us explore what is there. They are means by which we select, order, group, and organize phenomena for the purpose of bringing events into new relations. Their value lies in the new kinds of relationships we see through their use and the control we can exert over processes in order to bring about desired outcomes. Their validity, in Dewey’s point of view, lies in the consequences of their use. A functional approach toward language is therefore in order. We have here a theory which ties *meaning* to its actual situations of use, avoiding the essentialist notion of meaning as carried over into a situation from without.

### A Note on the “Denotative Method” and Other Terminology<sup>19</sup>

In the introduction to the first edition of *Experience and Nature* Dewey stated that philosophy needed to adopt the “denotative-empirical method” if it wanted to avoid the consequences of the ontological formula, or idealism and realism. Dewey describes this method: “. . . ‘denotation’ comes first and last, so that to settle any discussion, to still any doubt, to answer any question, we must go to some thing pointed to, denoted, and find our answer in that thing.”<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, this method has led to a great deal of confusion, in large part it seems because it is often subsumed in a discussion of experience considered from a sensationalist point of view. It seems as if Dewey is saying that to denote should make everything clear, obvious, and true.

Given the above characterization of naming we could develop the notion of “denote” along different lines. To do so it is necessary to keep the overall project in view. The empirical method is a method of controlling experience - or activities, to be more concrete. Introducing the empirical method into philosophy means to introduce controls on our experiences/activities. It is necessary to allow inquiry to be controlled by both our conceptions and our subject-matter. The fact is that in science, we always have to start and end with that which can be described. The problem is, in philosophy, how to “ground” our accounts in a way that is not “foundational” and which recognizes the knower’s contribution to the grounding.

Traditionally, “pointing to” is based on a denotative theory of language which includes a notion of closed meaning as part of its

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<sup>19</sup> The following characterization is consistent with Dewey’s emphasis on the context for an understanding of denotation. See John Dewey, “Meaning and Existence,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 25(13), 1928, 345-353.

<sup>20</sup> Dewey LW 1:372

apparatus. In this approach, we *warrant* an account by *pointing to* or denoting evidence which establishes its *truth*. This assumes that *pointing* is the basic function of language, and that we therefore have an intuitive notion or faculty of “to point.” “Warranting” in this case refers to a closed decision procedure—the attribution of a closed meaning to that which is denoted. This may be considered a possible technical description of “denote.” Dewey criticizes this approach in the *Logic* as the theory of mere or pure demonstrative propositions.<sup>21</sup>

An alternative, based on the above characterization of naming, is to consider the naming of objects to be an act of discrimination, or partitioning. Examples provide emblematic support, *anchoring* an account by articulating meanings which are *indexical*, thereby giving the account *heuristic* support and making it *warrantably assertible*. “Indexing” is used because the behaviour of “pointing” is to make a distinction. Instead of pointing in a denotative sense, which would require some concept of “to point,” we could postulate that the basic process is partitioning. Therefore we maintain our notion of continuity—this process is continuous with other bodily activities of partitioning or differentiating and doesn’t require a special mental faculty. “Anchoring” then depends on a shared context (the “situation” if we are engaged in oral talk, or the complete text if we are analysing written texts). When we denote or point or name we partition and index a meaning (“much more is meant than is said”). We are not saying that an object *has* a meaning. We are partitioning that object as distinct from the surround. We are saying what it is *not* as the same time as we are saying what it is. Instead of denoting an object and creating a closed meaning, we “index” a set of relationships. In this way we avoid a distinction between a word and meaning. It’s “meaning” is related to the ordering work it does in the actual situation of its occurrence.

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<sup>21</sup> Dewey, LW 12:241-242

This view accepts open-texture and incompleteness. Our terms will never be completely defined as if they were ontological objects. “Nothing new can ever be learned by analyzing definitions,” as Peirce said.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless our approach may be put in order by definitions and a familiarity with how a word will be used. A word’s meaning is not however exhausted by such definitions. A word, or a term, is open-textured, its elaboration ultimately stemming from the range of contexts in which it is used and the effects obtained. To “anchor” an account (or the use of a term; or a naming) is to provide contextual support for the action of naming. An anchor is therefore a resource – an operation upon and manipulation of the constraints of a situation through the activities of selection and choice – an ordering of our subject-matter. To index a meaning is to provide an open-textured analysis, one that does not seek to establish a true reading but a heuristic, temporary, and conditional reading.

An important sign of philosophy’s misdirection with regard to Dewey is the endless debate over what he meant by terms such as “denote,” “experience,” and “metaphysics” without taking into account the issues he was trying to address. Dewey is searching for a language, not a foundation. Not only did he severely restrict the proper use of the term “experience,”<sup>23</sup> but he also stated that he would possibly replace the term “denote” with that of “designation.”<sup>24</sup>

The eventual rejection and replacement of these terms should cause us to be cautious in trying to understand Dewey by queries into the “nature” of the terms. To go too far in this endeavour is another form of the ontological formula – the consequences are that we get stuck in definitional questions of what exactly Dewey was referring to and do not consider the issue which

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Peirce, “How to make our ideas clear,” in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 25.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:263

<sup>24</sup> Ratner, Altman and Wheeler, *John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley*, 249.

he was trying to address, which requires situating those terms in the context of Dewey's overall project. Dewey felt he was after something for which he needed the correct words. Terms, for Dewey, constitute "placemarkers" in an overall project of constructing an account of inquiry. He experienced great difficulty in choosing terms that would avoid introducing large amounts of philosophical intellectual baggage.

### **The Direct Descriptive Method**

Dewey and Bentley consider the word "description" to refer to an expanded form of naming, or that "naming" is a truncated form of description.<sup>25</sup> As with naming, description is an activity of ordering. When we describe, we are selecting and choosing what is relevant out of all the possible aspects of a situation we could identify. The result is one possible representation of some objective state of affairs. Appropriate subject matters for empirical inquiry are those that "yield to description." Our descriptions have to be anchored or grounded in observable processes. This is to say that our descriptive activity has to be controlled in the final analysis by our subject matter.

Because description involves operations of selection and choice, judgment is inherent in all descriptive activity. Judgment may be controlled by the explicit, reflective adoption of concepts and regulative principles which guide the descriptive activity and help us select what is relevant within any particular context of investigation. Dewey primarily drew his regulative principles from the biological sciences—principles of continuity, process, function and systems. The goal in science is to come up with descriptions that will further inquiry, ones that order and organize phenomena such that we are able to achieve desired consequences. In order for this process to be

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<sup>25</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:146

successful we need to give our descriptive activities “free rein,” that is, by not using our conceptions in such a way as to exert complete control over our descriptive activities by pre-judging our subject matter.

The primary way in which we impose unnecessary and undesirable constraints on our descriptions is by treating our principles, categories, descriptions and terms as if they had an ontological status. Descriptions and their terms become objectified. This practice has the consequences of decontextualizing objects and events, specifying a priori what is significant and what is not, and localizing the origin of phenomena in the inherent “nature” of our descriptive distinctions and terms. As Dewey and Bentley said, our current practice of applying the ontological formula “shatters the subject matter into fragments in advance of inquiry and thus destroys instead of furthering comprehensive observation for it.”<sup>26</sup>

Within the theory of inquiry, Dewey and Bentley draw attention to a trend that was slowly being recognized in both the physical and life sciences, which was that description can be carried out without giving ontological status to the “entities” described and thereby giving them determinative or causal force. In chapters 4 and 5 of *Knowing and the Known* they relate how descriptive activities in the sciences have evolved from the attribution of various forms of self-action, in which objects are viewed as acting under their own power; to interaction, in which one or more independent things are related in some causal connection; and most recently to the notion of transaction, in which it is held that description and naming may be carried on without the attribution of forces or causal powers to any independent entity. While the second, that of interaction, added a valuable relational component to our descriptions, only transaction represents an amplification of the phenomena to include the

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<sup>26</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:67

observer. When we do that, we find that the previous attribution of independent status to our entities becomes superfluous, and they become a matter of emphasis, not of ontological identity. The notion of “transaction” was therefore a concept which drew our attention to our own activities of ordering and was formulated as a regulative principle for inquiry that would allow description “free rein” by avoiding constraints imposed on our descriptive activities by the hypostatization or reification of language terms. With the notion of transaction we change the status of our descriptive activities from accounts of reality to *manners of representing* reality. Whereas the former two approaches utilize the ontological formula the transactional approach recognizes descriptions as “systems of description and naming” which have logical or symbolic status and not an ontological status. Dewey and Bentley are now contrasting two different *methods* of observation and description.

A better understanding of the above comments requires supportive examples. Here it may be noted that these issues are quite important and still being worked out in the life sciences, particularly in the area of biological development. In the domain of ontogenesis for example (the study of the development of biological form), it is coming to be recognized that we can describe the development of living forms without ascribing causal force to independent factors of genes or environment. The focus is becoming that of describing the system that produces the forms. This requires that we describe both characteristics of what we have previously held apart as organism and environment. The notion of species-typicality or that of maturation, for example, does not have to be pre-judged as a statement of inheritability, but simply of incidence—of relative frequency and predictability across the normal range of environments. Or in animal ethology, “territoriality” may be described as the coordinated patterning of a species’ behavior in relation to certain environments, without pre-judging the origin of

that behavior as being located in the genes or environment. “Control” becomes an issue that is not pre-specified but which depends on the analyst’s point of view.<sup>27</sup>

The notion is that if we do not give description free rein and allow our conceptions to be modified by the subject-matter being described, we often find an incoherence or incompatibility between our conceptions and our descriptions of actual processes. Our ideas or conceptions may be perfectly logical consistent but are still incoherent if they do not act as appropriate guides for empirically exploring our subject matter. This means that activities of description, while having to be guided by our conceptual apparatus, also have to be allowed to feed back to and modify our conceptions. Distinctions such as those between subject and object, genes and environment, mind and body, person and situation, organism and environment, natural kinds and human kinds, innate vs. acquired, etc. are evaluated for their utility in helping us describe phenomena.

The notion of transaction was derived from these recent trends in the physical and biological sciences. It does not have any a priori status as being either a characteristic of reality or as a fixed condition of inquiry. It is a general conclusion drawn from considering what happens when we describe a subject matter. The fact is that *under description*, for an adequate treatment, we are forced to attend to both the organism and environment, the cell and its surround, the child and the characteristics of the classroom, the businessman and business, the “territorial” behavior of the animal and the territory, the light ray and the conditions of observation, the genes and their environment, the word and the thing, the object and its value. When we describe the process of inquiry itself we find that our descriptions have to take into account both the act of observing as well as what is observed. Thus, the principle of transaction is a

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Oyama, *The Ontogeny of Information: Developmental Systems and Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

conclusion reached by generalizing from the requirements of describing what we do in knowing something. Its generality is given in its being a guide for the description of our subject matters in the research domain, as well as a guide for conducting inquiry in the analytic domain. It is a principle that helps us avoid the “ontological fallacy” by drawing attention to inquiry as an action of selection and choice on our part. It is a notion that is designed to give free rein to description, which is where inquiry starts and to which it has to return.

Description is freed in the sense that the locus for making partitions in our subject matter, rather than being determined a priori, is placed in the hands of the investigator doing the describing, making the choice of terms and distinctions that guide the process contingent on the subject matter and the act of organizing itself. The principles that guide the process must be conditional or contingent depending on the requirements of the subject matter, and therefore must be flexible, both in how they are interpreted and as far as their relevance to the subject matter is perceived.

Our assertion is the right to see in union what it becomes important to see in union; together with the right to see in separation what it is important to see in separation – each in its own time and place; and it is this right, when we judge that we require it for our own needs, for which we find strong support in the recent history of physics.<sup>28</sup>

### **Applying the Direct Descriptive Method to Philosophical Texts**

The study of written texts (or their spoken equivalents) in provisional severance from the particular organisms engaged, but nevertheless as durational and extensional behaviors

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<sup>28</sup> Dewey, LW 16:107

under cultural description, is legitimate and valuable. The examination is comparable to that of species in life, of a slide under a microscope, or of a cadaver on the dissection table – directed strictly at what is present to observation, and not in search for non-observables presumed to underlie observation though always in search for more observables ahead and beyond.<sup>29</sup>

Philosophy's primary proximal subject matter is written texts, and its primary activity is their analysis and interpretation. It would perhaps be better to use the word "reading" rather than the more cognitive "interpretation." Constructing an empirical reading is a matter of "observing" the visible features of a text by *anchoring* the determination of their significance in the text as a whole. All readings have the same status as descriptions in general – they are the product of an activity of ordering or organizing, and as such they are temporary, conditional and on-trial. If successful, a reading may be utilized by others to create a similar experience when reading the text as experienced by the author of the reading. The criteria for evaluating a reading is as much a matter of aesthetics, coherence or harmony, as logical.

As quoted earlier, Dewey and Bentley "will treat the talking and talk-products or effects of man (the naming, thinkings, arguings, reasonings, etc.) as the men themselves in action.." I have used the word "partitioning" to characterize this action. They say that the primary meaning of a word must be determined by locating the word in a sequence of behavior.<sup>30</sup> It is there that the activity of selection and choice, or partitioning, occurs.

Textual analysis, being a form of description, requires guiding principles for controlling the reading. The power of

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<sup>29</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:89

<sup>30</sup> Dewey and Bentley, LW 16:109

Dewey's critique of western philosophy is due to the analytic tool(s) he brings to bear on the texts of this history. He employs a technique of stripping away the content of a philosophical text and noting the distinctions made and the status given to those distinctions.<sup>31</sup> He looks for the lines drawn, whether the action is justified by the author on logical or empirical grounds, and then follows the course of inquiry by observing the consequences in terms of where we are led—the activities engaged in, questions asked, and the problems posed. Predictions may be made. If we understand the method a philosophy text uses, we know where it is going to go, regardless of the specific content. For example, when a philosophical text begins with a distinction between the human sciences and the natural sciences, given rigidity by a claim of inherent ontological differences in subject matter, the only way to proceed is to try to bridge the abyss by dialectical argument.<sup>32</sup>

The text is a record, condensed in space and time, of action.

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<sup>31</sup> For those interested, I might note that Dewey and Freud share a similar understanding of empirical method. In an article titled *Negation*, Freud describes his technique in the following manner: "In our interpretation we take the liberty of disregarding the negation and of simply picking out the subject-matter of the association" (p. 213). They are both using a guiding principle of partitioning. Dewey, in his critical work, focuses on how distinctions are made logical and in his constructive work focuses on linkages. Freud, in his therapeutic work, emphasizes the groupings, the *associations*. Dewey of course worked with textual accounts and Freud with oral accounts, related subject-matters but which arguably require a difference in focus. See Sigmund Freud, "Negation" in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff, (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 213-217.

<sup>32</sup> A good example of filling the gap by dialectical argument is Gadamar's treatise on "ontological phenomenology." His technique is to claim an ontological difference between the subject matters of the natural and human sciences, requiring different faculties for knowledge in each domain. This text is a treatise on a mechanism, in this case that of "understanding," which he believes must be postulated to demarcate the distinction and fill the gap. This filling takes him 584 pages of logical argument to complete. See Hans-Georg Gadamar, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1989), and Joseph Ratner on the dialectical gap in "Introduction to John Dewey's philosophy." In *Intelligence in the Modern World*, edited by Joseph Ratner, 1-241. New York: Random House, 1939.

The task is to describe the actions taken. Using this notion as a heuristic tool, the reading will therefore stay on the “surface” of the page. It does not look for anything behind the text and that unifies the text. Nothing is hidden in terms of meaning or intentions. We do not have to infer a content behind the text, often understood to be the real subject matter. Nothing more is meant than what is said. We focus on the text itself and gain our initial access to it using our shared cultural understanding of words. The method, in other words, consists of approaching the text literally in terms of determining what actions a writer is taking – the “moves” that are made. The moves consist of the lines drawn, the distinctions introduced, how the words function as markers within the overall account, the language employed and its grammar, and how words, sentences and paragraphs are collated. Our task is to display how these features relate to each other. Analysis has to be grounded or anchored in the features of the text itself. Words or terms are open-textured and part of their meaning is given by their location in the overall project. A functional approach means asking what a term does, what is it *for*. This approach differs in significant ways from an ontological treatment of the text in which terms are taken out of context and their definition becomes the primary concern. In this latter approach, the function of terms in the overall text, i.e. their use, is ignored.

The text may be historically and culturally situated in relation to other texts and traditions beyond itself, however, such comparison does not explain what is being done. We need to “provisionally” sever the text from its wider context and in a sense treat it as “autonomous.” Comparing and contrasting the texts of different writers of philosophical systems, when done, needs to examine the method used rather than the content. It is not difficult, for example, to find different authors discussing the characteristics of “experience” in very similar ways. However, to compare different descriptions of

experience based on their content, such as those by Ortega y Gasset, Heidegger, Csikszentmihalyi or Jung with Dewey's, is not to explain the use of the concept of experience by Dewey, nor is the concept "validated" by its similarity in content to that of other writers. To focus on the content is to decontextualize the concept of experience and remove it from its critical function in an overall project. There is an important difference, for example, in a phenomenological description of experience that is contained within a different network of terms than those employed by Dewey. The use of a word has to be located in the context of each philosopher's text, to see exactly what work it does *there*.

The purpose of textual analysis for Dewey is to evaluate the utility of the text for directing our attention and inquiries to empirical subject matter.

### **Implications**

It is important that we reflect for a moment on the broader implications of the foregoing characterization of language as a form of action.

The characterization presented here is of language as an activity of ordering the world in such a way that we can successfully regulate our relationship to it. This entails its manipulation to achieve desired results. Given this point of view, there is no possible meaning to the idea that we can know an independent reality. Either our language accounts are considered as activities of ordering or they are not. This means that we cannot give any aspect of Dewey's philosophical account the status of "metaphysical." For Dewey, the claim that any language statement represents an independent reality apart from our ordering activity is a form of justification. He replaces this method with the notion that justifications have to be based on utility, or use. If we do this with the "generic characteristics of

existence,” for example, we would change the status of these characteristics from ontological to postulatory, or what we might call regulative principles. This is more consistent with Dewey’s statement that his discussion of these characteristics were introduced in *Experience and Nature* as a tool of criticism.<sup>33</sup>

This raises the further question of what status we should award our accounts, regardless of their particular form. Can we continue to view them as direct, ontological representations of the world to be evaluated for their truth? Or are they produced as part of an activity of organizing and reflect the conditions of their production?

Assuming the latter, perhaps a map analogy would be more suitable than that of an ontological representation, an analogy that Dewey uses throughout his work.<sup>34</sup> As “maps,” our philosophical accounts are to be evaluated for their utility, which will depend partially on their logical constructions, but primarily according to the consequences of their use. They are constructed for a particular purpose as a tool of inquiry, to help us navigate from one situation to another. They are *forms of representation*, are infinite in their possible variety, and are tested for their utility. We may treat our philosophical accounts in the same way. By doing so we are forced to take into consideration the role of the user in map construction, its purpose or use, and situated criteria for its validity. A map is always a conditional heuristic—temporary, conditional and on-trial. Questions regarding which map is the “true” map are non-sensical.

If we view Dewey’s philosophy as having the status of a map,

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<sup>33</sup> John Dewey, “Experience and existence: A comment” in *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925-1953, Vol. 16, 1949-1952*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Jim Garrison, “Dewey on metaphysics, meaning making and maps,” *Trans. of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 41 (4), 2005. 818-844; for a good discussion of the map analogy applied to theories in physics see Stephen Toulmin’s *The Philosophy of Science: An Introduction* (London: Hutchinson & Co.,1953).

it helps us understand the choices he made in its construction. His primary concern was that it functions to engage us in empirical concerns over the resolution of logical problems, and that it made our use of language, as a form of action, available for control. Our questions regarding his account are no longer to be concerned with its truth value as a description of reality, but its utility as a particular form of representation.

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