

**INTRODUCTION:
ON SOME VARIETIES OF IMMEDIATE EXPERIENCE
– BETWEEN WITTGENSTEIN AND PRAGMATISM¹**

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Is it still possible to speak of immediate, unreflective experiences after the rejection of the myth of the given, after the pragmatic and semiotic criticism of the concept of non-mediated datum, and after the linguistic turn and the hermeneutic developments of phenomenology in the twentieth century?

Can we honestly and non-dogmatically recognize those aspects of our more or less ordinary experiences where all references come to an end, we plainly understand what is happening or, maybe, it is not a cognitive question at all?

Might it not be the case that a qualitative, pre-scientific or a-scientific dimension is already present here, a dimension that cannot be translated into quantitative terms and which has to do with the significance of experience at multiple levels – from bodily perception to aesthetic and ethic sensibility? Can we reasonably state that some sort of “imponderable evidence” – to quote Anna Boncompagni’s essay – gives us access to the immediate background of our actions and thinking, which is already there prior to any cognitive enterprise or epistemic project?

Classical pragmatism – particularly Peirce’s one, primarily considered in its semiotic aspect, as well as Dewey’s pragmatism, according to which “givens” are “takens” when dealing with the logic of inquiry – has correctly been described as the first source of criticism of the so-called “myth of the given”. On the other hand, it is well known to Wittgenstein’s readers that he understood

philosophy as an eminently grammatical approach to language and that he consequently criticized any appeal to the allegedly experienced character of meaning, conceived as something primarily subjective.

Nonetheless, it is equally known that James and Dewey tirelessly emphasized the qualitative, aesthetic and unreflective aspects of our experiences, which are significant for what they do directly on us, without being further deferred to other things (see Roberta Dreon’s paper). Wittgenstein all too frequently evokes those situations in which there is no need to speak and think any further, situations in which we are simply “to look at” what is happening as something “complete” in itself, dissolving its apparently problematic character – as Luigi Perissinotto explains in his essay.

The point is that the appeal to immediacy is far from unambiguous and can serve very different goals, as Vincent Colapietro highlights in his paper: the range of possibilities extends from the typically modern philosophical aim of establishing a secure foundation for our knowledge to the post-metaphysical acknowledgment that our experience of the world, including its bodily anchorage (to which Ángel Faerna directs our attention), is prior to the formulation of any radical doubt.

The articles collected in this issue of the journal share a basic downplaying of any epistemological claim for immediacy in favour of a more existential or anthropological understanding of the concept. They explore this subject by engaging with a variety of aspects and touching upon different nuances of the term: from the overlap between the concepts of immediate and direct experience to the distinction between the epistemological and existential interpretation of certainty; from the opposition between qualitative and quantitative experience to their intertwinement and mutual shaping; from an understanding of immediately experienced meanings in terms of gestures (as pointed out by Barbara Formis) to language-acquired habits which have “become nature to us” (as highlighted by Marilena Andronico); from the immediacy of competency, ability and the likes to the immediacy of

¹ Although this introduction has been a joint effort, Roberta Dreon wrote the first section of the preface while Anna Boncompagni wrote the second part of the text.

novelty (as noted by Giovanni Tuzet). This issue of *Pragmatism Today* represents the third step in the ongoing research on Wittgenstein and the Pragmatists conducted by a group of scholars mainly based in Italy and originally brought together by Rosa Maria Calcaterra (University of Roma Tre) and Luigi Perissinotto (University of Venice Ca' Foscari) in 2015. The previous stages of the research focused on habits, norms, and forms of life and on psychologism. The papers resulting from them were respectively published in *Paradigmi* (issue XXXIV (3), 2016) and the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* (issue IX (1), 2017). Most of the papers published in this issue of *Pragmatism Today* were presented at a conference held at the University of Florence in September 2017, which also saw the participation of members of the research unit "Qualitative Ontology and Technology (Qua-Onto-Tech)", coordinated by Roberta Lanfredini, thus leading the research to address phenomenological topics. Additionally, we welcome and strongly appreciate the collaboration of Vincent Colapietro, Ángel Manuel Faerna, and Barbara Formis, who have joined us in the present phase of the project. We are also very grateful to *Pragmatism Today* and, more specifically, to Alexander Kremer for hosting this part of our collaborative inquiry and for giving us the chance to make it accessible to a wider audience.

The three papers that open this issue retrace some central topics in the traditions that we are examining. **Michela Bella** offers an analysis of James' conception of experience as a way to approach the difference between percepts and concepts, that is between the immediate and the mediated. James' radical empiricism, she points out, can be usefully interpreted as 'a theory of experience based on a theory of relations', so that the thesis of relations being themselves experienced comes to play a key role. It is in the dialectic between the knower and the known, interpreted as a relation between parts of experience, that the difference between percepts and concepts emerges. Such a view

also helps to better contextualize Wittgenstein's criticism of James, centred on the latter's use of introspection in his treatment of concepts. **Alice Morelli**'s contribution is focused on James and Wittgenstein, and more specifically on what she calls "the experiential account of meaning" that Wittgenstein attributes to James. After describing James' approach as it emerges in the *Principles of Psychology*, she introduces Wittgenstein's reservations about it, and clarifies that Wittgenstein's aim is not to deny that there are experiential elements in meaning, but rather to oppose the tendency to *ground* meaning in experience. In her conclusion, Morelli also points in the direction of a Wittgenstein-inspired but at the same time broadly pragmatist notion of meaning as socially embedded and enacted, thus showing the contemporary relevance of these reflections. **Andrea Pace Giannotta** instead investigates the concept of experience by drawing a comparison between James' radical empiricism and Edmund Husserl's genetic phenomenology. This allows him to go beyond the apparent contrast between James' later thought, characterized by a strong anti-dualism, and Husserl's approach, focused instead on the dual dimension of intentionality. Giannotta points out that even in Husserl's genetic phenomenology the flow of primal impressions is conceived of as a fundamental dimension of experience that precedes the duality between subject and object. In his view, this conception, by anchoring experience in the embodied subject, can also complement the Jamesian perspective in the direction of concreteness, against certain metaphysical interpretations.

The five contributions that follow tackle more directly the theoretical core and the methodological aspects of the theme under discussion. The focus of Vincent **Colapietro**'s paper is on immediate experience as opposed to the artificial skeptical doubt that calls the very existence of the world into question. Both the classical pragmatists and Wittgenstein, he observes, oppose the usual move of traditional philosophy, which

detaches itself from ordinary life, as this were the only means for “true” philosophizing and for true critique. This opposition results in an appeal to the immediacy of the relationship between human beings and the world, that is, the immediacy of human beings’ inhabiting the world not as knowers, but as agents in an arena of action, where “action” is to be understood in a broad sense that encompasses both experience and language. In a similar spirit, **Roberta Dreon** articulates a deflationary pragmatist perspective on immediate experience by focusing mainly on Dewey, who in her view developed a novel approach to this issue as a result of his way of dissolving a tension between the young Peirce’s take on the mediated nature of human cognition and the later James’ views on immediate experience. Dewey’s solution hinges on a rich conception of experience as something strictly connected with human life, in such a way that language and cognition themselves are understood as parts of experience, and hence not in opposition to it. The later Wittgenstein interestingly turns out to be broadly in agreement with such a view. This is confirmed, from a methodological point of view, by **Luigi Perissinotto**, who draws attention to Wittgenstein’s use of the word “problematic” and observes that the aim of philosophy for him is precisely the disappearance of what is problematic in life. One form that this disappearance can take, Perissinotto argues, has to do with the capacity to acknowledge that what immediately appears incomplete is not something waiting to be completed (typically, by a sort of theory). In this sense, Wittgenstein’s philosophical method, centred on renouncing theory, is an appeal to immediacy: it is an appeal to see things as they are, by resisting the temptation to fill-in the gaps via theoretical moves. Fully in accordance with this claim, **Marilena Andronico** takes as her starting point Wittgenstein’s insistence on the fact that forms of life are a “given” that has to be accepted, a “given” which, in her interpretation, crucially includes linguistic habits and the following of rules. These broadly cultural and acquired habits, she observes, have an

intrinsically normative aspect, but nevertheless remain immediate. Their being part of the immediate given means that they play the role of irreducible elements within a certain kind of grammatical inquiry, defining its very domain. In this way, Andronico suggests, a grammatical investigation remains compatible with a form of naturalism, yet differs from an approach (like James’, in Wittgenstein’s perception) that relies solely on experience. Another paper primarily dealing with Wittgenstein is **Anna Boncompagni**’s one, whose focus is on the apparently elusive notion of ‘imponderable evidence’ that Wittgenstein uses to describe our understanding of others’ feelings and emotions, as well as our aesthetic judgments. In these contexts, she observes, we are often guided by a form of immediate and qualitative evidence that remains unmeasurable, ungraspable, and almost impossible to put into words. In imponderable evidence, Boncompagni argues, immediacy and experience are interwoven: in order to clarify this point, she turns to Dewey’s conception of ‘qualitative thought’, which shows surprising affinities with the Wittgensteinian perspective. Both thinkers, she concludes, help highlight the importance for philosophy of a fuller consideration of the qualitative dimension of human existence.

The three papers that conclude our issue deal with more specific traits of immediate experience, which prove to be particularly salient. **Ángel Faerna** is interested in highlighting the epistemological significance of the body. In contrast with the traditional neglect of the body, he notes that according to the later Wittgenstein (as also underlined by neuropsychiatrist Oliver Sacks) we normally have a non-discursive, immediate awareness of our having a body. Moreover, as the pragmatists also help us realize, this somatic awareness is crucially practical, as it has to do with the potentialities of the active body within the situation in which it is embedded. In spite of some short-sighted interpretations of bodily awareness, which all too hastily conflate it with either the privateness of mental states or

the foundationalism of the “myth of the given”, Faerna urges us to fully acknowledge its role in knowledge. **Barbara Formis’** contribution is close to this perspective in her emphasizing the importance of gestures and asking what the relationship between gestures and meaning is. Making use of John Dewey’s criticism of Darwinism, she highlights that a merely naturalistic approach risks overlooking that there is something more to a gesture than a simple organic discharge; yet, Formis also denies that gestures can be transformed into a formalized and logical form. By drawing from the later Wittgenstein, she finds a middle path between these two extremes, one that fully acknowledges the intertwinement between the biological and the social, and ultimately explains gestures as performed acts that carry an immediate quality and are characterized by an “overflow”, or a sort of “possibility of meaning”. Finally, **Giovanni Tuzet** distinguishes between two concepts of experience, the “singular” (“having an experience”) and the “general” (“having experience” or “being experienced”). After illustrating some insights of the classical pragmatists in the light of this distinction, he examines how some philosophers who are somewhat close to the pragmatists – Wittgenstein, Quine, and McDowell – dealt with experience, noting that they tended to privilege either one or the other aspect. Finally, he applies his distinction to the field of the philosophy of law, and reinterprets the dialectic between “stories” and “background generalizations” in the scholarship on the topic of evidence as a dialectic between the singular and the general concepts of experience, showing how this contributes to a better understanding of such problems.