# Normativity and Objectivity
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This text was automatically generated on 11 January 2018.

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## Introduction

1    One of the most important contributions of pragmatism to the understanding of contemporary epistemological concepts is the formulation of a comprehensive account of objectivity. Through a balanced combination of a) the Kantian insight that objects are *constructions* rather than givens, and b) the Hegelian thesis that truth and objectivity are the outcome of a controlled process of inquiry, pragmatists have argued that objectivity should not be conceived of as something independent of human perspective. Thus, pragmatists warn us not to use the term 'objectivity' in a strong 'realistic' and quasi-metaphysical sense: objectivity does not refer to something outside our space of reasons which externally influences our beliefs. Rather, it designates the regularity of the relations between our actions and the responses of the external world to them. To be objective means to be real, universal, and therefore rationally articulated – or, at least, rationally articulable. William James once said that the trail of the human serpent is over everything (James 1907/2008: 34). The same must hold true for the notion of objectivity.

2    In the following pages I will address the question of the nature and ground of objectivity from such a pragmatist perspective. The point of assessing its theoretical validity is to gain a better understanding of the idea that the pragmatist account of objectivity has a distinctly Kantian provenance.[1] Indeed, one should be careful not to misinterpret the sense of this assumption. Provenance is not taken to mean bald acceptance; rather, it consists in a process of critical and creative appropriation of the fundamental tenets of a tradition. To hold that the pragmatist notion of objectivity belongs to the post-Kantian tradition means, therefore, that the former should be read as a self-conscious attempt to come to terms with the latter. Such an attempt has both a positive and a negative component: acceptance goes hand-in-hand with rejection. On the one side, indeed, as a self-avowedly post-Kantian movement, pragmatism relies upon the principle of the

ontological and epistemological primacy of the spontaneity of human agency. Within the pragmatist framework the Kantian insistence upon the primacy of spontaneity is reformulated as the primacy of those activities *(practices)* in which human beings are involved. In doing so, the concept of spontaneity is brought down to earth, and becomes the core of an empirical and verifiable description of the behaviour of concrete human beings. As an important aspect of human behaviour, objectivity falls within the scope of spontaneity, and has therefore to be described in such terms. When seen in this light, objectivity turns out to be the collective name that we give to the constraints we meet in our transactions with the world.

3    On the other hand, being a self-avowedly post-Kantian movement – that is, a movement which is made conscious of the weak points of Kant's transcendental project as well as its many strengths – pragmatism cannot accept the dualism of form and matter that has been traditionally associated with the Kantian constructivist option. Post-Kantian philosophy has convincingly shown the untenability of any constructivist position holding a certain event or phenomenon (knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, morality) to be formed out of raw material that is devoid of the quality (cognitive, aesthetic, moral) which is characteristic of the final product we want to account for. Sellars's famous rejection of the Myth of the Given is part of a wider historical reaction against any reductionist programme aiming to search for an origin of those logical spaces (rational discourse, ethics, aesthetics, and so on) that determine the way in which human beings have experience of the world. The adoption of such a standpoint – which may be labelled 'value holism' since it relies upon the assumption that semantic holism is a particular case of the more general holistic structure of human rationality, centred around the notion of values – implies therefore that a constructivist account of objectivity cannot be satisfied with the equation of the latter with an alleged raw material of knowledge because such a raw material is nothing but a myth (Sellars 1956/1997).

4    The conjunction of those two trains of thought defines the predicament of any pragmatist account of objectivity which aims at taking seriously its post-Kantian roots. Indeed, it seems evident, at least at first glance, that the combined insistence upon spontaneity and value holism poses a serious threat to the possibility of accounting for the role played by objective constraints in our rational transactions with the surrounding environment. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that an account of objectivity hinging upon the idea of an *infinite* primacy of spontaneity – that is, not limited by anything outside itself – ends up in a denial of the very possibility of objectivity. McDowell's depiction of the continuous oscillation between coherentism and the Myth of the Given can be read as evidence of such theoretical discomfort. It seems that if one puts the idea of an independent reality aside, one is faced with the pure arbitrariness of their acts (McDowell 1994).

5    The goal of the article is to show that those two demands – the insistence upon the primacy (epistemological and ontological) of spontaneity and the rejection of the traditional form of constructivism – can be combined in a consistent whole which does not entail any unpleasant idealistic conclusion, that is, any conclusion which leads to the denial of the reality of objectivity. To achieve this goal, I will argue that, all the difficulties above notwithstanding, the insight which lies at the basis of the distinction between form and content – the idea that there is a way in which things are, and this way does not depend upon how an agent decides to conceptualize the material – can be preserved within a pragmatist framework. No matter what the theoretical framework is

within which it is formulated, a satisfactory notion of objectivity must recognize the fact that certain features of the material somehow put constraints upon the content and structure of the activities in which an agent can participate. As Peirce lucidly remarked, even though the brute quality of empirical experience – what he calls 'secondity' – does not exhaust the meaning of objectivity, it is nevertheless a fundamental aspect of what we mean by that notion.

6 Objectivity is a stratified concept, as complex as the normative relations that are implied in human activity. The ultimate aim of this article is to bring to light the complexity of that concept. The argumentation will proceed as follows. In the first two parts of the paper I will highlight the deep connection between activity and objectivity, and I will defend a pluralistic view of experience and reality. In the third section I will discuss the nature of common-sense objectivity in order to argue for its primacy over scientific objectivity. Finally, I will sketch a possible explanation of the relation between common-sense and scientific practices insisting on the notion of articulation of potentialities. I shall maintain that the notion of the rational articulation of potentialities should be acknowledged as the essential core of the pragmatist conception of objectivity and normativity.

## The Structure of Normativity: From Concepts to Practices

7 As we have seen, a mature, self-critical form of pragmatism needs to find a way to account for the constraints that human beings meet in their transactions with the world without relapsing into the Myth of the Given. A promising solution is to conceive of normativity as the backbone of objectivity. The advantages of this approach are twofold. On the one hand, the normative content implicit in the notion of objectivity is brought to light and emphasized; on the other hand, the nature of objectivity is explained in terms of a notion which is more directly related to the idea of spontaneity. As a consequence of this shift of focus from objectivity to normativity, it should be easier to remain within the scope of a genuine pragmatist investigation of the structure of human rationality.

8 An important clue to a correct formulation of the problem is provided by Kant. Kant has argued, I think convincingly, that objects and concepts *convertuntur.* In § 17 of the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he writes that an object is: "that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united" (Kant 1781/1998: B137). That insight is further developed in the section on schematism in which Kant attempts explicitly to prove the normative character of empirical concepts. The concept of dog, Kant writes: "signifies a rule in accordance with which my imagination can specify the shape of a four-footed animal in general, without being restricted to any singular particular shape that experience offers me or any possible image that I can exhibit *in concreto*" (Kant 1781/1998: A141/B180). Thus he suggests that we should not introduce any cognitive break between object and concept. The semantic content of the object – what the object means for us – is completely expressible in conceptual terms.

9 If we accommodate this insight within a pragmatist perspective, the Kantian account of concepts takes a more distinctively practical turn. Concepts can now be defined as rules *(Regeln)* that establish the conditions of usability of an object of a certain kind. [2] Paradoxical as it may seem, the structure of any object turns out to be of the form 'if you

do this, it will necessarily follow that' – or, better said, 'do this in order to achieve that.' In this sense, it is clear why and to what extent objectivity has to be regarded as a normative notion. An object, which consists of its semantic content, is what we *could* do with it *independently* of the fact that we actually undertake the particular kind of action formulated by the corresponding notion. There is an intimate relation between normativity and modality, as Brandom has correctly pointed out. On the one hand, normativity and modality are deeply intertwined since norms are *necessary* possibilities (Brandom 2008: 96-7). A diamond is hard even though it is crystallized in the midst of a cushion of soft cotton, and remains unscratched until the end of its time. But it is also clear why normativity is related to, and dependent upon, spontaneity. It is always up to us to decide what to do with a thing. In this sense, it is possible to say that norms are necessary *possibilities.*

10    However, while it is up to us to decide what to do with a certain thing, it is not up to us to decide whether or not that particular thing will actually succeed in satisfying our needs. It is true that norms are freely established by human beings, and that nothing in the world can compel us to undertake a certain behaviour or to speak in a certain way. This is a point that Rorty never tired of highlighting. Nevertheless, the success or failure of the application of the norms that we have established, or, in more pragmatist terms, of the tools that human beings have constructed throughout history, testifies to the existence of a bedrock upon which the spade turns (Wittgenstein 1953/2009: § 217). Such a bedrock is what we call 'objectivity.'

11    Here the richness of the vocabulary of normativity comes to our aid. First of all, it is important to note that the resistance we have experience of is always part of a *practice.* A practice is a normatively articulated whole. It establishes its own conditions of possibility, and is consequently defined by the normative constraints it acknowledges as its legitimate bounds of validity. Every practice displays an internal normativity which is structured around the relation between a set of means and the end that they claim to achieve (Frega 2010). Stated in other terms, every practice provides the conditions of possibility of the usability of the concepts through which the agent attempts to reach that particular end which defines of the practice in which they are involved. The relation between concepts and practices is homologous to that between focus and horizon. Every concept is significant only within a practice, since it is only in the context of a practice that concepts become truly effective. At the same time, practices are made concrete only when concepts are used to control and change the existing situations. Otherwise, a practice is only a scheme of possible actions.

12    When resistance is conceived of in the light of the practices in which it appears, it shows itself to be a normative concept in a twofold sense. On the one hand, resistance can be said to have a normative content because it is only in the light of the relation between means and ends that it becomes possible to determine what counts as a significant *resistance,* and to establish what is objective within a particular practice. Since such a relation is instrumental, and since instrumentality is a particular type of normativity, the pressure exerted by the 'givenness' of things – their quality or material aspect – is 'normativity-laden.' It is important to notice here that resistance should not be taken simply in a negative sense. It is simply meant to refer to the fact that the possibilities which things afford are determinate. If you want to break a glass, the trait to which you have to pay attention is the hardness of the object you are looking at. If the thing is hard enough – say, a stone – it affords the possibility of performing the desired action. By

contrast, if it is not hard enough, you are faced with its uselessness. In both cases, you cannot overcome the resistance of the object, that is, the determinacy of that which it affords. However, the object affords a resistance only because there is an underlying norm stating that a particular quality of the thing under consideration is a hindrance or a resource to the achievement of the goal that is constitutive of the practice at stake.

13   On the other hand, the notion of resistance turns out to be a normative concept in the sense that it sets the tasks that *other* practices – different from the one in which I am actually engaged – have to accomplish. Within the context of a certain practice an agent has experience of the determinacy of that which a thing affords – say, the hardness of a particular stone, what Gibson calls 'affordance.'[3] Now, it is always possible for them to adopt a reflective stance as a consequence of which that particular experience of resistance is made an object of analysis at a higher level. The adoption of a reflective stance is a possibility always available to a rational agent. In doing so, the determinacy of that which certain things afford is transferred to another level, and becomes the subject-matter of a higher-level practice. The relation between the two levels is a normative relation because the higher-level practice is subject to the authority of the kind of resistance that it has to account for. Consequently, resistance is normatively binding for the concepts through which the agent attempts to understand it.

14   The two senses in which resistance can be said to have normative value are not immediately reducible one to the other.[4] Indeed, while in the first case the normative relation concerns different aspects of a single practice, in the second case the normative relation holds between elements of different practices. Whilst not completely unrelated, I think that it is important to keep the two senses separate in order to preserve the autonomy of the various practices in which human beings can be involved.

## What Does "Relative to Practice" Mean?

15   From a pragmatist standpoint objectivity is always relative to a practice. This conclusion follows directly from the pragmatist principle that the validity of a judgement depends upon the kind of use that we want to make of it. So, for instance, the judgement "France is a hexagon" is valid – thence it has objectivity – if and only if there is at least one practice in which the utterance of that sentence represents a successful move. Here 'successful' means that a certain move actually succeeds in bringing about the desired result, where the notion of desired result refers to the objective purpose that is constitutive of the particular practice under consideration. Dewey's naturalistic conception of needs is useful to clarify this point. The satisfaction of hunger is not a psychological event – and here 'psychological' means subjective, private, but it is an objective goal that can be achieved only through the objective modification of the situation from which hunger originates. The desired result is the reconstruction of a harmonic transaction between the organism and its environment, and such reconstructed harmony is the only *legitimate* conclusion of the practice.[5] A conclusion is 'legitimate' if and only if the practice does not simply end or stop in it, but finds its accomplishment in bringing about that conclusion. Were it not so, it would be impossible to tell successes from failures. If one simply decides to stop doing something, their decision to quit the activity does not and cannot count as an achievement of the desired result, even if the practice ends with that very decision and even if the agent can rest content with that decision. The conditions that define the success of an activity are

completely independent of the will of the agent. It is the practice that establishes its own conditions of satisfaction. Every practice is autonomous in the Kantian sense of establishing the norms that hold for itself.

16  The latter remarks are particularly important for better clarifying what the pragmatist conception of objectivity amounts to. First of all, they highlight the fact that the thesis of the relativity of objectivity to practice is to be taken in its strongest sense if we want to preserve the genuineness of the insight that is at the heart of the pragmatist tradition – that is, the Kantian idea that objectivity is in some way dependent upon the standpoint of a certain subject. This is because a weaker formulation of that idea ends up denying the theoretical fertility of the constructivist option, thus opening the door to the reinstatement of some form of metaphysical realism. This is a point that deserves some attention. A weak version of the principle of the relativity of objectivity to practice can be formulated as follows. Even though a judgement like "France is a hexagon" is not *really* valid, it is nevertheless possible to find a practice in which its use leads to the desired outcome. Indeed, since there are situations in which the desired result can be achieved with a minimal amount of information, in those situations an indeterminate judgement can be just as useful as an objectively valid one to reach the particular goal at stake. For this reason, so the argument goes, it is possible to distinguish between two types of objectivity, and consequently between two senses in which judgements can be said to be objective. Some judgements are *objectively* valid since they can be successfully used in every practice in which a judgement of that kind is needed, while others have a very limited validity, one which is in some sense parasitic to the full-fledged objectivity of the first type of judgement. The vocabulary of the natural sciences is a good candidate for the first type of objectivity.

17  The common-sense insight that this account tries to grasp is the idea that a refined tool is always better and more satisfying than a rudimentary one. Indeed, it seems plausible to hold that a detailed map is preferable to an overview map even in those cases in which an agent is satisfied with the information which he receives from the latter. However, no matter how intuitive it may seem, that insight is misleading, and we should abandon it. It is not true that a detailed map is always preferable to a less informative one, just as it is not true that a refined tool is always preferable to a more rudimentary one. In some cases, many pieces of information are extremely problematic to handle, and in those cases we have the clear impression that there is something wrong in the very idea of a privileged form of objectivity.

18  In less metaphorical terms, it is a fact of our experience that common-sense judgements are not always substitutable with scientific judgements *salva veritate.* If it is very early in the morning and I ask you when the sun will rise because I am planning to go for a walk, I will not be satisfied with an answer like: "the sun does not rise because it is the earth that revolves around it." Neither can I accept as appropriate an answer such as: "the sun will rise in 5 minutes, 3 seconds, and 400 milliseconds." The correct reaction in both situations would be that my interlocutor has not understood the kind of practice in which I am involved. My interlocutor and I do not share the same form of life because we do not agree on the norms that rule my practice. The general theoretical principle that lies at the basis of the two examples and accounts for the failure of my interlocutor to appropriately answer my question is that if the semantic richness of a set of concepts – in more pragmatist terms, the transformative power of a set of tools – sets obstacles to the

achievement of a goal, that set of concepts cannot yield objectivity in that particular practice.

19   This conclusion leads us again to the issue of the autonomy of different practices, and warns us to pay more attention to the philosophical import of the idea that every practice establishes its own conditions of satisfaction. Until now, the notion of autonomy has been used negatively to exorcise the view that it is legitimate to evaluate a certain practice in terms of criteria of objectivity drawn from different practices. But the idea of the autonomy of various practices also has a positive content. Indeed, for a practice to be autonomous means not only that it is clearly distinguishable from other practices, but also – and more radically – that it is able to create new dimensions of normativity and, consequently, of objectivity. As is evident, the negative sense of autonomy relies upon the positive one. Every practice is autonomous only insofar as it establishes its own norms, provides the context in which these norms can be applied, defines the conditions of usability and constructibility of the objects that are significant for the accomplishment of the desired result, and supplies the normative criterion to judge the objectivity of the course of action chosen by the agent.

20   Dewey's notion of encompassing situation as formulated in the seminal article *Qualitative Thought* is probably the best description of the *normative* primacy of practice. According to Dewey, every situation is characterized by a single emotional quality that runs through all the different elements that make up that particular situation (Dewey 1932/2008). It is only because the situation is pervaded by its constitutive quality that it is a situation, and that the agent who is the central focus of that situation can find it reasonable. Quality is the concrete norm, a norm that is in the flesh of the objects that compound the situation, and is therefore a truly effective principle of organization, that unifies and gives intelligibility to a series of events and things that would otherwise be completely disconnected. It is the old idealistic insight that the whole comes before its part that Dewey wants to recover with the notion of the encompassing situation. But within the idealistic framework the idea of normative holism goes hand-in-hand with the idea that to be a whole means to have in itself the principle of its own movement – that is, to have in itself the principle of its own rational articulation. Dewey accepts both theses. For him, the encompassing situation is to be conceived of as a whole that continuously transforms itself in a free and autonomous process of *self-articulation*.[6]

21   Following Dewey, a practice should therefore be conceived as a whole that articulates itself according to the norms that it has set for itself. The idea of self-articulation is important for our purposes. Indeed, it is the activity of self-articulation that explains why an object's resistance is always relative and internal to a determinate practice. The definition of the affordance of the objects that are relevant to a practice – which is an act of the constitution of objectivity – is the first step in the process of transforming the environment which finds its conclusion in the production of the desired result. Everything that plays an effective role in bringing about the result in which the practice finds its own realization can be said to be objective. This is one of the ways in which practice articulates itself.

## The Primacy of Common-Sense

22   In the previous section we focused upon the structure of human agency, on the capacities of various practices to create and ground normativity, and on the notion of self-

articulation. It has been shown that the essence of man is to be normatively responsible. Human experience, that is to say, the way in which things reveal themselves to us, is loaded with meanings, and meanings have been conceived of as nets of relations between an action and its possible consequences within the context of a particular practice. Moreover, we have argued that the autonomy of practices fatally undermines any possible reductionist strategy. The pluralism of levels of objectivity is a fact of our experience, and we should resist any attempt to question or deny it.

23  Acknowledgment of the intrinsic pluralism of experience does not mean, however, that every practice is equally 'fundamental.' It seems obvious that we should conceive of some practices as more *central* – speaking of importance here would be misleading – than others to the way in which we experience the world. There is an obvious sense in which searching for food is a practice far more fundamental than searching for psycho-physical correlations between sensations and brain-states. If we translate the issue in terms of recognition, as Rorty invites us to (Rorty 2000: 373), we should say that, while we do recognize someone who cannot understand the practice of searching for psycho-physical correlations as a member of our community – and, consequently, as a possible participant in our practices, we would be far less tolerant in the case in which that 'person' could not understand the practice of searching for food. In the latter case, we would probably conclude that that human-like organism cannot be treated as a person. The thesis of the autonomy of practices therefore needs to be qualified.

24  It has been observed that the idea of the more fundamental character of some practices does not entail that these practices are more objective, more real, or more true than others. It simply means that some practices are inescapable. There are norms that we cannot call into question because they are constitutive of our being the kind of animals that we are. These norms cannot be established in scientific or refined practices; they must be something more basic, more concrete, and far less problematic.

25  An important insight with which to understand the nature of these practices is provided by what Dewey says about primary experience in the first revised chapter of *Experience and Nature* (1929). In those tormented pages, Dewey highlights the distinction between primary and secondary (or reflective) experience (Dewey 1925/2008: 15-6). Secondary experience is the name that Dewey gives to that particular kind of approach to natural events which leads to the construction of extremely refined tools which enhance our understanding of (some aspect of) nature. Primary experience is the life-world, the world of everyday life. The point that Dewey wants to highlight is that the two worlds – the world of sciences and the life-world – are "epistemologically" and "ontologically" different, the difference between them being due to the fact that they carry out different functions in human experience. Primary experience is the "place" in which we first encounter reality, and the only "place" which is accessible to everybody. Or, better stated, if there is a "level of reality" which is accessible to everybody, this is the life-world. Secondary experience as reflective experience originates from, and returns to, that ground-level of objectivity. As Dewey points out, "the subject-matter of primary experience sets the problems and furnishes the first data of the reflection which constructs the secondary objects," while: "the test and verification of the latter is secured only by return to things of crude or macroscopic experience – the sun, earth, plants and animals of common, everyday life" (Dewey 1925/2008: 16). Our inability to escape from the practices that constitute our being the animals we are is the inability to escape from the horizon of our life-world.

26    The idea at the basis of Dewey's concept of *experience* is the constructivist view according to which the nature of an object depends upon the attitudes we adopt towards it. As I read it, primary experience is the name Dewey gives to the set of practices that structure our life-world – "the sun, earth, plants and animals of common, everyday life." In order to avoid possible misunderstandings related to the ambiguity of the notion of experience, I will call this set of practices 'common sense,' and I will emphasize – certainly in a more radical way than Dewey actually does – their biological grounding. According to my reading, Dewey's views on primary experience should be translated as follows: human beings have a natural endowment that determines, in some sense of this word, the *types* of practices in which they are necessarily engaged (searching for food, searching for company, and so on) as well as the *kinds* of objects that they will encounter in the world. There is nothing metaphysical in the notion of necessity introduced here. It is a biological necessity, a basic fact of our life: the fact that without food human beings die; the fact that necessarily, that is, for adaptive reasons, we see things in a three-dimensional space, and so on. Thus, the various cultures can decide, and have actually decided. But here the term 'decide' is misleading because it opens the door to intellectualism – how to specify those generalities? The history of human civilization is the history of the process of refinement and broadening of the potentialities of human nature: our vocabulary of common-sense – the vocabulary that we of the 21st century use to speak of our life-world – is the fruit of choices made thousand years ago, and continuously modified in transmission from generation to generation.

27    The most fundamental practices are, therefore, those in which the natural constraints – that is, the constraints imposed upon us by our nature – are stronger. The inability to escape from these practices is the way in which our biological constitution manifests itself on a normative level. In this qualified sense, the kind of objectivity constructed in these practices can be said to constitute the ground-level of objectivity. Their objectivity is more fundamental that than of scientific practices because they provide the horizon of possibility of the latter.

## Potentialities of Things: The Ontological Import of Constructivism

28    When these ideas are expressed in an ontological language it is probably easier to understand what is at stake. Every practice is a principle of constitution of objectivity: different practices give birth to different objects because different practices establish different patterns of normativity. As we have seen, the process of self-articulation of a practice begins with the definition of those traits of a thing that are considered relevant for reaching the particular result that is constitutive of that practice. At this level of articulation, the normative structure of the practice takes the form of a series of restrictions on the richness of the surrounding environment. So, for instance, if the practice in which an agent is involved is that of searching for food, the normative restrictions imposed by the structure of the activity will be something like the following: try to locate the position of those things that seems to be edible; find or construct an object that will enable you to reach them; be sure that the ground is firm, and so on. As a consequence of this act of constitution, things become objects. Dewey has correctly pointed out that objects are "things with a meaning," where meaning here is to be conceived as the *explicitly recognized* relation between an act and its possible future

consequences (Dewey 1925/2008: 132). It is in the context of a practice that such an act of "semantic transubstantiation" takes place. Indeed, it is only within the horizon of a practice that a norm is established which states what aspects of a things count as semantically relevant.

29    The fact that the normative relation between an act and its consequences is to be *explicitly* recognized in order for a thing to become an object is important for understanding the nature of common-sense practices and their differences from the practices that constitute the scientific image of the world. I suggest interpreting the distinction between things and objects as the distinction between implicit and explicit normativity. This interpretative proposal aims to preserve the Kantian constructivist insight according to which concept and object share the same semantic content without denying the 'phenomenological' difference between perceiving and conceiving. According to this view, things are meaningful – we never encounter in our experience something completely devoid of meaning – but the meanings that constitute them are only *implicitly* recognized connections rather than *explicitly* formulated relations. As Dewey once pointed out, things are habits turned inside out – that is, norms of behaviour that are unreflectively had by an agent (Dewey 1922/2008: 127). Objects are these very norms made explicit and used within the context of a practice. So a thing to which we refer with the word 'chair' becomes a chair only when it is used to sit on. Before that moment, it is only a bundle of potentialities that wait for a realization.

30    The distinction between common-sense and the scientific constitution of objects is grounded precisely upon the different ways in which things can be articulated into objects. In the case of common-sense practices, the effort of articulation is somehow limited to the act of confirming the qualities of the things that enter in those activities. The very fact that the language we use in our habitual transactions with the world – the language that makes available to us the possibility of having a world in view, to use a formula coined by McDowell (2009) – implicitly advances an interpretation of how to treat things is the best evidence of the constraints imposed upon our capacity to articulate by the nature of these things. Here the process of articulation of the normativity implicit in habitual transactions with the world comes as nearest as possible to pure representation. We call a thing 'a chair' even though we are not actually interested in sitting on it, and when we use a chair as a chair it seems that we are simply taking notice of what the object really is. In common-sense practices we feel a normative constraint to articulate the semantic content of a thing in a certain direction, and to realize the potentialities of that thing along a line determined by its very nature. This has much to do with the 'givenness' of perception. When I look at a chair, I cannot help but see that particular chair with all its sensible qualities, no matter how much effort I make to see differently. There is nothing that my will can do to change what I see. Similarly, when I try to actualize the potentialities of a thing within the context of a common-sense practice, the determinacy of its affordances commands (puts constraints upon) my attempt to articulate.

31    The conclusion that can be drawn from these premises is that, in the case of common-sense practices, there is no substantial *semantic* difference between objects and things. What we do with a thing on an unreflective level is almost identical to what we do with the articulated object on a reflective level.[7] This remark should not be taken to imply that the potentialities of a thing are completely actualized in the common-sense practices in which it enters. It only means that common-sense practices cannot articulate and

actualize potentialities different from, and other than, those they have *already* articulated and actualized. In other words, it means that the habits through which we pre-constitute the world are nothing but past common-sense practices that have become ingrained in our biological constitution. Things are common-sense things – that is, bundles of relations between actions and consequences originally established within the context of previous and different common-sense practices and now apprehended in an unreflective way.

32   It is only within the process of the constitution of scientific objectivity that the obviousness and non-problematic nature of the process of articulation of meaning is finally overcome. Generally speaking, scientific practices consist in the elaboration of schemes of explanation that aim, in the final analysis, to account for some aspect of the world of common-sense. In order to achieve this goal, the particular quality of a certain class of common-sense things that form the subject-matter of inquiry is to be abstracted from the context in which it 'naturally' presents to us, and is put in a new and larger context. As a consequence of this act of abstraction, which amounts to an act of substitution and replacement, the quality under consideration enters into new relations and acquires new meanings. The potentialities of a thing are thus articulated and actualized in a new set of highly-refined objects whose nature is determined wholly *intra-theoretically.* Objects of physics are no different from the physical theories that speak of them. In this particular case, ontological constructivism shows its theoretical fertility, and finds important confirmation in the fact that the meaning of scientific objects coincides completely with their existence.

33   The process of constitution of scientific objectivity depends, therefore, upon the construction of theoretical frameworks and specialized languages in the light of which we interpret the quality of the things that we seek to understand. Theoretical frameworks are linguistic entities that enable us to construct linguistic relations among apparently unrelated elements. As Dewey states in his *Logic,* thanks to (scientific) language, smoke can be related not simply and not only to the particular fire that is its cause or to the general notion of fire, but also to: "such apparently unrelated meanings as friction, changes of temperature, oxygen, molecular constitution, and, by intervening meaning-symbols, to the laws of thermodynamics" (Dewey 1938/2008: 58). The liberating power of language is the condition of possibility of the freedom we have to articulate the implicit normativity of things according to our explanatory interests. From a logical point of view, indeed, the act of choosing one particular theoretical framework over another is a completely free act. The choice of the standpoint from which to look at things – that is, the choice of the axioms and postulates that constitute scientific objects of a particular type – is a free decision which precedes and grounds the constraints which we will meet in the practice that we have chosen to undertake. In a sense, Rorty is right when he says that "truth is not out there," and that there is nothing in the world – that is, in the things of common-sense – that forces us to speak in a certain way (Rorty 1989: 5). We can describe a chair as a physical object, as a historical object, as an object subjected to the laws of property, and so on, and it is completely up to us which of the qualities of the thing we wish to articulate and realize. In all these cases, however, our decision is not the final judge of the objective validity of the choice we have made. The final judge is, once again, the practice itself, and more precisely the potentiality of the selected theoretical framework to satisfy the potentialities of the things of common-sense.

34   So, whilst in scientific practices we are not faced with the strong constraints that we meet in common-sense practices, our decisions are nevertheless subjected to some form of normative constraint which makes it possible to tell objectively valid statements from those that cannot pass the test of experience. It is possible to conclude therefore that there is a common structure of objectivity that encompasses the two senses of normative constraint defined above. In both cases, indeed, what lies at the basis of the possibility of achieving objectivity is the capacity to articulate the implicit normativity of things – a capacity which, in turn, is founded upon the metaphysical assumption that nature is rich enough and complex enough to support different principles of construction of objects. Consequently, the idea of the articulation of potentialities is the backbone of the concept of pragmatist objectivity and the ultimate ground of the notion of success, from which pragmatist objectivity has usually been traced. As a matter of fact, the success of a certain norm in bringing about the desired result is not the last word that can be said about objectivity. The success of a norm can be further explained in terms of its being an accurate and normatively responsible articulation of what nature is – of its being part of a practice in which some potentialities of nature find proper realization.

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## NOTES

**1.** Margolis furnishes the clearest analysis of the post-Kantian roots of pragmatism: on this point see in particular Margolis 2012a. For a critical discussion of Margolis' claim of the indissolubility of realism and idealism see Gronda 2012, and Margolis' reply in Margolis 2012b.

**2.** Dewey has shown that meanings can be experienced in a direct or in a reflexive way. In the first case they are experienced as habitual patterns of behaviour. In the second case they are experienced as ideal plans of action the validity of which consists in their capacity to provide the agent with a set of tools that enable them to reconstruct a contradictory situation. In both cases, an object is everything whose action can be understood and foreseen on the basis of a general rule.

**3.** The notion of affordance is obviously drawn from Gibson, who also coined the term: "The affordances of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. The verb to *afford* is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment" (Gibson 1979/2014: 119).

**4.** This distinction corresponds to the one that Dewey makes in his *Studies in Logical Theory* between the structural and the dynamic aspect of experience: "[t]he distinction *between* each attitude and function and its predecessor and successor is serial, dynamic, operative. The distinctions *within* any given operation or function are structural, contemporaneous, and distributive. Thinking follows, we will say, striving, and doing follows thinking [...]. But coincident, simultaneous, and correspondent *within* doing is the distinction of doer and of deed; within the function of thought, of thinking and material thought upon; within the function of

striving, of obstacle and aim, of means and end" (Dewey 1903/2008: 311). For a useful discussion of this aspect of Dewey's thought, see Frega (2006: 46).

**5.** It is true that in some cases the desired result can be obtained without changing the initial, objective conditions that originates the process of inquiry. Mind-altering substances can reduce or eliminate anxiety and sorrow even though the objective conditions are left unmodified. But in these cases the satisfaction of the need is only apparent, and the symptoms of the problem will appear again and again. Dewey's well-known thesis that emotions are tertiary qualities is intended to highlight precisely this point, that the objectivity of emotions is a consequence of their being natural events grounded on our biological constitution.

**6.** For an analysis of the notion of articulation as a moment of a practice, see Frega 2010.

**7.** Since common-sense practices are the simplest and most basic articulation of human nature, and since they are the manifestation of our biological endowment, they are relatively unmodifiable. Owing to their stability, habits formed in past transactions with the environment provide reliable norms for present action. The relative unmodifiability of common-sense practices warrants the possibility of realizing the potentialities that things present to us as their affordances. But the platitudinousness of this particular kind of articulation of normativity is the price we pay for the certainty of its success.

## ABSTRACTS

In this paper, I address the question of the nature and ground of objectivity, with the aim to develop a pragmatist account of its distinctive features. Traditionally, pragmatism has been considered as an alternative to Kantian approaches. The aim of the paper is to argue that, contrary to the received view, a consistent pragmatist theory of objectivity should preserve many insights of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. My thesis is that Kantian notions of spontaneity, activity and objectivity can be fruitfully reformulated and translated into pragmatist terms. The key notion here is that of practices. It is only within the context of a practice that concepts can be successfully applied to experience. The intrinsic normativity of practices establishes different levels of objectivity. The paper defends a pluralistic view of reality, insisting on the irreducibility of common-sense objectivity to scientific objectivity. At the same time, it is maintained that common-sense practices have a primacy over scientific practices, and that scientific objects are constructed out of common-sense objects through a process of articulation of the potentialities of the latter.

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