

## Pragmatism as Practices – Beyond the Practice Turn

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Practices are of central interest in pragmatism and the notion of practice or 'praxis' is an important, maybe the most important concept pragmatism defines itself with.<sup>1</sup> What counts as practice as well as the relation of practice and theory has been debated in philosophy since its beginnings in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. At stake are not only the concepts of theory and practice but the meta-philosophical question of outlook, task and function of philosophy as such. This is also the overall goal of this paper, to offer a pragmatic understanding of philosophy on the background of a radical understanding of practices. It was especially Dewey who was convinced that the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition limited philosophy to a mere contemplative endeavor. As well-known, Aristoteles established the distinction of praxis (human interaction that forms the realm of ethical-political practices), theory (the inquiry into the fundamental reason and causes) and poiesis (the production of things). From Dewey's viewpoint this distinction results in a problematic hierarchy: Theory is conceptualized as an end in itself, and the theoretical conduct of life fulfills the human potential at its best. The ethical-practical life also promises some fulfillment of human potentiality, but only to a certain extent. Theory adds to praxis the transcendence of the contingencies of reality, it puts the human being into an independent position and is therefore the noblest of all conducts of life according to Aristoteles. Lowest in hierarchy is poiesis, an activity that is bound to the pattern of means and ends and therefore evaluated as dependent and coerced by the contingencies of nature and fate. Dewey widened the concept of praxis to practices, which now also includes poiesis.

This is a radical re-evaluation and transformation of traditional philosophy Dewey undertakes explicitly in the *Quest for Certainty* as well as in *The Reconstruction of Philosophy* and he circumvents in the end the question of the priority of practice or theory as such. In this paper I am interested in the consequences Dewey's radicalization of the concept of practice has and in order to highlight Dewey's perspective I will put this into relation to the so-called 'Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory' (Schatzki, 2001). I concentrate on Dewey's pragmatism for this goal and shall only implicitly justify my strategy when I outline his radical pragmatic position regarding practices. In a second part I shall show the consequences

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'praxis' and 'practice' are often used synonymous and not clearly distinguished in philosophy and social theory. The concept of 'praxis' indicates its origins in the Aristotelian theory, later reformulations of 'praxis' as in the Marxian or the existential traditions understand 'praxis' in a much broader sense, already including poietic practices – famously Marx and his emphasis on labour. I shall restrict the use of 'praxis' to the Aristotelian sense and develop a pragmatic understanding of 'practices' in relation to the 'Practice Turn', thus emphasizing with the plural 'practices' the different types of actions and cultures that constitute the realm of practices.

of the transformation pragmatism undertakes. Dewey's pragmatism offers a position that goes beyond the theories assembled under the heading of 'Practice Turn'.

In this introduction I shall also give a short description what is meant with 'Practice Turn'. In contemporary social theory and philosophy 'Practice Turn' is more an umbrella term than a well circumscribed theoretical approach. Historically it has its background in philosophical phenomenology (life world approach), in Wittgenstein's philosophy of the 'Philosophical Investigations' and in ethnomethodology - to name only a few. Recent theoretical approaches that are subsumed under the heading of practice theories are e.g. approaches of Science and Technology Studies, most famously the Actor-Network-Theory of Bruno Latour, but also reformulations of Heidegger and Derrida (H. Dreyfus) as well as Bourdieu's conceptualization of practical knowledge. These different approaches and traditions share a broad understanding of practices as "embodied, materially interwoven" (Schatzki 2001: 12) actions and interactions. As Andreas Reckwitz highlights, "practice theory 'decentres' mind, texts and conversation. Simultaneously, it shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary." (Reckwitz, 2002:259). The practice turn is by no means limited to social theory. E.g. Robert Brandom's inferentialist theory of meaning (Brandom, 1998) is part of a practice turn within language philosophy, thus continuing Wittgensteins dissolution of the ideal language approach. In Germany the 'methodological culturalism' of Peter Janich (Janich, 2001) and his group investigates into everyday life and scientific practices to reconstruct underlying patterns and action schemes. One could also relate the 'Practice Turn' to contemporary philosophy of science and to Science and Technology Studies where a shift can be stated away from knowledge as objective towards an understanding of knowledge that accepts and even appreciates the centrality of various practices (cultural, political, instrumental etc.) for their justification. (Pickering, 1992, 7) Pragmatism is said to be part of the 'Practice Turn' and definitely had some influence on not a few of these approaches, most notably on the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz and the language theory of Robert Brandom. But as I shall outline in this paper, the Deweyan pragmatism offers a radical understanding of practices and thus represents an option that reaches beyond those theories that are subsumed under the heading of 'Practice Turn'.

## **1. A radical concept of practice**

As I already have mentioned, there are quite different pragmatisms on the market and the conceptualization of practice varies in these approaches. I concentrate on Dewey's version and would argue that his version is the most accomplished critique of a traditional understanding of philosophy in relation to other pragmatisms. I address the topic of practices from three different angles: Anti-

representationalism and anti-foundationalism, knowledge and experience, and the relation of theory and practices.

### **Anti-representationalism and anti-foundationalism**

The critique of the traditional representationalist understanding of knowledge and epistemology is central to pragmatic theories – to theories from Peirce to Brandom. The critique of representationalism is first of all motivated by the internal problems of representationalist epistemologies and has been in its basic form already uttered by Hegel against Kant.<sup>2</sup> Rorty has formulated his critique of representationalism as a concept that has the function to bridge the “imaginary barriers between you and the world” (Rorty, 1991, 138) with a double strategy. On the background of the realist – anti-realist debate in contemporary epistemology and metaphysics Rorty directs his critique to both, the realist and anti-realist positions; or, as he calls it: positions of “finding and making” (Rorty, 1999).<sup>3</sup> This radical move makes sense if one understands that for Rorty anti-representationalism is not enough, it has to be accompanied by what he names ‘anti-foundationalism’. The different versions of representationalism have in common the belief that the ‘representation’ of something in the world has the task to single out a foundation for knowledge and a specific self-reflective realm of knowledge. As Rorty outlines are those approaches both representationalistic and foundationalistic that hold the following argument: If we are not able to achieve certainty about our knowledge claims from the objects of knowledge itself, we have to assume that a certain sphere – representation – exists that provides this certainty. This realm provides the foundation of our knowledge and must therefore be privileged in relation to other spheres. From Rorty’s point of view both realistic versions of representationalism and the anti-realistic versions are looking for a foundation and justification of knowledge that lie beyond our practices, be it language practices, social, political or cultural practices. Rorty’s critique relies heavily upon Dewey’s philosophy at this point, but he abandons the notion of experience that is decisive for Dewey, as well as Dewey’s and James’ idea of a pragmatic method.

Although pragmatists are rather good in analyzing and pointing out the particular internal problems of representationalism, their main interest is not to solve these problems. Rather than solving problems pragmatists pursue the strategy of putting representationalism and foundationalism aside and develop an understanding of knowledge that is part of an interactive relation with the world. Here knowledge doesn’t correspond to a ‘piece of world’ but is related to the achievements and abilities that enable us to act

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<sup>2</sup> See Antje Gimmler (2003).

<sup>3</sup> See David L. Hildebrand (2003) who outlines not only the main arguments and Rorty’s critique of the realism-anti-realism debate but also highlights the differences between Rorty’s and Dewey’s pragmatism.

controlled and purposive in the world. A first difference to some of the theories assembled under the heading of 'Practice Turn' can be stated already: Some of the theories would not whole-heartedly subscribe to the pragmatic anti-foundationalism. Social phenomenology e.g. investigates into social practices and interpersonal relations, but prioritizes linguistic practices as the foundational realm. And Bourdieu, who criticized philosophy for reifying social forms into universals, built his theory upon a logic of struggle for social, cultural, economic and symbolic cultural forms – a logic that is the result of the idealization of a certain historical-national context of practice, he didn't question in return. From Dewey's point of view both theories have not tasted their own medicine and don't keep their own analytical framework open and flexible.

### **Knowledge and experience**

The background for the pragmatic conceptualization of knowledge is the dissolution of the contemplative ideal of the relation between subject and object. The theoretical reification of the knower, who purely contemplates the object of knowing, is transformed into a relation of action and production, which is prior to the theoretical relation of the knower and the known. As Dewey says in *Experience and Nature*: "They are things *had* before they are things cognized" (Dewey, 1988, 28). Practices understood as action and interaction build a framework for experiences. Dewey's understanding of experience should not be mistaken for the Anglo-Saxon empiristic reduction of experience as 'perception'. Rather experience has three dimensions for Dewey: The first dimension is the experience of something in a situation – a sensation that possesses qualities (Dewey, 1989, 42ff.). Here the somatic experience is crucial – not as an immediate end itself, but "to establish and improve the quality of immediate experience as a practical and useful tool" (Shusterman, 1997, 167). The next dimension is best described as 'to be experienced in something'. Experience in this sense is sedimented in recipes, in tools and in the body. It often is tacit, emerging in culture and routines. The third dimension of Dewey's understanding of experience has Hegelian traits. Interacting with the world, we also make experiences with ourselves, reflecting and investing hypotheses or theories. Especially this third, reflective version of experience is underrepresented in the contemporary 'Practice Turn', which underestimates the creative adjustment and handling individuals achieve in situations. Dewey's concept of experiences has no representational function, it is genuinely non-epistemological if we understand with epistemology those theories since the seventeenth century which investigate into the intermediaries that mediate between our mind and the world and are supposed to explain and limit our knowledge. This non-epistemological understanding of experience shows some similarities to the "natural realism" Putnam in reference to William James develops as a plausible answer to the question "How does language hook on to the world?" (Putnam, 1999, 12).

As it should be clear from this presentation, experience is sedimented and systematized in contexts of knowledge and worlds of symbolic meaning. But experience is always connected, directly or indirectly to actions – experience is a slice of the practice of action. And these actions are both of linguistic and instrumental-poietic nature. Our everyday life and the rupture of habits that sometimes occur are well-suited to illustrate this relation between action, experience and knowledge. The decisive situation where we are forced to start a process of investigation and where we use theorizing to overcome the obstacles posed by the situation, takes place within an already meaningful context. The notion of situation that Dewey puts in the center of the process of inquiry, is a real problematic situation that inhibits or even stops our actions and where we lack the anticipated result of our action, e.g. when the car doesn't start and we try to find out what is wrong – we will do that with experimental action. Actions define and at the same time alter the situation. Knowledge becomes situational and this is part of the fallibilism, all pragmatists ascribe to. Fallibilism is not disclaiming truth; that scientific or everyday life results of research processes are not infallible simply means that empirical knowledge, knowledge that depends on the situation, procedures and methods could be different the next time we investigate.

### **The relation of theory and practices**

With the transformation of a theoretical into a practical acquisition of knowledge and experience Dewey problematizes the traditional priority of theory over practices. The consequences are radical. Theory is instrumentalized. Theories, concepts and methods are tools and instruments of practices, be it everyday life or scientific practices. Even language is a tool, the “tool of tools” (Dewey 1988, 134) as Dewey puts it. This second level coordination of action and the conservation of former patterns of action follow indeed a certain linguistic systematic, but stay directly or indirectly always connected to patterns of conduct and action. It is rather the use of a tool, which enables us to interact with something in the world, than the pure referential use of language that constitutes the paradigm of Dewey's theory of language.

From the perspective of Dewey practices are both temporally and logically prior to theory and this constitutes a priority of practices that also affects the understanding of philosophy as such. But as theory becomes a tool to alter, to work with or to cope with situations, theory becomes an inherent part of practices.<sup>4</sup> Philosophy is a sophisticated and highly specialized tool to analyze and discuss the relation between theory and practice; but it is also a tool to use in situations and in the long run to change practices. Philosophy then in its recovered form should play a decisive role in the improvement of practices within democratic communities; the experimental political-social community and the scientific community

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<sup>4</sup> See on this: Larry Hickman (2001), p. 179.

are not only structured along the same principles of cooperation and collective intelligence, but should also cooperate.<sup>5</sup>

The conceptualizing of practice and the tasks of philosophy, Dewey advocates, splits the pragmatic movement and distances it from most of the practice theories. Brandom e.g. would fully subscribe to the critique of representationalism and with some reservations to the anti-foundationalism. But he would not accept the radical transformation of the tasks and the role of theory and philosophy Dewey suggests. Habermas on the other hand would hesitate to accept the anti-foundationalism because this opposes his double strategy of acceptance of the social contexts of knowledge claims on the one hand and the universalistic justification of this knowledge claims on the other. But the liberating and critical role of philosophy is a position Habermas is sympathetic about, though his evaluation of instrumental and 'practical-communicative action' differs from Dewey's pragmatism. Neither ANT nor Bourdieu would accept to change the role of theory as far as Dewey recommends.

## **II Radical Practices**

In the end I am only able to sum up the consequences Dewey's conceptualization of experience and practices has for the practice of philosophy. One could state that a more active role of philosophy in the evaluation and critique of technology and society would be possible also without a transformed understanding of experience and practices. But following Dewey in his reconfiguration of theory and practice with his non-epistemological concept of experience a radical and also more encouraging task for the philosophical investigation into technology becomes visible – a task I would argue is not possible without this transformed understanding. Dewey's "productive philosophy" (Hickman, 2001, 4) holds a sophisticated understanding of means and end, they are neither neutral nor given, but should be seen as contextual in broader situations. Knowledge and technological devices are "knots of socially sanctioned knowledge" (Preda, 1999, 347) and the task of philosophy would be to untie these knots and show the interdependency of so-called purely scientific and socially-cultural practices. Innovative use of means, e.g. the use of the cellular phone for writing messages, is one of the types of creative configurations that could happen when technologies are used in life-world contexts. The operationalization of concepts and theories in what Dewey called 'overt action' would be one of the consequences of radical practices. A next step would be that philosophers cooperate with other knowledge cultures, be it social scientists, engineers or designers in order to use the complexities of realms of experienced technologies and try to shape better

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<sup>5</sup> See: James Bohman (1999)

life conditions, humanizing technology and making humanities at the same time relevant to the technological world.

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