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Donald Morse, *Faith in Life. John Dewey's Early Philosophy*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2011.

Donald Morse's *Faith in Life. John Dewey's Early Philosophy* is an important and controversial book. As the author openly claims, his is the first attempt to offer a comprehensive account of Dewey's early thought which does not simply consist in a teleological interpretation of his philosophical development. Traditionally, Dewey's early writings have been considered interesting only because, and insofar as, they are believed to reveal something about Dewey's particular version of empirical naturalism. Morse tries to reject such approach, and to take Dewey's early thought – and in particular his *Psychology* (1887), of which Morse's book is the first thorough study – seriously: his aim is to show that “Dewey's view comprises an original version of idealism that contributes to both nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinking” (8). By arguing for the theoretical availability of Dewey's psychological idealism, Morse not only distances himself from the traditional readings of Dewey's philosophical development. He also raises a new issue that future interpreters of Dewey will have to address carefully – that is, whether or not “the earlier idealistic philosophy [could offer] and advance over Dewey's later philosophy in some way” (10). In doing so, he implicitly suggests that we should reconsider from scratch the relation between American pragmatism and its idealistic roots. Contrary to what is usually believed, Morse argues, the historiographical assessment of that relation is an open question, whose answers have a great impact on the theoretical evaluation of the validity of pragmatism (and naturalism) as a legitimate and viable philosophical option. Amongst the other things, such a reconsideration may lead to a criticism of the direction taken by American philosophy at the end of the 19th century, thus calling into question the accepted idea that pragmatism represents the most important contribution of America to philosophy. We will return on this point in a later moment.

As is evident, Morse's project is extremely ambitious, to the extent that it asks for a major revision of the traditional interpretative schemes. To achieve the goal of understanding Dewey's early philosophy in its own terms, Morse resorts to an interdisciplinary and comparative approach. On the one hand, he endeavours to clarify Dewey's views by paying attention to the *cultural* – that is, not strictly philosophical – debates in which Dewey directly or indirectly took part. On the other hand, he broadens the scope of his analysis to include a discussion of the main trends of thought of Dewey's time, with particular attention to what was going on in Europe – and, more precisely, in the German-speaking world. Thanks to this twofold change of perspective, Morse believes that Dewey's philosophy can now be placed in its proper context, as a consequence of which its distinctive features acquire a new and different significance. The pivotal category on which Morse's interpretative proposal hinges is that of “modernism”. In the second chapter of the book, devoted

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to the discussion of Dewey's cultural and intellectual background, Morse depicts modernism as a current of thought which assumes as its starting point the idea that human beings are metaphysically severed from nature and society. According to the modernist *Weltanschauung*, human beings live in a world (both natural and social) governed by mechanical laws – a world in which no room is left for human freedom and hope. Nature and society are completely devoid of values, and offers no possibility of authentic realization of human purposes. Consequently, the only way to escape the condition of alienation experienced by the man living in the world is to withdraw into inner life and to acknowledge the “rigid separation between the transparent, everyday world of conscious thought and our deeper and richer emotional contacts with the world” (42). Karl Kraus, Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, Arnold Schönberg, Sören Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Matthew Arnold; in their works they all shared the same fundamental insight: the realm of salvation is the realm of private consciousness.

Relying on a solid textual basis, Morse suggests to read Dewey's early idealism as an attempt to counteract the modernist tendencies active in contemporary culture. His analysis of Dewey's essays *The Lessons of Contemporary French Literature* (1889) and *Poetry and Philosophy* (1890) is particularly convincing: it is difficult to deny that Morse actually succeeds in showing how in these texts Dewey's concerns with the problems of his time emerge with the greatest clarity. However, even though Dewey's intentions find their best expression in these less technical texts – Morse says that in some cases “an author's real focus – his main, driving idea – comes out only in the margins of his work” (24) – Dewey's answers to the challenges raised by modernism are distinctively philosophical, and center around the notion of construction of meaning. Dewey was aware that the only way to get rid of the modernist threat is to conceive nature and society in a radically different way, “as a whole that includes human values within it” (46). The task of philosophy, Dewey believed, was that of discovering the processes through which the self constructs a meaningful world in which purposeful activity is possible. The shift from a mechanist account of reality to an organicist worldview view is a move from Kant to Hegel. However, Morse does not rest content with the (traditional) assimilation of Dewey's idealism to Hegelianism. In the last chapter of the book, significantly entitled *A New Idealism*, he focuses the attention on the peculiarities of Dewey's early thought, and stresses the differences between Dewey and Hegel, on the one side, and between Dewey and his mentor George Sylvester Morris, on the other side. In doing so, Morse brings to the fore the originality of the young Dewey, and in highlighting the distance that separates him from British and American neo-Hegelians.

Too often, indeed, interpreters of Dewey's idealism scholars have misunderstood his creative appropriation of the idealist tradition. The “discovery” of the irreducibility of Dewey's early philosophy to other, more classical forms of neo-Hegelianism is therefore an important interpretative result achieved by Morse in his book. According to his reading, the originality of that approach has to do with the particular way in which Dewey articulates the constructivist *and* idealist principle that meaning is the product of the activity of the self. More precisely, Morse argues, three are the concepts that “define Dewey's early work”, and these are the concepts of “rupture,

meaningfulness (or faith in life), and critique” (14). Taken together, they give birth to a philosophy which is idealist without being metaphysically burdened by the idea of the transcendence of the infinite over the finite. Contrary to the traditional view formulated by Thomas Hill Green and accepted by almost all neo-Hegelians, indeed, Dewey has no recourse to the Absolute as providing the ultimate *ground* for the union of man and nature and for the existence of a meaningful world. In his *Psychology*, Morse states, Dewey follows a different route, by giving pride of place to what Morse calls the concept of rupture, in whose terms it is possible to account for the concrete *process* of meaning-constitution in a dynamic rather than static way. The neo-Hegelian recourse to the notion of Absolute paved the way for a new, dramatic separation between finite and infinite consciousness (245). Moreover, the idea that meaning is already there in the world, thanks to constructive work performed by an eternal and perfectly harmonic Absolute, and that it only waits for the activities of human beings to be rediscovered made irrelevant the efforts they put forth to realize themselves in life. On the contrary, Dewey assumes that meanings are “progressive realizations”, the fruit of a continuous and never-ending process through which brute facts become more and more significant for human life (218). Dewey, Morse writes, “centers meaning in the finite self pursuing the Absolute, not in the eternal and completed Absolute itself” (244). Even in his early days Dewey was not attracted by the lure of certainty: he already believed that the proper task of philosophy was not that of supplying human beings with the metaphysical assurance in the meaningfulness of the world, but that of fostering their impulse for activity and their faith in the possibility of the success of human actions (218).

Now, Morse tells us that rupture is the essence of the process of construction of meaning. But what is rupture? And, even more fundamentally, what is meaning? For the young Dewey meaning is *idealization*, the establishment of a *relation* between an element and an ideal that is not present in the actual fact. In the three central chapters of the book – *The Nature of Knowledge*, *What We Know*, and *Feeling, Will, and Self-Realization* – Morse carefully reconstructs the analysis of the three forms of idealization (cognitive, emotional, and practical) that Dewey offers in his *Psychology*. Through idealization – this is the core insight of Dewey’s idealistic psychology, and Morse is completely right in insisting on this point – sensations become objects, animal feelings become vehicle of moral and religious ideas and principles, instinctual and sensuous impulses become a series of interconnected actions aiming at the realization of the self in the world. Thanks to the activity of idealization the self overcomes the givenness of the immediate existence and projects upon it its own meanings, thus constructing an ordered and significant world out of a bundle of disconnected elements.

The act of negating givenness, Morse suggests, is an act of rupture. Morse uses this notion – drawn from Adorno’s *Three Studies on Hegel* – to emphasize the similarity between Dewey’s version of psychological idealism and some contemporary efforts to radicalize the Hegelian lesson. Like Nancy, Žižek, and Adorno, the young Dewey privileges rupture over harmony, discontinuity over continuity, process over product, dynamism over stasis. According to Morse, such conceptual shift dramatically affects

the way in which the Absolute can be conceived. Within this heterodox Hegelian framework, indeed, the idea of totality cannot be dismissed as an unnecessary and superfluous appendage, as has been argued by important Deweyan scholars. Rather the contrary, it provides the (internal) criterion which enables the individual to criticize the provisional results achieved in his ongoing activity to make the world more and more meaningful. The idea of a whole encompassing all the aspects of human life thus creates the conditions for moving beyond *every* possible configuration of existence, negating the very fact of givenness, and “mov[ing] on to create better meanings” (270).

This does not mean, however, that human beings can overcome the given in a complete and satisfactory way, and bring about a condition of perfect harmony in which the potentialities of meanings are fully realized in the external world. Morse is extremely careful in stressing the constitutive and necessary limitations of the process of transformation of facts into meanings. Were it not so, Dewey would relapse into a traditional form of neo-Hegelianism, and the Absolute would be not a goal that human beings have to struggle to reach, but a result that they have attained once for all. To support his reading of the young Dewey as a “negative” philosopher, Morse quotes a passage from the last section of the *Psychology*, in which it is said that since there is “always a chasm between actual knowledge and absolute truth”, the latter cannot be grasped by an act of knowledge, but only through an act of faith (186). There is no certainty that the world will accept the meanings that the self will project upon it: we are only “entitled to have faith that it [the world] is as we find it” (205). Nonetheless, our faith is rational because we have evidence that the connection between the given facts and human beings is not simply possible, but *has been* real: the existence of a meaningful world to which we belong – the fact that we are “surrounded by significant objects and events, with emotionalized objects that we can relate to and understand and in relation to which, to some extent, we can exert our will” (205) – shows that we are not confronted with brute fact, but with an ordered, harmonious world. To have faith means to believe that the process of idealization can go on indefinitely, and that the meaningfulness of the world will increase without limits. Faith, rather than knowledge, in the possibility of the Absolute is the ultimate ground of the possibility of the success of our efforts to make the world more meaningful. It is faith, therefore, that enables human beings to overcome pessimism and to see the universe as an “ongoing interconnected event in which we play our part” because it encourages us to plunge into action without fear and restraint (218).

In conclusion, Morse’s reconstruction of Dewey’s answer to the modernist challenge brings to the fore the relevance of the notion of faith in the economy of his early idealism. In turn, faith is dependent on the notion of rupture, which represents, according to Morse, the backbone of the philosophy of the young Dewey as formulated in the *Psychology*. But is this reconstruction correct? Is Morse right in insisting on rupture and discontinuity as the distinctive features of Dewey’s psychological idealism? And again, is it true that Dewey’s early thought differs from his later naturalism because the latter gives pride of place to continuity over discontinuity?

A clear and definite answer to these questions cannot be given. It depends too much on the particular standpoint from which Dewey's early writings are interpreted, and I do not agree with many of Morse's basic assumptions. In particular, I am not persuaded that Dewey's early work should be read as primarily concerned with the search for a solution of the "existential" problems raised by modernism. I tend to see in the young Dewey less an existential thinker than an academic philosopher. For all these reasons, I prefer not to question the general validity of Morse's account. Rather, I will focus the attention on some technical issues which I consider important for understanding Dewey's psychological idealism, Morse's treatment of which I do not find sound and convincing.

My main perplexity is related to Morse's use of the term "rupture". As has been remarked above, rupture is not a Deweyan term. Dewey never uses it in his work – certainly not with the emphasis that Morse puts on it. Obviously, there is nothing wrong in adopting an interpretative category which cannot be found in the texts that are the subject-matter of the study, provided that such category succeeds in shedding light on them. The point is that, at least in my eyes, the notion of rupture does not achieve that goal. Rupture calls to mind the second moment of the dialectical process, that in which the original harmony is broken and the various oppositions thus engendered have not yet been overcome. However, Dewey was not a dialectical thinker at the time in which he wrote the *Psychology*. To get convinced of this, it is sufficient to read those pages of *Psychology as Philosophic Method* (1886) devoted to the criticism of Hegel's Logic. I would even be tempted to say that Dewey started being influenced by Hegel not before 1890, approximately when he began teaching Hegel's philosophy at the University of Michigan.

In any case, the issue at stake is not whether the young Dewey was Hegelian or not, but whether the concept of rupture enables us to adequately understand the particular version of idealism that he expounded in his *Psychology*. Morse is aware that his use of the notion of rupture is not orthodox: with rupture he intends to refer not simply to the second moment of the dialectical process, but to the fact of "idealization" in its widest generality, that is, to the fact that meaning consists in the establishment of a relation between something *actually* present and something which is only *ideally* present. Now, by insisting on the centrality of the concept of rupture for Dewey's theory of meaning, Morse suggests to interpret Dewey's early philosophy as a form of constructivism that centers on the idea that meaning is always the result of an act of synthesis – what Dewey refers to as the apperceptive activity of mind. I wholly agree with Morse that Dewey's idealism is constructivist. The problem is that constructivism is only an aspect of Dewey's theory of meaning – an aspect that is not as original as Morse seems to believe. Here a more historically oriented approach would have been useful because it would have shed more light on the reasons why the young Dewey has been an original thinker. A short remark on the conceptual apparatus on which Dewey's early idealism is based may serve to clarify this point. Take, for instance, the notion of idealization. Idealization is a concept that Dewey probably took from Lewes' *Problems of Mind* (1879): the latter used that notion to refer to those processes through which perceptions are transformed

into conceptions. According to Lewes – and it is significant that Dewey articulated the very same view in his *Psychology* – the best example of the activity of idealization is science because through its ideal constructions we come to see a universal law in the present data of sense. “Perception”, Lewes wrote, “gives the naked fact of Sense, isolated, unconnected, merely juxtaposed with other facts, and without far reaching significance”. It is only when “the artifice of Construction” is added by an act of mind to “the brute simplicity of Sensation” that mind idealizes its material, and thus eventually comes to understand its significance”¹.

By insisting on the relational nature of meaning, therefore, the young Dewey did not distance himself from the ruling tradition in contemporary philosophy and psychology. Dewey departed from the standard view in that he did not accept the traditional account of perception as a synthesis of sensations. As Morse clearly acknowledges, Dewey’s aim was to avoid materialism and mechanism. Dewey was well aware that materialism and mechanism cannot be avoided if sensations were conceived as the ultimate ground of knowledge because, in that case, the synthetic activity of the mind would amount to the (external) combination of a ready-made material. If sensations were raw and uninterpreted data, they would have a meaning before and independently from the synthetic activity of mind. It would follow that meaning could not be explained as a construction of the self, and modernism – to use Morse’s interpretative categories – would not be overcome. This was precisely the reason why neo-Hegelians were dissatisfied with Kant’s distinction of sensibility and understanding: they believed that Kant did not manage to free himself from the errors of British empiricism, and that as a consequence of his incapacity to get rid of the language of sensations he relapsed into a form of pre-critical thinking. The same error, they argued, was made by contemporary psychologists, whose approach to the study of mind was dominated by the idea that the goal of psychology as a natural science consisted in discovering the fundamental elements out of which our knowledge of the world is made. In his early texts Dewey followed this line of thought, but, contrary to the other neo-Hegelians (with the partial exception of Bradley), he did not deny validity to scientific psychology: rather, he attempted to find a way to make room for psychology in his idealistic account of meaning. The solution that he advanced in the two *Mind* articles (*The Psychological Standpoint* and *Psychology as Philosophic Method*) and in the first edition of the *Psychology* can be summarized as follows: sensations and apperception are scientific constructs that do not correspond to anything in reality, but whose exclusive value is function of their explanatory power². This entails that the scientific investigation of mind does not necessarily lead to materialist and mechanist conclusions: the results of physiological psychology can be easily accommodated within an idealistic framework. In my opinion, this work of conceptual clarification should be acknowledged as Dewey’s truly original contribution to the philosophical debate of the time.

¹ Lewes G., (1879), *Problems of Life and Mind. Problem the First. The Study of Psychology. Its Object, Scope, and Method*, Cambridge, The Riverside Press, 272.

² Dewey J., (2008), *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882-1898: Psychology*, Boydston J. Ann ed., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University, 26.

We are now in a better position to appreciate the difficulties generated by Morse's use of the concept of rupture. My impression is that the emphasis on rupture as the key to understanding Dewey's early idealism prevents him from drawing two fundamental distinctions: on the one hand, the distinction between philosophical and psychological approach to the study of meaning; on the other hand, the distinction between the scientific explanation of the processes through which meaning is constructed and the analysis of the concrete, conscious activities through which meaning is idealized (perception, memory, imagination, thinking, and intuition). Morse is completely right in arguing that the young Dewey formulated a unified *philosophical* theory of meaning grounded on the notion of rupture – or, in more Deweyan terms, relation. However, on a psychological level things are much more complicated: since meaning is essentially of the nature of relation, perceptual meanings – that is, the fact that we encounter a meaningful world in our perception – should be explained by postulating a synthetic activity of which we cannot be aware. This is not a psychological but a logical impossibility: we cannot be aware of such an activity – as well as of the raw material that undergoes the process of synthesis – because they are theoretical artifacts that do not exist in consciousness. It follows therefore that Dewey's constructivism is not naïvely empiricist: the perceptual world is not constructed out of sensations, but is a whole whose elements are in turn wholes, that is, the union of immediate (perceptual) and mediate (intellectual) moments. This is the reason why perceptual world is, if not rational, at least potentially rationally articulable. And this is the reason why Dewey's constructivism is, at the very same time, a form of expressivism: through memory, imagination, thinking, and intuition, the conceptual content only implicitly developed in perception is brought to light and rationally articulated. In Dewey's early works – and, in particular, in his theory of knowledge – continuity goes hand in hand with discontinuity, harmony with rupture.

In other words, in his account of Dewey's idealistic theory of meaning Morse is led to blur the difference between meaning-making and meaning-transforming, tracing them back to the principle of rupture without any further qualification. In doing so, Morse seems to overlook the fact that rupture (relation) can be said in many different ways. But it was precisely the awareness of the difficulties posed by the idea of the relational nature of meaning that prompted Dewey to revise the section of his *Psychology* devoted to the analysis of the nature of sensation, a revision that ideally ends in the theory of thought as the reconstructive activity of meaning formulated in *The Studies in Logical Theory* (1903). From that moment on, Dewey identified the activity of thought as the moment of rupture in experience, thus providing an empirical grounding for his previous idealistic theory of meaning. Morse is therefore completely right in claiming that “the way pointed by the early Dewey [...] merits our consideration”, but he should also acknowledge that Dewey's naturalism did not come out of the blue (281). Again, no discontinuity without continuity, no rupture without harmony.