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# Dewey's Anthropology of Interests – and Values

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- 1 In recent years, several authors have contributed to the articulation of a pragmatist anthropology. Despite their differences, these contributions seem to share some common features and thus contribute to a pluralistic yet unitary pragmatist view of anthropology. First, pragmatist anthropologies entail an endorsement of non-reductivist naturalism, inspired by an original interpretation of evolutionism (Pearce 2020). Such an approach emphasizes the continuity between biological and cultural processes, without seeing the latter as a mere epiphenomenon of the former (Dreon 2021), and rather contribute to an original understanding of culture (Viola 2020).<sup>1</sup> In a nutshell, pragmatist anthropologies involve a focus on the recurring conditions and features of “*human changeableness*” (Honneth & Joas 1980).
- 2 Second, pragmatist anthropologies are characterized by close interaction with contributions from the theoretical and empirical work of anthropologists. This statement is trivial only at first glance. In fact, a long tradition of philosophical anthropology – especially German philosophical anthropology – has developed throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day without taking significant account of the work of social and cultural anthropologists. On the contrary, the significant and mutual interaction and influence between John Dewey and anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict, among others, is well known and well documented in the scholarly literature on the subject (Zask 2003; Goldman 2012; Torres-Colòn & Hobbs 2015; Viola 2020; Dreon 2022).
- 3 Third, despite their commitment to naturalism, pragmatist anthropologies do not entail a depoliticizing stance. References to nature and biological processes are not used to present the main features of human action and experience as fixed, fully determined, and indisputable. On the contrary, pragmatist anthropologies can be understood as the exercise of an original form of critical naturalism (Gregoratto *et al.* 2022).

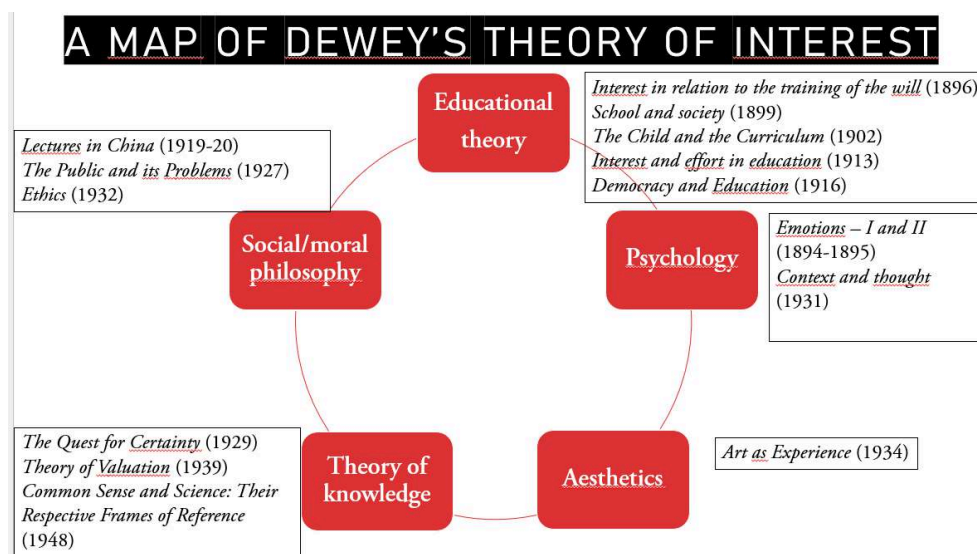
- 4 In the following paragraphs, I will contribute to this multifaceted project of articulating a pragmatist anthropology. I will do so by reconstructing Dewey's theory of interest. My main thesis is that throughout his intellectual production, Dewey developed an original *anthropology of interests* – i.e., a definition of the recurring conditions and features of human changeability that: a) depends on Dewey's original idea of interest; b) has distinct features from other influential anthropologies of interest.
- 5 Developing the idea of a pragmatist anthropology of interests necessarily requires clearing the field of two potential misunderstandings. First, theories of interest are usually understood to be either subjectivist – in the guise of various versions of *homo oeconomicus* – or objectivist – along the lines of basic versions of Marxism and political realism. From a subjectivist standpoint, interest should be reduced to self-interest, and self-interest in turn should be understood in the sense of the more or less rational pursuit of purely subjective preferences. From an objectivist perspective, interests are purely given, in the sense that their existence and their definition: (1) do not depend on subjective factors (individuals and groups might feel more or less attached to them, but either way interests will just simply exist); (2) are by definition close to any possible transformative criticism (you can criticize them, but your criticism will leave them unaffected). On the contrary, as we will see, pragmatism clearly involves a position that transcends the subjectivism/objectivism dichotomy. Second, both in the scientific realm and in public discussion, advocates of interests tend to be dismissive of values. They support a kind of discourse in which values are unrealistic conceptual inventions, while interests are not. Interests – either subjective or objective – are real, and they are the only thing that matters when it comes to explaining human nature and behavior. On the contrary, Dewey has made an original and productive contribution to the understanding of values and valuations (Joas 2000; Petit-Ballett 2023; Alexandratos 2024).<sup>2</sup>
- 6 To avoid these misunderstandings, it will be necessary to: (1) show how Dewey's theory of interests strategically aims at overcoming the subjective/objective dichotomy; (2) develop a pragmatist anthropology of interests *and* values. This emphasis on “and” is not accidental. In fact, interests and values are often pitted against each other as pivotal concepts of incompatible anthropologies – e.g., *homo oeconomicus* vs. *homo interpretans* (Michel 2019). Interests and values indicate two dimensions in necessary and inevitable conflict in human beings – respectively, a structural and causally determinative dimension, and on the other hand a superstructural and ideological dimension – an opposition that we typically find in political realism. As we will see in the final section of the paper, the coexistence of both categories allowed for by Dewey's rejection of the interests-values dichotomy opens the way to a third path beyond basic forms of political realism and political idealism.
- 7 The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 will include a map of Dewey's uses of the concept of “interest” in the various domains of his intellectual production, and a working Deweyan definition of interest. In section 2, I will reconstruct Dewey's theory of interest in the crucial area of educational theory. I will then show how Dewey's rich understanding of interests involves a rejection of the concept of disinterestedness (section 3) without abandoning the concepts of common interest (section 4), evaluations and values (section 5). The way Dewey portrays the relationship between interests and evaluations, however, could be perceived as a relapse into a rationalist and intellectualist anthropology. To address this criticism, I will show the importance

of processes of articulation and conflict in Dewey's anthropology of interests and values (section 6).

# 1. A Map and a Working Definition of Interest

- 8 The concept of interest spans all areas of Dewey's work. Coherently, the scholarly literature focuses mainly on Dewey's use of the term in specific areas – especially educational theory (Hansen 2006; Jonas 2011; Pennacchini 2015; Wilson 2016; Girel 2023) and moral and social theory (Frega 2015; Hogan & Marcelle 2022). Thus, articulating a unified definition of interest is no easy task.
- 9 I will approach this complicated task in three steps. First, I will present an initial working definition of interest in Dewey's work. Second, I will present a map of Dewey's uses of interest in his multifaceted intellectual production. Third, I will discuss some specific use cases in greater detail to enrich the initial working definition.
- 10 A Deweyan working definition of interest includes at least four points:
  1. Interest is a mode of transaction between organism and environment;
  2. Interest organizes and channels emotions/impulses/needs/desires;
  3. Interest is qualitatively characterized (it has to do with sensitivity, concern, cognitive and aesthetic selectivity);
  4. Interest is a hinge concept between biological/social/political.
- 11 Even this extremely schematic definition suggests several original aspects of Dewey's concept of interest. First, interests are neither purely subjective nor purely material and objective—they necessarily involve both the pragmatic and qualitative relation of subject and object. Second, interests are grounded in the impulsive and affective dimension of behavior and experience, and yet they involve something more than impulses, emotions, and desires. To fully grasp the originality of these aspects, however, requires a small interdisciplinary journey into the various areas of Dewey's work.

Picture 1. A map of Dewey's theory of interest



- 12 Above is a map of Dewey's theory of interest in the main areas of his thought. In the context of this article, however, I will not undertake a painstaking reconstruction of Dewey's uses of interest in each domain.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I will offer a more detailed look into Dewey's uses of the concept of interest in the areas of pedagogy, social and moral theory, and the theory of knowledge and evaluation. I have chosen to focus on these three domains because they offer me the opportunity to highlight the anthropological significance of Dewey's theory of interest – that is, the specific understanding of human specificity advocated by Dewey.

## 2. Interests and Educational Theory

- 13 As widely acknowledged in the scholarly literature, Dewey's pedagogical essays from 1896 to 1916 represent an original theory of interests in the field of educational theory. In *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*, Dewey writes that his interest in pedagogy and educational theory “merged with and brought together what might otherwise have been separate interests – those in psychology and those in social institutions and social life” (LW.5: 156). This, of course, has implications for his whole theory of interests. Indeed, the significance of his reflections in essays such as *Interest in Relation to the Training of the Will*, *The Child and the Curriculum* and *Interest and Effort in Education* goes well beyond the realm of educational theory. More ambitiously, Dewey identifies and challenges three common misconceptions about interest, misconceptions which also affect psychology, social and moral theory, and the theory of knowledge. According to the first misconception, interest can (and/or should) be reduced to self-interest. According to the second misconception, the concept of disinterestedness is necessary if we are to account for: a) learning processes; b) moral acts; c) aesthetic experience. And finally, according to the third misconception, the plurality of interests necessarily leads to moral and social chaos. As can easily be seen, challenging these three misconceptions entails paving the way for an anthropology of interests that is radically alternative to the two models presented in the previous section.
- 14 To challenge these misconceptions, Dewey drew on the philosophical and psychological ideas he had developed in his Ann Arbor and Chicago years (Westbrook 1991). The main thrust of Dewey's argument rests on his rejection of the reduction of interest to self-interest. In fact, the concept of disinterestedness is only necessary if interests are reduced to self-interest and understood as purely subjective and private. The more human interests are reduced to self-interest, the more one needs the concept of disinterestedness to account for these areas of action that do not fit an explanation in terms of self-interest. But this subjective understanding of interests is untenable and problematic. Dewey agrees that interests are intimately related to the self (Pappas 2008: 213; Hansen 2012: 165), to the possibility of self-realization. Yet they are transactional in nature, they play an integrative role as they are situated precisely between organism and environment, subjective and objective, means and ends. Interest is about both ends and means. It is “the identification of mind with the material and methods of a developing activity” (MW.7: 195).<sup>4</sup> Complementarily, the decline of interests is a sign of separation. From this perspective, disinterestedness does not mean impartiality, but rather the rupture of the connection between means and ends, subjective and objective. The prototypes of this lack of interest are not altruistic

behavior – which is a specific organization of interests directed toward others – but rather routine work and depression.

- 15 This subjective understanding of interests is untenable and problematic, and it also leads to blocking dichotomies. If interests are nothing but self-interests, if they are subjective and originally removed from practice and interaction, then interest must be handled from outside – by arousing interest or by disinterested discipline and effort. If the educational object is something “outside the sphere of self,” then it must either be made artificially interesting or mastered through sheer exertion of will (MW.7: 156). On the contrary, the goal of education is the reorganization and reconstruction of the child’s existing powers. The starting point is a feeling and acting child with its incomplete tendencies and concerns. Therefore, in the classroom the interests of the child should be neither indulged, not suppressed for the sake of discipline.

I believe that these interests are neither to be humored nor repressed. To repress interest is to substitute the adult for the child, and so to weaken intellectual curiosity and alertness, to suppress initiative, and to deaden interest. To humor the interests is to substitute the transient for the permanent. The interest is always the sign of some power below; the important thing is to discover this power. To humor the interest is to fail to penetrate below the surface and its sure result is to substitute caprice and whim for genuine interest. (EW.5: 92-3)

- 16 But again, if interests are not synonymous with egoistic self-interest, the fear of a chaotic and immoral world ruled by interests loses at least some of its force. As Dewey makes clear in *Democracy and Education*, the natural plurality of interests becomes compatible with the possibility of common interests (Dewey 1916). But what does Dewey mean by common interests? To answer this question, it is necessary to say something more about Dewey’s skepticism towards both the concepts of self-interest and disinterestedness.

### 3. Dismantling the Self-Interest- Disinterestedness Dichotomy

- 17 As often happens with Dewey, when rejecting the reduction of interest to self-interest he hardly mentions explicit polemical targets. Yet, it is quite uncontroversial to argue that this rejection involves rejecting a perspective that had been gaining significant traction in the social sciences of his time – i.e., the model of the *homo oeconomicus*. From a theoretical perspective, we can understand *homo oeconomicus* as the final point of convergence between two historical theses in the history of the concept of interest: (1) the universal thesis – all are moved by interest; (2) the reductive thesis – interest is self-interest. In its earliest formulations – for example, that of J. S. Mill (1836)<sup>5</sup> – *homo oeconomicus* is conceived as a purely theoretical model. The idea is that if one wants to formulate the laws of human behavior in the economic sphere, one must consider not concrete human beings, but the prototypical human being, that is, a *homo oeconomicus* acting according to self-interest. This would imply that *homo oeconomicus* is not an anthropological model, but only an explicit abstraction aimed at predicting a very specific domain of human action, i.e. the economic domain. But there are good reasons to think that *homo oeconomicus*, far from being a pure model of a particular kind of action-economic action, has become a full-fledged anthropological model. First, this model presupposes invariant anthropological elements – e.g., the basic needs that unite every human being – and/or universal psychological mechanisms – e.g., preferences,

means-ends relations. Second, one might argue that this model has exerted a performative force: it has *become* the image through which rational human action is described and understood as the optimal allocation of scarce resources to alternative ends and, in general, the interaction between organism and reality (see Foucault's (1978-1979) remarks on von Mises and Becker).

- 18 According to John Levi Martin and Alessandra Lembo (2020), this is precisely the point where the concept of interest and the concept of disinterestedness join forces. Levi Martin's and Lembo's thesis runs as follows: While attractive, the idea that human action is mainly motivated by interest – narrowly understood as self-interest – posed a problem to philosophers and sociologists of the late 19th century and of early 20th century. If interest is reduced to the pursuit of self-interest, then logically all the different kinds of behavior incompatible with such reduction must be understood as disinterested. Moreover, the domain of disinterested behaviors grows if self-interest is in turn reduced to economic interests, as it happens in the well-known model of the *homo oeconomicus*. This is precisely the conceptual work that the concept of value is expected to do in social and moral philosophy and sociology – i.e., to account for those domains of human action that seem to be oriented toward ultimate ends that cannot be reduced to the logic of self-interest.
- 19 The anthropological consequences of this compensatory strategy are quite clear. Human beings living in modern capitalist societies are expected to act, and expect others to act, according to their own interests. As Adam Smith famously argued, if we want a steak, it is definitely better to appeal to the butcher's self-interest than to his benevolence. Yet some domains of human action – from bureaucracy and public service (Parsons 1934) to moral life – require disinterested action. In these domains, we are expected to act, and we expect others to act according to our ultimate ends – i.e., our values – rather than our bargainable interests.<sup>6</sup> A second anthropological model, involving a division of labor between interests and values, thus emerged as both a reaction to and a compensation for the anthropological model of *homo oeconomicus*.
- 20 Dewey's theory of interest is irreducible to the two paradigms outlined above. Unlike the *homo oeconomicus* paradigm, Dewey radically and explicitly challenges the reduction of interest to self-interest – even more so when self-interest is further reduced to economic interest. To the extent of my knowledge, there are no extensive discussions of the *homo oeconomicus* in Dewey's work, yet he was certainly familiar with similar developments within liberalism, for example marginalist theories. Tilman and Knapp (1999) showed in detail how Dewey had already prepared some *Lectures* in 1913 which focused on a philosophical, psychological and economic criticism of marginalism. Moreover, his criticism of marginalism leans on two essential tenets of his understanding of interest: (1) the critique of subjectivist understandings of interests; and (2) the focus on the means-ends continuum.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the second *compromise* model, Dewey radically and explicitly rejects the idea of disinterested behavior, and – as we will see – he does so without getting rid of the concept of value.

#### 4. Common Interests without Disinterestedness

- 21 Dewey's rejection of the idea of disinterestedness plays a key role in his articulation of the concept of common interests. As we have anticipated at the end of section 2, the idea that interest cannot be reduced to self-interest goes together with the idea that

the plurality of interests characterizing contemporary societies is not an evil source of uncompromised conflicts in itself. At the same time, Dewey clearly does not buy the idea that the market society and the demand-supply mechanism will automatically and spontaneously adjust themselves, and contribute to the common good of society. To fully grasp the originality of Dewey's ideas on this topic, it is useful to contrast it with the idea of the *natural identity of interests*.

- 22 As Parsons points out in his 1937 masterpiece, *The Structure of Social Action*, old school liberals often argued that common interests are only possible if we postulate the natural identity of interests. It is true that each individual pursues his own interest, but this egoistic orientation is tempered by the fact that these interests are naturally identical. This leads to the equally natural recognition of a relative right to limit each other. For example, the fact that each individual has a natural interest in his or her own property is the origin of the natural right to property. Society is thus spontaneously and originally organized around such rights, made possible by the fact that individual pursue identical interests. According to Parsons, the hypothesis of the natural identity of interests is unrealistic, and the very idea of common interests is a contradiction in terms. Interests in modern societies are radically plural, heterogeneous, unreliable – as Durkheim (1893) claimed. So there are no common interests. Only values understood as ultimate ends – and thus divorced from means-ends chains – can be authentically common, shared and stable in a given community. This solution fits perfectly with the second anthropological model presented above. Values as ultimate ends are supposed to compensate for the limits of interests.
- 23 Dewey rejects the idea of natural identity of interests as early as 1888 (EW.1: 215-6). Nevertheless, unlike Parsons, he believes that common interests are possible, but not as a precondition, but rather as a result of social practices, i.e., through “the perfecting of the means and ways of communication of meanings so that a genuinely shared interest in the consequences of interdependent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action” (LW.2: 332). This is Dewey's well-known theory of the public. From this perspective, social order in a democratic society is based not on the existence of a system of ultimate ends, but rather on common and shared interests that are at once cognitive, affective, and moral. Cognitive, in that – as we will see in section 5 – they require individuals to be able to reevaluate interests. Affective, in that they require individuals to participate in common activities and be affected by their consequences. Moral, insofar as common interests make possible the transition from the Great Society to the Great Community, that is, from a merely associated life to a moral and fully social community life.
- 24 Two things are worth noting here. First, common interests are not incompatible with social conflict. Rather, they are a possible outcome of social conflict between social groups (Dewey 1919-1920). These conflicts involve both pragmatic and identity issues. Second, democratic social order is not based on disinterested shared values. On the contrary, the very concept of disinterestedness is unnecessary and misleading.
- 25 It is useful to go back to Levi Martin's and Lembo's 2020 article. Levi Martin and Lembo pursued a Deweyan strategy in arguing against the necessity of the concept of disinterestedness. Their strategy is quite explicitly Deweyan. They argue that the need for the problematic and unnecessary concept of disinterestedness depends on a previous reduction of interests to self-interests, and that we should instead embrace a “new” rich idea of interests, inspired (among others) by John Dewey. Now, the adoption

of a rich concept of interest and the general rejection of the concept of disinterestedness anticipated in his pedagogical essays are explicitly expressed in Dewey's mature works, most notably in the 1932 version of *Ethics*. There we find one of the most comprehensive and detailed definitions of interest ever proposed by Dewey:

Any concrete case of the union of the self in action with an object and end is called an interest. [...] An interest is, in short, the dominant direction of activity, and in this activity desire is united with an object to be furthered in a decisive choice. Unless impulse and desire are enlisted, one has no heart for a course of conduct; one is indifferent, averse, not interested. On the other hand, an interest is objective; the heart is set on something. There is no interest at large or in a vacuum; each interest imperatively demands an object to which it is attached and for the well-being or development of which it is actively solicitous. (LW.7: 320-1)

- 26 This rich understanding of interests, in turn, leads to the rejection of the idea of disinterestedness:

It is absurd to suppose that the difference between the good person and the bad person is that the former has no interest or deep and intimate concern (leading to personal intimate satisfaction) in what he does, while the bad person is one who does have a personal stake in his actions. What makes the difference between the two is the quality of the interest that characterizes them. For the quality of the interest is dependent upon the nature of the object which arouses it and to which it is attached, being trivial, momentous; narrow, wide; transient, enduring; exclusive, inclusive in exact accord with the object. (*ibid.*: 296)

- 27 But Dewey's attack on disinterestedness is not limited to morality. Rather, it is gradually extended to a domain that has often been understood and conceived of as disinterested – that is, scientific activity. In this sense, it is important to briefly discuss an article from late in Dewey's life: "Common Sense, Science, and Control" (published in 1948). In this paper, Dewey seems to expand upon a specific aspect of Peirce's theory of common sense as vague, as presented in "Issues of Pragmaticism" (1905, CP5.438-63) and in some unpublished manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> Peirce maintained that common sense beliefs are acritically indubitable only when applied to primitive modes of life. Dewey seems to follow Peirce on the idea that the validity of commonsensical beliefs has to be limited to a specific domain of existence and experience. But he was too caught up in the anthropological debate of the time to use the term "primitive" lightly. Therefore, he defines the common sense frame of reference as something that refers to "uses and pleasures common to mankind or to a given community" (Dewey 1948: 200). But if common sense has to do with common "uses and enjoyments" (as Peirce would say: "objects of universal concern," see CP5.522), this does not mean that science is a disinterested activity, that it is "not a human concern, affair, occupation" (Dewey 1948: 204). On the contrary, if we want to explore the differences between science and common sense, we should focus on a different issue altogether: "The question to be discussed is that of the kind of concern or care which distinguishes scientific activity from those forms of human behavior which fall within the scope of common sense" (*ibid.*). The primary concern and interest of science is abstraction: "Scientific knowledge is that particular form of practical human activity which is concerned with the advancement of knowledge apart from concern with other practical matters" (*ibid.*: 206). This means that we should neither isolate science from other social and political interests, nor try to understand science as a framework that provides the truer representation of reality. The real issue is to control and direct "the return of scientific methods and conclusions to the concerns of daily life [...] so as to minimize evil

consequences and intensify and extend good consequences, and, if possible, to find out how such a return is to be accomplished” (*ibid.*: 207).

- 28 The accomplishment of this control and direction is a key concern of democracy. The articulation of democratic common interests out of existing plural interests cannot be achieved by adopting an allegedly disinterested perspective. Science plays a momentous role in achieving this control and direction, but it does so *exactly* because it follows specific interests.
- 29 The problem of the control of interests in democratic societies is a main concern of Dewey’s 1939 essay on valuation. The analysis of this text gives us the opportunity to address a crucial aspect of Dewey’s anthropology of interests. As we saw in the previous sections, this perspective rejects the reduction of interest to self-interest and rejects the very idea of disinterestedness.<sup>9</sup> But does this also lead to the dismissal of the concept of values from Dewey’s view of the human being? Levi Martin and Lembo’s answer to this question is decidedly positive. From their perspective, abandoning the problematic idea of disinterestedness in favor of a new rich idea of interests means that we should abandon the concept of values. If interests are richer than self-interests, and if we do not need to postulate disinterestedness to account for the altruistic organization of interests toward others, then why do we need the concept of values?
- 30 While I sympathize with Lembo’s and Levi Martin’s paper in many respects, I would like to offer an alternative view. My idea is that Dewey’s theory of interests makes the concept of disinterestedness untenable, and yet it does not dismiss the importance of values. Rather, it paints a picture of human beings as interested and (e)valuating animals.

## 5. Interests and Evaluations

- 31 The basis of my argument is an analysis of Dewey’s 1939 *Theory of Valuation*. This essay provides an insightful account of three important tenets of Dewey’s theory of interests.
- 32 First, interests cannot be reduced to given and predetermined individual preferences:
- [D]esire and interest are not given ready-made at the outset, and a fortiori are not, as they may at first appear, starting-points, original data, or premisses of any theory of valuation, for desire always emerges within a prior system of activities or interrelated energies [...] Interest represents not just a desire but a set of interrelated desires which have been found in experience to produce, because of their connection with one another, a definite order in the processes of continuing behavior. [...] There are no desires and interests apart from some field of activities in which they occur and in which they function, either as poor or as good means. (LW.13: 239-40)
- 33 Two aspects are worth noting here. First, interests emerge as a part of a set of activities and energies. This means that they might appear as “starting points” only in a given situation and for specific purposes, and not in themselves. Second, interests play an integrating role in experience and conduct. They connect our actions and our feelings in a continuous and habitual process. A totally discontinuous and fragmented interest is not by definition an interest. It seems at least insincere to claim that I have an interest in global peace if do not care about current wars, if I do not read books or articles on the topic – briefly, if I do nothing to demonstrate concern about the topic.

- 34 Second, interests articulate and re-organize vital impulses. In this sense, they are both natural and cultural. Interests presuppose vital impulses as conditions *sine qua non* for their existence. Yet, differently from vital impulses, interests “include foreseen consequences along with ideas in the form of signs of the measures (involving expenditure of energy) required to bring the ends into existence [...] There is no desire and no interest which, in its distinction from raw impulse and strictly organic appetite, is not what it is because of transformation effected in the latter by their interaction with the cultural environment” (LW.13: 207). Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the role of “cultural conditions and institutions” in shaping interests (*ibid.*: 248).
- 35 The third point is of direct concern to us because it touches on the possibility of evaluating interests. From Dewey’s perspective, interests are evaluated as long as they are examined in their concrete makeup in relation to their place in a situation. More precisely, an interest is evaluated according to its capacity to meet “the needs of existing situations” (*ibid.*: 207). This passage has far-reaching consequences. An interest embodies a set of valuations as it selects the relevant features of a situation, and it organizes our impulses and behavior considering these features.<sup>10</sup> But, in turn, interests can be evaluated according to the role they play in particular situations.
- 36 This idea of the evaluation of interests has far-reaching political consequences. In acknowledging this possibility, Dewey rejects both political realism – the idea that particular interests are beyond the scope of criticism and evaluation – and political idealism – the idea that authentic democratic life is based on disinterested values and ideals. On the contrary, evaluating interests is a key activity in democratic practice. Democratic life depends on the “regulated guidance of the formation of interests and purposes in the concrete” and on intelligent control “in the formation of desires and valuations” (*ibid.*: 239).
- 37 From this perspective, the difference between values and interests seems to follow the logical schema of the difference between valuations and second-order valuations – a schema that we find in various guises in authors such as Harry Frankfurt and Charles Taylor (Joas 2000). While interests involve a selective evaluation of the relevant and “interesting” objects in the environment, values have to do with second-order evaluations. Something is a “value” if it is not only the object of desires and interests, but if it is also worthy of our desires and interests – in short, if it is desirable.
- 38 Yet, as scholars have often pointed out (Welsh 2013), Dewey’s account of how interests can be shaped by intelligent evaluation in *Theory of Valuation* seems overly rationalistic and intellectualistic. The transition from first-order to second-order valuations is apparently due to an act of purely intellectual reflection that assesses the capacity of a given interest and valuation to meet the needs of an existing situation. Consequently, the ability to reconcile interests and values seems to depend on a strong reinstatement of the role of intellectual judgment. This is a rather surprising result, especially given that Dewey’s pragmatist anthropology is often conceived as a radical alternative to classical modern rationalist anthropologies.

## 6. Articulation and Critical Interests

- 39 There are two reasons why this charge of rationalism and intellectualism against Dewey could and should be resisted. Both reasons presuppose that we should not use

*Theory of Valuation* as a general account of Dewey's theory of values and interests. Rather, this text should at least be integrated with other works. The first work that needs to be part of this conversation is *The Quest for Certainty* – particularly chapter 10.<sup>11</sup> In the 1929 essay, Dewey discusses the topic of values and the relationship between the desired and the desirable in a way that seems to avoid the charges of intellectualism brought ten years after by *Theory of Valuation*.

- 40 There are two aspects to be considered here. First, in contrast to *Theory of Valuation*, Dewey in *The Quest for Certainty* has something quite substantial to say about the experience of objects of value. In particular, Dewey emphasizes that evaluation is not merely an intellectual act. It does not consist merely in controlling experiences of pleasure and desire in the restrictive sense of the term. Evaluation is not simply a test of whether an object of desire, interest, or pleasure deserves to be considered a value. On the contrary, the control and regulation exercised by evaluation involves a deeper knowledge of the object and of the experience we have of that object.
- 41 Such a deeper knowledge – second point – involves what we might call an *articulation* of the experience of that value. Articulation can be defined as the process through which an idea or a feeling is made explicit and precise through language or other symbolic tools (Jung 2009). According to Dewey, when we experience an object of desire and/or enjoyment as a value, the experience of enjoyment and/or desire is accompanied by an awareness of the worth of this object. In this way, we do not simply label the object as legitimate through a purely cognitive procedure of assessment. Quite on the contrary, the articulation of the object of value has a feedback effect on our affective and sensual attachment to that object. Our experience of desire/interest/enjoyment is not bracketed through an intellectual *epoch*. Rather, it is intensified by the awareness of its value. The drive of compulsively repeating the experience as a subjective feeling is replaced by the need to keep the object of value alive. The shift in focus from subjective feeling to evaluation is not at the expense of the affective dimension. On the contrary, the discovery that a thing is worthy of enjoyment involves a surplus of enjoyment (LW. 4: 213). Thus, the reconstruction and articulation of the relationships that develop around the object of value involves an internal transformation of the feeling that binds one to that object. Valuation transforms one qualitatively characterized situation – the enjoyment of an object whose value-status is not yet determined – into another qualitatively connoted situation – in which the object is enjoyed as a value (LW.15: 70). In contrast to *Theory of Valuation*, the centrality of articulation processes in Dewey's anthropology of interests and values is quite clear in *The Quest for Certainty*.<sup>12</sup>
- 42 Thus, for Dewey, human beings are capable of second-order valuations – that is, evaluations of interests. Evaluations should be understood as processes of articulation, rather than as mere external assessments of the value and legitimacy of a given interest, desire or enjoyment. In short, human beings are capable of processes of *reflective articulation* of their interests. And as Tilman and Knapp aptly point out in discussing Dewey's criticism of marginalism, neglecting the possibility of evaluating interests and values has clear political consequences:
- In Dewey's view, marginal utility doctrine privatized value and by doing so induced moral agnosticism, a condition of permanently suspended judgment regarding individual and social needs, a suspension that was likely to undermine the foundations of a democratic community by immunizing value against collective appraisal by public bodies. (Tilman-Knapp 1999: 407)

- 43 But all this does not mean that we are always able to carry out reflective evaluation and articulation in a satisfying way. Rather, Dewey maintains that this activity is a possibility of human experience and action. Human beings are not naturally bound to unrestrained and uncontrolled interests. Moreover, the possibility of controlling interests through reflective articulation plays a key role in the realization of collective and individual democratic life.
- 44 However, one last piece of the puzzle we are trying to reconstruct needs to be added. Dewey's problem is not merely to determine whether human beings are capable of reflective articulation of their interests after the dust has settled. The problem is that the dust rarely settles for good. In everyday social life, evaluation must take place in situations where plural and sometimes unarticulated interests are in lively conflict. For this reason, it is necessary to bring into the picture Dewey's 1919-20 *Lectures in China*.
- 45 The *Lectures* clarify in a fairly effective and clear way some of the basic tenets of Dewey's understanding of social life. First, interests are the building blocks of individual and social life. Therefore, it is impossible to understand social issues without focusing on interests. Second, interests can (and often should) be evaluated in terms of two different relationships:
1. *The relationship between interests and the needs and vital impulses they express.* As we already know, interests do not emerge out of thin air. They express and organize impulses, desires, and needs. But the problem with the dominant interests of a given society is that they do not merely express and fulfill some needs. Rather, they begin to grow and expand and reproduce themselves inertially and independently of their relationship to the needs (Frega 2015) and impulses they are supposed to express and satisfy.
  2. *The relationship to other interests.* By definition, dominant interests dominate and hegemonize other actual or potential interests. When domination is at its peak, it is perceived as natural and unassailable by both the dominating and dominated groups. But then, in dominated groups, an initially vague and unarticulated dissatisfaction might emerge. This inchoate dissatisfaction opens the way to a denaturalization of domination and a critical evaluation of dominating interests and their dominant patterns of action (Testa 2017).
- 46 Dewey seems to go so far as to suggest that in order to criticize a dominant interest, one must appeal to another interest – either an actual or potential interest – that is dominated and/or suppressed by the former interest. This dominated interest may be either fully articulated or only incipient and inchoate. The domination exercised by the second interest may be so strong as to prevent certain groups and individuals from articulating their interests (Serrano Zamora 2017). Therefore, the vital source of critique and evaluation of existing dominant interests is the emergence (in various stages of articulation) of *critical interests*. These interests are critical in two senses: 1) they are important, vital, and decisive to certain people, and this importance must be socially recognized (Gregoratto 2017); 2) they embody a living source of critique of dominant interests and of the degeneration of associated life (Särkelä 2017).
- 47 By this, Dewey does not mean that political life should be reduced to a mere struggle between competing interests. Dewey's political anthropology of interests is an alternative to both pessimistic "realist" and naïve "idealist" anthropologies. Dewey is anti-idealist enough to distrust the possibility of evaluating existing interests as a mere exercise of philosophical virtuosity without pointing to other potential, emergent, or articulated interests.

48 But this does not lead him to deny the importance of values and the ideal dimension of social and political action. Dewey is not suggesting that values are merely a rhetorical and ideological cover for clashes of interests. Nor is he saying that one can evaluate and critique existing interests only if s/he is actively involved in an activist group. His much more nuanced point is that the evaluation of existing dominant interests at least points to potential and growing alternative interests, or to new articulations of common interests. On the political level, here lies the originality of his anthropology of interests *and* values.

## 7. Conclusions

49 In the previous sections I have reconstructed Dewey's anthropology of interests. I have tried to show how his theory of interest presents an idea of human beings as essentially interested animals. The diversity of human interests, however, cannot be reduced to self-interest. Moreover, human interests have a clear biological background and yet are shaped by cultural practices, habits, and institutions. Finally, while disinterestedness has no place in this view of human beings, values and evaluations do.

50 I am aware that Dewey's original anthropology of interests *and* values leaves us with a number of open questions that cannot be adequately addressed here. I mention them because they are a sign of how problematic (in a Deweyan – and thus not necessarily negative – sense) and vital Dewey's insights are.

1. Is the intelligent and transformative evaluation of interests envisioned by Dewey even possible? Are ultimate ends the potential objects of evaluation?<sup>13</sup> And finally, in an age of nudging and hypernudging<sup>14</sup> (see Hildebrand's 2023), is Dewey's theory of interests and (e)valuations still viable? Or is it too demanding for existing democracies?

2. Dewey defines interests as closely related to desires, impulses, emotions, and needs. This is indicative of the biological basis of human interests. However, two aspects are not fully clarified by Dewey. First, the relationship between these various biological aspects of human action and experience is not resolved by Dewey. Second, Dewey uses different terms to define the relationship between interests and this biological bedrock – organization, expression, reflection, articulation. Because these terms refer to quite different processes, the specific way in which culturally shaped interests interact with the biological dimension of human beings is left partially unspecified.

3. Finally, in this paper I presented Dewey's anthropology of interests as an alternative to both naive idealist and narrow realist political anthropologies. However, an alternative interpretive hypothesis could be developed. It is possible to understand Dewey's perspective as a radical redefinition of political realism. Rather than conceiving of existing interests as purely given and self-legitimizing entities – as basic forms of political realism often do – Dewey understands real interests<sup>15</sup> as the outcome of evaluative processes. This would open up the possibility that people often pursue “unreal” interests. From this perspective, the difference between real and unreal interests would depend on the quality of the processes of articulation – that is, on the evaluation of the various ways in which interests articulate the needs, desires, and impulses of a particular group or of particular individuals.

51 These crucial issues – which can only be touched upon here – and their significance for a pragmatist anthropology need to be further developed in future work.

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## NOTES

1. In this sense, pragmatist anthropologies seem to endorse a kind of liberal naturalism (De Caro & Macarthur 2022). On the differences between liberal naturalism and pragmatist liberalism, however, see Levine 2022.
2. For strategic reasons, I am not providing here a definition of interests and values. My overall strategy consists exactly in reconstructing Dewey’s understanding and definition of interests and values, by reorganizing and reconstructing Dewey’s plural uses of these terms in the various domains of his work. I would like to thank reviewer 2 for pointing to this issue.
3. My first attempt at such a reconstruction is Santarelli 2019.
4. On this topic, see Girel 2023.
5. See Bee & Desmarais-Tremblay 2023.
6. See Martin & Lembo 2021.
7. Tilman and Knapp (1999: 400) hypothesize that Dewey’s critique of marginalism is perhaps influenced by Veblen’s theories and Dewey’s growing social radicalism (*ibid.*: 401). To these two possible roots, however, we must add the recognition of how this criticism is consistent with the epistemological assumptions that Dewey progressively develops starting from the last decades of the 19th century – above all, the means-ends continuity and the criticism of subjectivism and introspectionism.
8. On this topic, see Viola 2019, and Bellucci & Santarelli 2023.
9. One might argue that it is necessary to distinguish between disinterested and uninterested action. Indeed, Dewey seems to argue against the possibility and value of disinterested action, but not against disinterestedness as a whole – provided that the latter is understood not as an implausible lack of interest, but rather as a nonpartisan and nonpartial organization of interests. Or, in Bourdieu’s terms, from this perspective Dewey would argue that disinterestedness is achieved not through a kind of divine indifference, but through the cultivation of an interest in disinterestedness (Bourdieu 1987-1989). On a theoretical and conceptual level, I think this reconstruction fits well with Dewey’s ideas. On the level of terminology, however, it is no coincidence that when Dewey discusses disinterestedness in *Ethics* (1932), he defines it as a characteristic of genuine or complete interests. This suggests Dewey’s insistence on reformulating the concept of disinterestedness in terms of a specific impartial attitude toward our own interests and the interests of others (LW.7: 256). I am grateful to Pierre Steiner and Vincent Colapietro for drawing my attention to the need to discuss this aspect.
10. This is where James’s influence becomes clearer.
11. I would like to thank Mathias Girel for suggesting I include “The Quest for Certainty” in this conversation.
12. In recent years, many contributions focused on the importance of the concept of articulation in pragmatist philosophy and anthropology. See Frega 2010, Viola 2017, Serrano Zamora 2022, Zamora & Santarelli 2021.
13. Frank Knight, an author whose influence on the Chicago neoliberal boys is well documented, criticized Dewey on this very point – see Knight 1936. On this topic, see Hands 2006, and Fiorito 2011.

14. Hypernudging is a specific type of highly profiled nudging made possible in digital systems that use large amounts of user data and machine learning to guide decision-making in a highly personalised way. See Richards 2024.

15. The problem of real interests from a Deweyan perspective has been convincingly addressed by Hogan & Marcelle 2022.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article presents a reconstruction of Dewey's anthropology of interests. In particular, it aims to show the originality of Dewey's choice to place the concept of interest at the center of his understanding of human beings. This is manifested in three distinctive moves made by Dewey: (1) the critique of the reduction of human interests to self-interest; (2) the rejection of the concept of disinterestedness; and (3) the central role of both interests and values in understanding the nature of human action and experience. In the final part of the article, I will identify some problems that the Deweyan theory of interests and values fails to resolve, leaving them open for further discussion.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Interest, Value, John Dewey, Anthropology, Pragmatism

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