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“Subject-matter”: The Graphic Evidence of an Operative Field

Gioia Laura Iannilli

1. Introduction

- 1 The translation of a philosophical text can often bring to the fore aspects that were “hidden in plain sight” when reading the same text in the original language. This is precisely what happened recently as I was working on the translation of a series of texts authored by John Dewey between the end of the 19th century and the 1930s.¹ While in this process, a term particularly struck my attention: “subject-matter.” Unusually hyphenated, this otherwise common term progressively acquires a technical meaning in Dewey’s work and it becomes a concept. The term subject-matter – which, as far as I know, has until now attracted little attention² in the field of Dewey Studies – requires then a twofold approach: a theoretical and a linguistic one. As I am not a native English-speaking scholar, the very attempt to translate it into my own language (i.e. Italian) raises a few issues. Simply reading it in the original text, instead, does not arouse any particular “suspicion,” for it constitutes a “flowing” and therefore integral part of the discourse. In Italian, no direct correspondent is available for subject-matter. A translator is therefore forced to look for the closest match in the realm of its synonyms. But what is Dewey’s subject-matter synonym of? In this case, while striving to preserve the full import of the original text in a philosophical translation, linguistic matters tend to merge in a twofold, as already anticipated, or better “bistable,” co-constitutive, theoretical-linguistic inquiry.
- 2 In the following analysis of subject-matter, I will employ an “archaeological” method. This latter will allow to dig into and make sense of the several layers – even the somewhat messy ones – of the notion. Although at first sight subject-matter does not seem to belong to a clear speculative grammar and lexicon, in my view, it can be seen acquiring an increasing technical import. Its conceptual status is poignantly addressed in *Art as Experience*, but it can also be found at work in some other strategic venues of Dewey’s *corpus* over a long period of time, long before, and even after, the publication

of his 1934 book. One passage from the 1903 *Studies in Logical Theory*³ well exemplifies the length of this journey. Dewey addresses the topic of subject-matter from the standpoint of its relationship with thought, and provides for it the following complex articulation:

In taking up the problem of the subject-matter of thought, I shall try to make clear that it assumes three quite distinct forms according to the epochal moment reached in control of experience. I shall attempt to show that we must consider subject-matter from the standpoint, first, of the *antecedents* or conditions that evoke thought; secondly, of the *datum* or *immediate material* presented to thought; and, thirdly, of the *proper objective* of thought. Of these three distinctions the first, that of antecedent and stimulus, clearly refers to the situation that is immediately prior to the thought-function as such. The second, that of datum or immediately given matter, refers to a distinction which is made within the thought-process as a part of and for the sake of its own *modus operandi*. It is a status in the scheme of thinking. The third, that of content or object, refers to the progress actually made in any thought-function; material which is organized by inquiry so far as inquiry has fulfilled its purpose. (Dewey 1903/1976: 317)

- 3 One should also add that in a 1906 essay, while outlining the characters of “The Experimental Theory of Knowledge” in a realist, or naturalistic sense, Dewey quotes Santayana’s indication⁴ to follow “the lead of the subject-matter” (Dewey 1906/1977: 118). To this apparently trivial word, therefore, a speculative weight of no little importance is attached as early as the turn of the century.
- 4 In what follows an account will be provided of the career of this term, of its increasing technicality, and of how translating hurdles bring out conceptual specificities.
- 5 The paper will proceed as follows: after providing an etymological profile, I will discuss the difficulties encountered while translating the term subject-matter, briefly outline the possibilities indicated by fellow native English-speaking philosophers, and then offer possible solutions. Key passages in which Dewey employs the term will guide this process. I will start my survey from *Art as Experience* and conclude it with *Experience and Nature*. This latter work will also provide the ground to a basic comparison between *subject-matter* as employed by Dewey and the phenomenological notion of *Lebenswelt*. This is meant to simply indicate a framework for a possible and programmatic comparison, which still remains to be developed more systematically. The reader should therefore not be surprised to find that, in the final parts of the text, an agile and to some extent experimental sampling of passages is used and commented on as the ground work for future investigations on the proximity between the two aforementioned concepts.⁵

2. Etymological Clues and Conceptual Distinctions Starting from *Art as Experience*

- 6 As any English-Italian dictionary will show, the meaning that is generally attached to subject-matter is that of “theme or topic of discussion,” which, *sub specie philosophica* in general and *sub specie deweyana* in particular, amounts to an unsatisfactory result. Translating subject-matter into Italian is not a problem *per se*, because, as a matter of fact, the context itself usually provides an indication on how to proceed to make the text as a whole linguistically understandable and flowing. When translating Dewey’s texts, however, I could but notice how insistently Dewey turns his attention to this

term, hence suggesting its conceptual technicalization in a number of passages, and I felt challenged, or even tempted, to provide an unambiguous translation of it. And this is where problems begin, as this strategy is often detrimental to the readability of the text as such, as I shall show.

- 7 To begin with, whenever one encounters a term that exhibits a certain “viscosity” or generates a certain “friction,” checking its etymological origin is always a useful exercise. And that’s what I did here.
- 8 In this case,
 - [t]he meaning “subject matter of an art or science” is attested from 1540s, probably short for subject matter (late 14c.), which is from Medieval Latin *subjecta materia*, a loan translation of Greek *hypokeimene hylē* (Aristotle), literally “that which lies beneath.” (Online Etymology Dictionary, last accessed on January 5, 2024)
- 9 At least heuristically, this etymological detour provides us with two clues: one related to the legal sphere, and one related to Aristotelianism. Both aspects prove useful in understanding the (mostly implicit) proposal I believe Dewey puts forward concerning the subject-matter. In the case of the former, *subjecta materia* means “what is being discussed,” “what is under examination,” “what pertains to,” “what is at stake.” One could also say that *subjecta materia* is that to which interest and attention and possibly also speech are directed and from which they are hence articulated. In the case of the latter, namely in the framework of the reference to *hypokeimene hylē*, what is highlighted is a dimension that is, so to speak, infrastructural, and which, in being so, characterizes, informs and is at the same time characterized, informed by what it sustains. At any rate, in both cases it is possible to speak of an inherence and, by extension, of an inextricable relationality between a “what” and a “how.”
- 10 As to the second etymological strand, the reference to Aristotle seems not to be entirely fortuitous. Even though no explicit reference to Aristotle can be found in it, ancient philosophy plays a crucial role in a key chapter (i.e. Chapter 6) of *Art as Experience*. There, Dewey argues against the classical distinction between “Substance and Form,” as also the chapter title suggests. It is safe to say that a thorough critique of the Platonic doctrine of ideas is carried out in those pages, an operation that also Aristotelian anti-dualistic hylomorphism was aimed at accomplishing. In the same pages, one can also find a thorough conceptualization of subject-matter. Dewey introduces in fact clear distinctions between the import of this term and that of other terms in his philosophical device, in particular within the framework of a re-definition of substance and form in an anti-dualistic sense.
- 11 Almost obsessively throughout the chapter, the relationship between substance and form is discussed based on the assumption that, granted that all arts are expressive – as crucially established in Chapters 4 and 5 – they should be seen as languages articulated by their specific medium; moreover, it should be made clear that they always involve an individual and a shared dimension, an organism and an environment, a creator and a perceiver, what is said and how this something is said, namely, *a substance and a form*. In these pages Dewey constantly oscillates between the analysis of each of these inseparably co-operative aspects, while adopting a writing style that remains as accurate as possible in expressing this inseparable co-operation, that is, in preserving the complexity of the modes of *experiencing qua experiencing*.
- 12 Nevertheless, for analytical purposes, his initial focus is on the side of substance.⁶

- 13 Paraphrasing Bradley's (1926) account on poetry, Dewey draws a first distinction between "subject" and "substance."
- 14 On the one hand, he links the "subject" of a work to a "matter *for*," that is to say, something that can be described in many different ways without the work being affected by them: a theme, a title, a description, something that, for Dewey, serves at most the purpose of identification: "The subject [...] is outside the poem. [...] 'Subject,' however, itself varies over a wide range: hardly more than a label; the occasion that called out the work; the subject-matter which as raw material entered into the new experience of the artist and found transformation" (Dewey 1934/1989: 115).
- 15 On the other hand, he links the "substance" of a work to a "matter *in*," that is to say, the work itself, something that cannot be said, or done, or experienced otherwise: "one can tell another in words the subject of the 'Ancient Mariner.' But to convey to him its substance one would have to expose him to the poem and let the latter have its way with him" (*ibid.*). What is at stake here is aesthetic matter, or the subject after having been processed by the artist, after undergoing his/her treatment and having been experienced by someone else: "the substance is within *it* [the poem]; rather, *it is the poem*" (*ibid.*). Dewey also specifies that "substance" is not a "theme" or "topic," just as none of these three indicated terms is what he calls an "antecedent subject-matter" (*ibid.*: 116). Attaching the character of antecedence to subject-matter is not of secondary importance.
- 16 The following example adds some clarity:
- The "subject" of the "Ancient Mariner" is the killing of an albatross by a sailor and what happened in consequence thereof. Its matter is the poem itself. Its subject-matter is all the experiences a reader brings with him of cruelty and pity in connection with a living creature. (*ibid.*)
- 17 Associated with the overall experience of an individual or group of individuals – on a spectrum that for Dewey ranges from creator to user – *up to that moment*, subject-matter is "antecedent," in the sense of being the operative condition on the basis of which the rest can be built. For analytical purposes Dewey provides a somewhat linear and sequential description of the procedure. However, this does not actually reflect the modes through which experience actually or operatively unfolds, for him. These modes are instead seen by Dewey as transversal, contemporary and complex. But "for the sake of clarity," he states: "First comes subject-matter, then the substance or matter of the work; finally the determination of topic or theme" (*ibid.*).
- 18 An unambiguous translation of subject-matter with theme, subject or content, is therefore clearly non-viable. The solution generally suggested by dictionaries, and therefore certainly acceptable in current English, does not work for Dewey's use of the word, and the peculiarity of his philosophical standpoint around it. One more aspect should be also taken into account. What is at stake is not only the "priority" of the subject-matter as such, but also the manner in which such priority is itself operative.
- 19 This can be seen at play in Dewey's rejection of conventionalism and mechanicalness when it comes to artistic construction, as well as in general in the management of experience, where certain aspects of it are intensified, or made more perspicuous and experienceable. By conventionalism and mechanicalness, Dewey means all those forms of elaboration of experience that effect a detachment from the organic and ever-situated transaction that characterizes the relationship between humans and the environment, by applying pre-constituted forms and formulas that, as such, are closed

and forced upon. And this is what happens if one starts exclusively from a mere “subject” upon which to work: “The artist himself can hardly begin with a subject alone. If he did, his work would almost surely suffer from artificiality” (*ibid.*).

- 20 The “antecedence” or “priority” of subject-matter entails instead a processual dimension of development, both temporal and transformational. Important parallels can be here pointed out with Dewey’s understanding of form as a *forma formans* rather than as *forma formata*:

Antecedent subject-matter is not instantaneously changed into the matter of a work of art in the mind of an artist. It is a developing process. As we have already seen, the artist finds where he is going because of what he has previously done; that is, the original excitation and stir of some contact with the world undergo successive transformation. That state of the matter he has arrived at sets up demands to be fulfilled and it institutes a framework that limits further operations. (*ibid.*)

- 21 In this process the subject-matter *possibly* becomes substance, that is, formed matter.

As the experience of transforming subject-matter into the very substance of the work of art proceeds, incidents and scenes that figured at first may drop out and others take their place, being drawn in by the suction of the qualitative material that aroused the original excitement. (*ibid.*)

- 22 This process, however, does not take place simply, but selectively, namely by complying with the “retention” and “release” movements enacted by what Dewey calls a “qualitative material.” I will get back to this point in the next section.

3. A Few Attempts, a Possible Solution and a Common Ground

- 23 Now, in the light of this meticulous series of distinctions and nuances that Dewey brings to the fore, it is clear that the term subject-matter is hardly “tamable,” both from the standpoint of a philosophical translation into Italian, where, unlike what is the case for the other terms Dewey uses, there is no direct correspondence to it, and from the standpoint of the attempt to find, in English – specifically meant as Deweyan English – a *conceptually* adequate synonym.

- 24 This brings us to two further steps taken in my survey: first, an outline of the responses I received from native English-speaking colleagues whom I consulted,⁷ and second, a focus on a seemingly trivial graphic element – the hyphen – namely the nexus that connects “subject” and “matter.”

- 25 Let’s begin with the first point: I involved six American colleagues, who can be categorized into three groups: Dewey experts, pragmatists, and aestheticians. Their responses were varied and can also be organized into types. Some argue for the lack of any technical import in Dewey’s usage of the term subject-matter, which, then, would result in plain English, and which may be hence equated with “theme,” “topic,” “content,” “object” or even “point” of anything, something which may be defined as being connoted by a certain “aboutness.” Other respondents argue that in subject-matter, “matter” means things of importance, things that matter and hence that subject-matter is whatever comes to be noticed by a subject. Finally, in some responses, the specifically technical and philosophical import of the term in question was acknowledged and thematized. I will focus particularly on the latter type of response.

- 26 The aim of this paper is not to provide a detailed account on Dewey's philosophy. Yet, an unavoidable aspect that should be taken into consideration if one wishes to understand the latter, and if, of course, one wishes to understand how actually relevant subject-matter is within it, is what is referred to as *continuism*. To sum up this complex feature in a nutshell: nothing happens *in vacuo*, *ex abrupto* or *ex nihilo*, but life unfolds relationally, qualitatively, historically, temporally, processually, and contextually or situatedly. Namely, within a field. It is therefore not surprising that, as I also at some point considered, some of the proposed translation options included precisely "situation" [in Italian: *situazione*] and "field" [*campo*] in which a certain relevance, prominence, pertinence, and significance is at stake. However, I argue that although they are, among the various options that have emerged, the ones that overlap to a greater extent with subject-matter, they cannot be used as its synonyms, nor as a suitable base for an Italian translation, since they are thematized by Dewey in a somewhat "self-sufficient" manner.
- 27 Concerning the term "situation," one could take, for example, the following passage from the 1930 essay "Qualitative Thought," in which, while elaborating on his distinctions, Dewey says:
- What is intended may be indicated by drawing a distinction between something called a "situation" and something termed an "object." By the term situation in this connection is signified the fact that the subject-matter ultimately referred to in existential propositions is a complex existence that is held together in spite of its internal complexity by the fact that it is dominated and characterized throughout by a single quality. By "object" is meant some element in the complex whole that is defined in abstraction from the whole of which it is a distinction. The special point made is that the selective determination and relation of objects in thought is controlled by reference to a situation – to that which is constituted by a pervasive and internally integrating quality, so that failure to acknowledge the situation leaves, in the end, the logical force of objects and their relations inexplicable. (Dewey 1930/1984: 246)
- 28 "Situation" clearly embodies a principle of selection, control and relevance of and in experience. This point is also made in *Art as Experience*, as exemplified for instance also by one of the passages quoted in the conclusion to the previous section, and which I now retrieve, where Dewey refers to the operation of "suction of the qualitative material" in the process of transforming the subject-matter into the substance of the work of art. In that process perceiving is carried out toward the direction of expressing: a process which, from a situation, moves toward an (inferred) object. Hence, even though they can be considered as equally constitutive elements of the process through which operatively and tacitly efficacious experiential elements are intensified, possibly thematized, and made explicit, "situation" and "subject-matter" cannot be fully equated.
- 29 Concerning the other term, which has been indicated as a "better fit" as far as a theoretical-linguistic point of view is concerned, a similar argument can be put together.
- 30 The term "field" is frequently used in Dewey's *corpus* (see for instance Dewey 1925/1984: 52-3), although it never really reaches the same degree of technicalization that "situation" and "subject-matter" have.
- 31 It is also true that Dewey's conception of experiential dynamics could or perhaps should be termed "energetic." As the title of one of the chapters of *Art as Experience*

suggests, the dynamics underlying *an* experience (i.e. an aesthetic one) are indeed understood in terms of “The Organization of Energies.”

- 32 It is noteworthy then to point out that Dewey describes emotion – a key notion to him – not only as a
- [...] moving and cementing force [which] selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar. It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience. (Dewey 1934/1989: 49)
- 33 But also, in the framework of the development of an expressive act, as something that selectively operates as a magnet, which is nothing but an energy field that
- [draws] to itself appropriate material: appropriate because it has an experienced emotional affinity for the state of mind already moving. Selection and organization of material are at once a function and a test of the quality of the emotion experienced. In seeing a drama, beholding a picture, or reading a novel, we may feel that the parts do not hang together. Either the maker had no experience that was emotionally toned, or, although having at the outset a felt emotion, it was not sustained, and a succession of unrelated emotions dictated the work. In the latter case, attention wavered and shifted, and an assemblage of incongruous parts ensued. The sensitive observer or reader is aware of junctions and seams, of holes arbitrarily filled in. (*Ibid.*: 75)
- 34 Furthermore, it should be noted that Arnold Berleant, in his 1970 volume *The Aesthetic Field: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, not only highlighted the radical affinities between a phenomenological and a pragmatist perspective, but also thematically fine-tuned some of the conceptual aspects that in Dewey mainly played an “operative” and not fully “thematic” role, since they were finely integrated into the text as such. Interestingly enough, it is precisely the notion of “field” which undergoes such “fine-tuning” procedure.
- 35 This set of indicators has thus made me rule out the usage of “field” as a possible equivalent of “subject-matter,” since – despite closely “bordering” each other – field already has, as a matter of fact, its own well-defined identity.
- 36 As stated above both “situation” and “field” have to do with a certain relevance, prominence, pertinence, and significance. The passages that have been quoted here also indicate a selective and controlling aspect and, not least, a processuality that moves from a *fungierend* – as German phenomenologists would nicely put it – implicit and dense operativity toward a level of organization, emergence and, possibly, of explicit thematization. In this sense, one might discern in all of this that “double-barreled” character that Dewey ascribes on the one hand to experience and on the other hand also to the inquiry field (for want of a better term). In the case of experience, he understands it as both lived experience and structured, organized experience. In the case of the inquiry field, he understands it both as a field *for* inquiry – to be managed, organized, explored, at least potentially – and as a field *of* inquiry – a more structured, explicit, delimited, yet still to be investigated one.
- 37 And this point brings us back to the earlier etymological indication regarding subject-matter, in which both aspects were referred to, namely that involving a certain “indeterminacy” (Aristotelian root) and that involving greater “determinacy” (legal root). This would seem to suggest that “subject-matter” has itself a double-barreled nature, and that as such it requires a translation – both in a linguistic and conceptual sense – that accounts for this complexity but is also sufficiently flexible.

- 38 The following passages, in particular, challenge the idea that single term consistency should be pursued in the translation of subject-matter:

[1:] The actuality of our perception thus lies in its activity, in the movements which prolong it. Take this passage seriously and literally, and you have the precise view of perception here contended for. It is not a choice accomplished all at once, but is a process of choosing. The possible responses involved are not merely postponed, but are operative in the quality of present sensori-motor responses. The perceived subject-matter is not simply a manifestation of conditions antecedent to the organic responses, but is their transformation in the direction of further action. (Dewey 1912/1979: 24)

[2:] Let a man be as persuaded as you please that the relation between psychology and philosophy is lacking in any peculiar intimacy, and yet let him believe that psychology has for its subject-matter a field antithetical to that of the physical sciences, and his problems are henceforth the problems of adjusting the two opposed subject-matters; the problems of how one such field can know or be truly known by another; of the bearing of the principles of substantiality and causality within and between the two fields. (Dewey 1913/1979: 48)

- 39 In this latter passage from an essay on the topic of “Psychological Doctrine and Philosophical Teaching” subject-matter does in fact lean towards a more “plainly linguistic” acceptance, but it is not just that.
- 40 Conceptually close to this acceptance of subject-matter, I suggest translating the latter here as “*materia trattata*,” or “addressed matter.” While not suitable for total adoption, such a translation choice would emphasize the specific thematic and thematized import of subject-matter. After all, Dewey is writing about teaching, an activity which, like science, philosophy or research at large, does require a degree of thematization. Yet, according to the pragmatist golden rule, any thematization or conceptualization still finds its root and testbed in concrete experience. A “thematized subject-matter,” or “addressed matter,” is then more than just a mere “topic of discussion,” but it actually designates a highly structured articulation which deals with or asserts “implicit” and lived experience explicitly.
- 41 In the former passage, from “Perception and Organic Action,” in which Dewey deals widely and critically with Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, and particularly with its first chapter titled “Of the Selection of Images for Conscious Presentation. What Our Body Means and Does,” the subject-matter is interestingly attached to perceptual activity, just like, in *Art as Experience*, it is specified in terms of an “antecedent subject-matter.” Here, (perceived) subject-matter seems to stand for an ongoing, enduring, operative presence and also a directional force which finds its expression, or presentification, not via thematization, but into and through a choosing, acting, or transforming, just like artists do when they organize experienced matter into an “aesthetic” one, or into an artwork, as in Dewey’s example in *Art as Experience*. This also applies to anyone whenever they organize experienced matter into an experience. What is at stake is an *inherent*^s force that is expressed throughout and within a relationship between “subject” and “matter.”
- 42 And, again, even though unsuitable for total adoption, this other characterization of subject-matter could be conceptually rendered by translating it with “*materia inerente*,” “*materia d’inerenza di*” that is, respectively, “inherent matter,” “a matter to which something inheres,” emphasizing in this sense both the passive and active form of the verb “inhering.” In this case, the translation emphasizes its more specifically

philosophical import, bringing to the fore the radically continuistic acceptance – in the sense described above – on which the whole Deweyan proposal is based.

- 43 And this brings us to another indication that Dewey puts a lot of philosophical weight on “subject-matter”: his use of the hyphenation. Normally, current English speakers write “subject matter,” that is, as two words without the hyphen. Needless to say, they are writing about a century after Dewey, and any argument built on this fact would be anachronistic and a non-sequitur. Moreover, the *Oxford English Dictionary*⁹ shows the occasional use of the hyphen during and leading up to Dewey’s time. Yet, putting weight on such a miniscule “trait,” is more than just a rhetorical strategy, since the hyphen could also be understood as the graphic element designating Dewey’s approach to philosophy. Even if it was not unseen in his time, he could have chosen not to use it, for instance. The hyphen in this word, at any rate, fits comfortably within Dewey’s attempt to overcome *even graphically* the traditional philosophical dualisms between subject and object, form and matter, activity and passivity, mind and world, inner and outer, *experience and nature*.
- 44 Interestingly enough, in the text where – perhaps more radically than any other one – Dewey presents his anti-dualistic thought in different respects and in different areas of philosophy (i.e. a moral, epistemological, aesthetic one, etc.), namely *Experience and Nature*, the locution “subject-matter” and its hyphen recur quite often (on at least 80 pages out of about 300, more than 100 times). In this case, unlike what we have seen in *Art as Experience*, the locution is put at work without any thematic-technical explanation. The abundance of its occurrences reveals nevertheless its strategic function in expressing some basic moves of Dewey’s overall theory, precisely in relation to the question of experience as explored in the whole volume.¹⁰
- 45 Experience, as already mentioned above, is double-barreled, that is, it has an intrinsic duplicity which, however, does not amount to dualism, but rather to an entanglement of “what” and “how.” All things considered, it is precisely the subject-matter of experience that is called upon to manage this entanglement, because the subject-matter is itself a “what” according to a “certain mode,” namely, an *inherent matter*. And by virtue of the mode in which it occurs, it turns out to be inherent with respect to potentially thematic contents that can be made explicit and thus become *addressed matter*. This can be seen in a number of instances where this locution occurs and which I will quote below. These passages allow, also, to see that subject-matter expresses that same layer of experience which in phenomenological terms corresponds to the notion of *Lebenswelt*. Subject-matter and the latter, in fact, equally have to do with that operative texture of aspects from which and in which also scientific-philosophical knowledge respectively begins and is rooted. Namely, that texture which scientific-philosophical knowledge seeks to address, seeks to make explicit, according to the forms and syntaxes of scientific-philosophical thought. As a result, subject-matter is transformed into a meaning that can also be ideally defined, that is to say, defined with respect to an ideal of science-philosophy, and to an ideal scientific-philosophical method.
- 46 In conclusion, subject-matter is that layer of potential meaningfulness that cannot be reduced to a cognitive meaning. It rather nourishes and supports the latter. While cognitive meaning is expressed in the forms of *judgment*, subject-matter is inherent in the side of *experientiality* as such. Husserl’s typical dichotomy between experience and judgment can be fruitfully put at play here. The same contrast can also be described in

terms of the relationship between an “ante-predicative” or “pre-categorical” and a “predicative-judgmental” or “categorical.” In this sense, pragmatism and phenomenology can both be seen attempting to retrace the sensible roots of experiencing between thematization (i.e. explicitness, even to the point of conceptual technicalization) and the inherent operativity (i.e. practical, *fungierend* implicitness) of a (scientific, artistic, everyday...) complex and vital field.

4. A Programmatic and Experimental Sampling: Subject-Matter as *Lebenswelt*

47 The passages from *Experience and Nature* that have been experimentally sampled and are now going to be listed below serve precisely to show these programmatic aspects. The following is hence a path that, from my stance, namely from the stance of someone attempting to establish a connection between pragmatism and phenomenology starting from the former, seems to point to something that either as “inherent matter” or as a possibly “addressed matter,” eventually resembles the crucial notion of *Lebenswelt*, namely that qualitative, immediate and also historically and socially imbued living and lived world from which everything emerges and to which everything belongs and refers.

48 In this first passage from the preface, Dewey highlights the continuism between subject-matter as inherent matter as such and as potential addressed matter, by emphasizing the temporal and transformational dimension already mentioned in the passages above from *Art as Experience*, which bring him, interestingly enough, to use subject-matter in the plural, making its temporal, transformational and hence dynamic import more perspicuous.

The constant task of such thought is to establish working connections between old and new subject-matters. We cannot lay hold of the new, we cannot even keep it before our minds, much less understand it, save by the use of ideas and knowledge we already possess. But just because the new is new it is not a mere repetition of something already had and mastered. The old takes on new color and meaning in being employed to grasp and interpret the new. (Dewey 1925-1929/1981: 3)

49 The passage below comes from a *locus* in the book in which Dewey leans more toward the “scientific” side of the elaboration of the experience-nature hendiadys, and in which science is used as an example. Yet, this happens, according to Dewey, only insofar as theory, in its being thematic and thematizing, remains attached to experience in its operative and *fungierend* dimension,¹¹ that is, in its “start[ing] from and terminat[ing] in directly experienced subject-matter” (Dewey 1925-1929/1981: 11), which is the background from which and in which everyday life (“the man in the street”) and science (“the scientific man”) equally move, and to which, in particular the latter, must indeed always return.

Theory may intervene in a long course of reasoning, many portions of which are remote from what is directly experienced. But the vine of pendant theory is attached at both ends to the pillars of observed subject-matter. And this experienced material is the same for the scientific man and the man in the street. The latter cannot follow the intervening reasoning without special preparation. But stars, rocks, trees, and creeping things are the same material of experience for both. (*Ibid.*)

- 50 The radical *caveat* concerning the continuity between subject-matter as inherent matter and as *possible* addressed matter put forth by Dewey is quite strong:

As has been suggested, [mental and psychical objects] are not original, isolated and self-sufficient. They represent the discriminated analysis of the process of experiencing from subject-matter experienced. Although breathing is in fact a function that includes both air and the operations of the lungs, we may detach the latter for study, even though we cannot separate it in fact. So while we always know, love, act for and against *things*, instead of experiencing ideas, emotions and mental intents, the attitudes themselves may be made a special object of attention, and thus come to form a distinctive subject-matter of reflective, although not of primary, experience.

We primarily observe things, not observations. But the *act* of observation may be inquired into and form a subject of study and become thereby a refined object; so may the acts of thinking, desire, purposing, the state of affection, reverie, etc. Now just as long as these attitudes are not distinguished and abstracted, they are incorporated into subject-matter. It is a notorious fact that the one who hates finds the one hated an obnoxious and despicable character; to the lover his adored one is full of intrinsically delightful and wonderful qualities. (*Ibid.*: 21)

- 51 Here a passage in which Dewey also insists on the qualitiveness and immediacy or, as he will maintain in the following one, “primacy” of the subject-matter of actual (still unanalyzed) experience:

Genuine empirical method sets out from the actual subject-matter of primary experience, recognizes that reflection discriminates a new factor in it, the *act* of seeing, makes an object of that, and then uses that new object, the organic response to light, to regulate, when needed, further experiences of the subject-matter already contained in primary experience. (*Ibid.*: 25)

- 52 And a scientific-philosophical method that is “genuinely empirical,” or experiential, i.e., that recognizes the primacy of experience *qua* experience in its ordinary, “ante-predicative” or “pre-categorical” import, also recognizes its “ultimacy,” namely its force as inherent matter, even when it is addressed in ways that tend instead to be “predicative-judgmental” and “categorical.” It seems possible to retrieve here pragmatism’s aforementioned golden rule (and phenomenology’s too, as a matter of fact, with its *Zu den Sachen Selbst!* maxim), namely, that every conceptualization, or thematization, must find its root and its testbed in lived, concrete, operative experience. This rule is illustrated by Dewey in a threefold way:

Reference to the primacy and ultimacy of the material of ordinary experience protects us, in the first place, from creating artificial problems which deflect the energy and attention of philosophers from the real problems that arise out of actual subject-matter. In the second place, it provides a check or test for the conclusions of philosophic inquiry; it is a constant reminder that we must replace them, as secondary reflective products, in the experience out of which they arose, so that they may be confirmed or modified by the new order and clarity they introduce into it, and the new significantly experienced objects for which they furnish a method. In the third place, in seeing how they thus function in further experiences, the philosophical results themselves acquire empirical value; they are what they contribute to the common experience of man, instead of being curiosities to be deposited, with appropriate labels, in a metaphysical museum. (*Ibid.*: 26)

- 53 One of the risks that Dewey warns about here, if one does not follow this methodological “mantra,” is that of intellectualism, by which it

[...] is meant the theory that all experiencing is a mode of knowing, and that all subject-matter, all nature, is, in principle, to be reduced and transformed till it is

defined in terms identical with the characteristics presented by refined objects of science as such. The assumption of “intellectualism” goes contrary to the facts of what is primarily experienced. For things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things *had* before they are things cognized. (*Ibid.*: 28)

- 54 That is to say, the risk of reducing experience’s living and lived character into a merely cognized one, and thus the risk of denying its qualitative primacy:

The isolation of traits characteristic of objects known, and then defined as the sole ultimate realities, accounts for the denial to nature of the characters which make things lovable and contemptible, beautiful and ugly, adorable and awful. (*Ibid.*)

- 55 While

[...] it is literally impossible to exclude that context of non-cognitive but experienced subject-matter which gives what is *known* its import. (*Ibid.*: 29)

- 56 Last but not least, at least not in importance, but according to a progressive movement toward the elaboration of the 1934 explicitly aesthetic book, Dewey resorts to the example of art. This latter, understood as another mode through which experience is dealt with, turns out to be more effectively able to preserve the subject-matter in its experiential *inherence*, while still *addressing* it somehow, that is, able to overcome those dualisms that instead still afflict certain ways of articulating theory.

Experience in the form of art, when reflected upon, we conclude by saying, solves more problems which have troubled philosophers and resolves more hard and fast dualisms than any other theme of thought. As the previous discussion has indicated, it demonstrates the intersection in nature of individual and generic; of chance and law, transforming one into opportunity and the other into liberation; of instrumental and final. More evidently still, it demonstrates the gratuitous falsity of notions that divide overt and executive activity from thought and feeling and thus separate mind and matter. (*Ibid.*: 293)

- 57 So, in these pages it is possible to see already the outline of what will, in fact, be the thread running through *Art as Experience* as a whole. What is described just above does indeed take place because the artistic process “remains,” or “dwells,” in the field of subject-matter without denying its “freedom” and “activity” but by articulating it within the continuity of its *primacy* and *ultimacy*, namely, in its capacity as *sustainer* of consciousness.

In creative production, the external and physical world is more than a mere means or external condition of perceptions, ideas and emotions; it is subject-matter and sustainer of conscious activity; and thereby exhibits, so that he who runs may read, the fact that consciousness is not a separate realm of being, but is the manifest quality of existence when nature is most free and most active. (*Ibid.*: 294)

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NOTES

1. See Iannilli 2024.
2. But see Matteucci 2024, which partly focuses on the logical import of subject-matter in Dewey.
3. Not to mention also the fact that in the 1938 *Logic*, the term subject-matter occurs quite often (about 70 occurrences), proving, once again, its pervasiveness and weight in Dewey’s *corpus*. A further elaboration of this point is to be postponed to another occasion, though. My focus here will be more specifically on the suggestions provided by the minute linguistic and conceptual distinctions Dewey carries out in *Art as Experience* and how they shed (or hopefully can shed) light on other areas of Dewey’s thought.
4. Probably paraphrasing and not directly quoting his *The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress* (1905-1906/2016) of which Dewey reviewed the first two volumes exactly in 1906.
5. The reader should note that the aim of this final comparison is not to provide a historically detailed reconstruction of the relationship between pragmatism and phenomenology. I am simply interested in comparing concepts that have a somewhat similar meaning, and as such may provide the ground for a further exploration. None of the historical aspects involved will be developed here. I refer the reader to recent studies which have gone in this direction, providing extensive analyses of the same relationship: see at least Buongiorno & Iannilli 2024; Bell & Manca 2022; Renn, Sebald & Weyand 2012.
6. For a detailed analysis of the side of “form,” and the distinctions made by Dewey in this regard in the chapter at issue, see Iannilli (2020: 73-108). We also refer to the same book for an exam of the relationship between substance and form in terms of a reconsideration of the relationship between function and form in the framework of designed experience.
7. Without any statistical-quantitative claims, however, but with the sole purpose of gathering qualitative insights from native-speaking philosophers.
8. The meaning of the term “inherent” has a certain degree of complexity *per se*. On the one hand, it is close to the semantic sphere of “adherens” and as such it pertains to a dimension involving a sticking, a clinging, an “attachment,” a close proximity, or even juxtaposition, as shown by the etymological reconstruction of the term “Inherent: 1570s, from Latin *inhaerentem* (nominative *inhaerens*), present participle of *inhaerere* ‘to be closely connected with, be inherent,’ literally ‘to adhere to, cling to’, from *in-* ‘in’ (from PIE root *en ‘in’) + *haerere* ‘to adhere, stick’” (Online Etymological Dictionary, accessed January 5, 2024). But on the other hand, it does not only denote adjacency because it implies an intimate relationship between the parts that are related to each other. And that is why it takes on the current meaning of deep-seated, deep-rooted, ingrained, which express the inextricable extent of density and pervasiveness which characterizes precisely the inherence of matter as subject-matter.
9. Online: Oxford English Dictionary, accessed April 4, 2024.

10. I am particularly grateful to Giovanni Matteucci for his generosity in discussing some of the excerpts from *Experience and Nature*.

11. Also in the sense put forward by phenomenologist Eugen Fink in his 1957 essay “Operative Begriffe in Husserls Phänomenologie.”

ABSTRACTS

The persistent occurrence of a locution that turns out to be far from trivially used, and the translation hurdles related to it are the core elements of this contribution. The term in question is *subject-matter*, which is used by John Dewey in many of his writings and of which he provides an explicit conceptualization in *Art as Experience*. Focusing on this term and its hyphenation allows to emphasize and shed new light on important aspects of Dewey’s thought, in that: it is increasingly technicalized in Dewey’s writings; it holds “antecedence” or “primacy”; in its double-barreled employment it keeps together the twofold meaning of “inherent matter” and “addressed matter”; and finally it epitomizes a number of traits shared by the notion of *Lebenswelt*, hence affording a programmatic and experimental comparison between the two.

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