Early Forms of Metaethical Constructivism in John Dewey's Pragmatism

Pierre-Luc Dostie Proulx

This paper demonstrates the innovative character of the approach to metaethics underlying John Dewey's pragmatism. Dewey's theory of evaluation is contrasted with one of the most dominant contemporary metaethical theses: *constructivism*. I show that the insistence placed by metaethical constructivists on the actor's practical point of view, on the rejection of the subjective preferences model, and on a specific form of ethical antirealism and naturalism echoes some of the most crucial claims made by Dewey. This argumentation leads to my main hypothesis: an analysis of Dewey's conception of evaluation allows us to highlight the groundbreaking character of its metaethical approach—an approach that will be characterized as fairly constructivist.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the innovative character of the metaethical thesis underlying John Dewey's pragmatism. More precisely, I will contrast his theory of value with one of the most dominant contemporary metaethical theses—what we now call *constructivism*. I will argue that the growing interest in metaethical constructivism, especially since the publication of John Rawls' *Political Liberalism*, must and should draw the attention of those interested in classical pragmatism. I will show that the insistence placed by metaethical constructivists on the actor's practical point of view, on the rejection of the *subjective preferences model*, and on a specific form of ethical antirealism and naturalism, echoes some of Dewey's most crucial claims. The significance of this connection between Dewey's work and constructivist thought is twofold: first, it unveils the groundbreaking character of the metaethical thesis that underlies Dewey's classical pragmatism; second, it participates in an academic trend toward refining the dialogue between pragmatism and analytic philosophy—a trend to which scholars such as Rosa Maria Calcaterra, Sami Pihlström, Elizabeth Anderson, and Cheryl Misak (just to name a few) have significantly contributed.

More precisely, this paper draws a parallel between metaethical constructivism and the notion of *evaluation*, a key concept of Dewey's pragmatism. A careful study of Dewey's writings—in particular *Theory of Valuation* (1939)—allows us to interpret Dewey's pragmatic theorization as a response to logical positivism, which had seized the American philosophical landscape in the early 20th century. Against such theories, Dewey offered a compelling empirical and experiential conception of value and evaluation.[1] Specifically, he regarded evaluation, in its most general sense, as a procedure in which the value of things is determined (Dewey LW, 15.104). It is precisely this complex activity that this paper captures by insisting on the metaethical background of Dewey's conception of evaluation. This line of argumentation leads ultimately to my main hypothesis: *an analysis of Dewey's conception of evaluation allows us to highlight the groundbreaking character of its metaethical approach—an approach that will be characterized as fairly constructivist*. This connection to metaethical constructivism will be used to give Dewey an appropriate historical place in relation to 20th century analytic philosophy.

This paper is structured as follows. In the first section, I present key aspects of contemporary metaethical constructivism as described by Sharon Street. In the second, I present Dewey's theory of value and discuss its most interesting features, arguing that Dewey's pragmatism advanced a *constructivist* conception of evaluation decades before its development into analytical philosophy.

2. Street and Metaethical (Humean) Constructivism

Before delving into Dewey's work, I first wish to clarify what is meant by "constructivism." Constructivism is a polysemic term.

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[1]Dewey says that "valuation-expressions" are "propositions subject to empirical test and verification or refutation" (Dewey LW, 13.201). References to Dewey's writings use the standard forms of citation. See the references section.

Kersten Reich distinguishes five specific variants of this notion (Reich 2009, 53–54). The present paper focuses on yet another version: what we now called *metaethical constructivism*. Metaethical constructivism has appeared only recently in the landscape of analytic philosophy, and its popularity has grown continuously since its introduction. In the last years, two important volumes have been published on the subject: Lenman (2012) and Bagnoli (2013). Of all the scholars interested in metaethical constructivism, Street has produced a particularly important body of work in recent years. In presenting my description of constructivism, I will focus on some of the main considerations of her already famous article, 'What is Constructivism?" (Street 2010).

Street's goal in "What is Constructivism?" is to show how constructivism (and especially Humean constructivism) can be regarded as a full-fledged metaethical theory. From the outset, she observes that constructivism is, by and large, characterized by its relationship to procedure; in her words, constructivism has a "procedural characterization." In this sense, constructivism is defined by the organic relationship between a procedure itself and the results obtained through the procedure.

In her article, Street does not hide her dissatisfaction with this strict characterization of constructivism, which she deems incomplete. Her opposition to this characterization derives from a simple but profound intuition: that what primarily characterizes constructivism is not its relationship to a procedure (although this relationship remains an important heuristic device), but to a *practical point of view*. Street employs this "practical standpoint characterization" to emphasize some of the most fundamental characteristics of constructivism. I will start by exposing two core properties of metaethical constructivism: the notion of a "practical point of view" and the rejection of subjectivist projectivism.

2.1. The Practical Point of View and the Rejection of Projectivism

The first question to be tackled when assessing the notion of metaethical constructivism is: what does Street mean by "practical point of view"? In a decisive excerpt from her 2010 article, Street affirms that "the practical point of view is the point of view occupied by any creature who takes at least some things in the world to be good or bad, better or worse, required or optional, worthy or worthless, and so on—*the standpoint of a being who judges*" (Street 2010, 364, my emphasis). Two conceptual elements need to be highlighted here. The first is the *crucial role bestowed on the actors*. In her definition, as well as elsewhere in her work, Street emphasizes the position of the *first person*: the practical point of view is indeed the "perspective" from which moral actors assess the world. The second element is the *organic relationship existing between the practical point of view and the notion of judgment*. To adopt a practical point of view is first and foremost to *issue a certain type of judgment on the world*.

These two elements are found—in a more explicit way—in James Lenman's definition of constructivism in the introduction to Lenman (2012). Lenman maintains that "what is meant by [the practical point of view] is simply the point of view characteristic of a *deliberating agent*, subject to all motivating states agents are subject to: desires, plans, intentions, *and, perhaps in particular where constructivists are concerned, normative and evaluative judgments*" (Lenman 2012, 3, my emphasis). In addition to affirming the idea of first-person judgment, Lenman completes Street's definition by specifying that *the judgments that constitute the practical point of view are "evaluative."* Further, he contends that constructivists take those judgments and make of them "the raw material for their constructive endeavours" (Lenman 2012, 3). Independent of any ontological conception of value, we can define the practical point of view as *the position from*

which actors make evaluative judgments on the different phenomena that surround them. Street terms this the "attitude of valuing" (Street 2010, 366). Thus conceived, constructivism is a theory that, in its broadest sense, insists on the centrality of first-person evaluative judgments.

It may still be unclear, however, how such a characterization creates a fundamental distinction between constructivism and other metaethical theories. Could we not say, for instance, that most realist theories likewise insist on evaluative judgments that isolate and recognize moral facts? As Carla Bagnoli (2011) notes, the question "what is judgment?" (and what part should rationality play in it) becomes central to any constructivist theory.

To eliminate some of these possible ambiguities, and to better understand the kind of constructivism Street wants to defend, one important point deserves to be raised. According to constructivism, evaluative judgments cannot be reduced to the sole act of *recognizing pre-existing value attributes* (as suggested by some realistic theories), nor to the act of *expressing an evaluative attitude* (as maintained by Ayer's expressivism). What appears to be common to constructivists—and especially to Humean constructivists, as I will show hereafter—is the conviction that evaluative judgment amounts to an *act of attribution*. Indeed, it is precisely the act of *attributing a value* which best defines the constructivist act itself. Following this line of reasoning, the core of an evaluative judgment lies, not in the *recognition* of an independent value, nor the *expression* of an attitude, but in the *constructive act of valuing*. This qualification—the emphasis on the actor's practical point of view (understood as an act of attribution)—can be taken as a founding pillar of all types of metaethical constructivism.

It is worth noting that metaethical constructivists also reject one of the main potential interpretations given to the act of attributing value: *subjectivist projectivism*. According to subjectivist projectivism—also known as the "subjective preferences model"—*values take shape as the actor "projects" his or her preferences onto the world*. Thus, an object devoid of utility and economic value can become central to an actor's life as soon as he or she attributes a certain significance to that object. According to this view, it is the role of an actor to *project* evaluative judgments onto the world. Yet projectivism has, from a constructivist standpoint, two serious weaknesses: the *nonrecognition of the existence of typically collective evaluations* and the *nonrecognition of the impact of past evaluations on future evaluations*. As François Côté-Vaillancourt notes in his defense of an "evaluative constructivism", value attribution is typically collective in nature, and collective evaluations play a central role in subsequent evaluations (Côté-Vaillancourt 2015). In order to avoid those snares, constructivists refuse to reduce the act of valuing to the simple projection of subjective preferences onto the world. Constructivism hereby seeks to account for intersubjective evaluations and for the internal connection between past and future evaluations.

Metaethical constructivism thus rejects the claim that we have to *individually construct each and every value*. On the contrary, the vast majority of our evaluations are socially inherited; they arise through our integration into a community which shares a common hermeneutic horizon. Constructivism argues that *our evaluations take place in a world that is already axiologically charged* (a charge that need not be ontological). This observation reinforces our intuition that our current evaluations constitute the raw material for tomorrow's evaluations. In this sense, "valuing" amounts to establishing criteria—either personal or collective—for the orientation of future evaluations. Hence the second pillar of metaethical constructivism: *the rejection of the subjective preferences model for a theory that accounts for collective evaluations and for a symbiotic relation between past and future evaluations.*

2.2. Two Types of Metaethical Constructivism

At this point, it may seem unclear how constructivism enables us to distinguish between authors like Jürgen Habermas and John Dewey. Indeed, those familiar with these philosophers could argue that they both support the idea of a practical point of view—conceived as a perspective from which moral actors venture evaluative judgments—and the rejection of subjectivist projectivism. So far, nothing in the proffered analysis seems to articulate a distinction between these two philosophers' theories. Does constructivism therefore constitute an all-encompassing metaethical theory within which most contemporary theories fit?

In what follows, I will maintain that, while Habermas and Dewey do indeed endorse metaethical constructivism, they do so from two different perspectives. In order to clarify the complexity of metaethical constructivism—and thereby differentiate Habermas from Dewey—let us look more closely at Street's understanding of "Kantian constructivism" and "Humean constructivism". The debate between these two forms of constructivism is well delineated in the literature. The major difference between them lies in *what is implied by the adoption of the practical point of view*. In a nutshell, Kantian constructivism relies on *the characteristics of the rational agent* (Bagnoli 2011, §2), while Humean constructivism does not. Bagnoli's definition says the following of Kantian constructivism:

> [According to Kantian Constructivism] reasons for being moral do not spring from our interests or desires; instead, they are rooted in our nature as rational agents. Insofar as they are requirements of practical reason, moral obligations are universally and necessarily binding for all rational beings. Because of its claim to universality, Kantian Constructivism is the most ambitious form of constructivism. (Bagnoli 2011, §2)

This focus on the features of rationality aims to ground constructivism in something that is not subjected to contingencies (hence an opening to universality). According Kantian constructivism, the adoption of the practical point of view may *reveal certain transcendentally unavoidable moral obligations*.

Contemporary philosophy offers several interesting variants on Kantian constructivism. Christine Korsgaard, for instance, maintains that the adoption of the practical point of view transcendentally leads us to a "value of humanity," which, in turn, engages us normatively (Korsgaard 1996). For T. M. Scanlon, constructivism is reduced to a defined set of judgments on what is good and bad. As Thomas Nagel puts it in his review of *What We Owe to Each Other* (1999): "[Scanlon] thinks the search for conditions of mutual justification will itself lead us to the right standards, by combining diverse reasons in an appropriate framework for the identification of acceptable principles" (Nagel 1999, 4) According to Scanlon, the validity of moral judgments originates from an informed and voluntary "contractual situation" (Scanlon 1999); "the idea is that if our aim is to be able to justify our conduct to others, we will want it to conform to principles that none of them could reasonably reject" (Nagel 1999, 5). In what follows, however, I will set this view aside to focus on Karl Otto Apel's and Habermas' version of Kantian constructivism.

As we may ascertain from Street's definitions, *discourse ethics represents a strong version of Kantian constructivism*. First of all, this theory proposes a "moral point of view" within which moral actors make evaluative judgments. Since "valid" judgments are those that receive the support of all participants in practical discussion, discourse ethics unequivocally rejects the model of subjective preferences. By rejecting methodological monologism, discourse ethics also insists on *collective evaluations*. What should concern us is here the fact that as soon as an actor adopts the moral point of view—as soon as he engages in argumentation—*he is compelled to accept the inescapable presuppositions of argumentation*. Those presuppositions have—this is

the core of discourse ethics—a moral character. In Apel's and Habermas' theories, the adoption of the practical point of view *reveals certain* transcendentally unavoidable *moral obligations*. As Bagnoli underlines, this type of constructivism leads us towards "moral obligations" of a universal nature. Discourse ethics thus constitutes a touchstone of Kantian constructivism.

On the other hand, this idea of *unavoidable moral obligations* is disputed vigorously by Humean constructivists. According to proponents of this version of constructivism, value derives exclusively from the practical point of view, "no strings attached." The truth of an evaluation "consists in its being entailed from the evaluative standpoint of particular individuals without any explicit reference to rationality" (Bagnoli 2011, §4). In this version of constructivism, evaluative judgments do not commit us to anything specific. As Street herself notes, Humean constructivism thus offers more relativistic and contingent notions of value and validity than Kantian constructivism does. For the former, rational deliberation does not commit us to any moral content. A Humean constructivist, unlike a Kantian constructivist, could maintain that a coherent Caligula is possible (Street 2010, 371).

In the next section, I demonstrate how certain aspects of Humean constructivism are connected to John Dewey's philosophy. Before drawing this parallel, however, I will demonstrate two additional characteristics of Humean constructivism: the specific form of antirealism that it defends, and its rejection of naturalist reductions.

2.3. Ethical Antirealism and the Rejection of Naturalist Reductions

In spite of the set of characteristics outlined above, doubts may persist as to what fundamentally distinguishes Humean constructivism from other metaethical theories. In order to illustrate Street's contention that constructivism is a full-fledged metaeth-ical theory, we need to refine the distinction previously made among the tasks of *recognizing*, *expressing*, and *attributing* value. To this end, I will insist on another key characteristic of constructivist theory: *constructivism* (and more specifically here, Humean constructivism) *must be completed by some form of ethical antirealism*.

For Street, the central question behind ethical realism is *whether there are entities that may have a value regardless of our practical point of view*. Thus, the question of ethical realism concerns the possibility—or impossibility—of axiologically or normatively loaded entities. In other words, *can values exist without actors*? Humean constructivists answer this question in the negative. For them, the value or validity of an entity *can only be the result of a construction*: value is—and can only be—the result of an evaluative judgment (i.e., an attributive act). Street contends that, for Humean constructivists, "the truth of a normative claim consists in that claim's being entailed from within the practical point of view" (Street 2010, 367). She adds that the slogan of Humean constructivism is: "no normative truth independent of the practical point of view" (Street 2010, 371).[2]

In addition to this mind-dependent conception of antirealism, Street maintains that Humean constructivism rejects any form of *naturalist reduction*. Such reductionism was notably championed by Peter Railton at the end of the 20th century (see Railton 1986 and Railton 2003). Railton is a naturalist, meaning that he sees ethics as nothing more than an extension of the natural world; he admits no ontological break between the field of science and that of normativity. Street notably emphasizes on the "reductionist" aspect of Railton's naturalism. One of Railton's main strategies consists of reforming the definitions of our moral conceptions

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[2]Although I will abide by Street's definition of ethical realism in this paper, I admit that this is a debated point in the literature. Street defines ethical realism through a certain *mind-dependence relation*, but this outline is challenged by important authors. Scanlon (2014) stands as a noteworthy instance. Nevertheless, Street's ontological definition is sufficient for our purposes here.

in order to expose their "reduced" forms: definitions which *comply with the objective world and explain certain aspects of our experience*. Significantly, this approach entails that all moral attributes are, at least potentially, reducible to natural attributes. In order to alleviate moral conflicts, any argument in a moral discussion should take the shape of a natural fact. From this perspective, the statement "this action is morally right" should and must be reducible to the statement "this action contributes to the happiness of conscious beings."

In order to better understand the aim of such reductions, Street draws a parallel with the game of baseball, taking the affirmative judgment "this player is safe"—meaning that he has reached the base before the ball—as her discussion point. Two interpretations of this statement are possible. On the one hand, this affirmation may be the result of an impartial umpire's judging that the player is safe, based on his thorough knowledge of the game. In this case, baseball rules can be reduced to empirical statements (in the sense that it is possible to find or conceive of an umpire who would apply such rules). On the other hand, the proclamation of safety may have been produced through a combination of baseball's normative rules with non-normative facts (the proceedings of the game itself), together entailing the affirmation "the player is safe." In this second case, the judgment derives from the intersection of the game's rules with certain non-normative facts.

Street argues that, while Railton defends the first interpretation, metaethical constructivism supports the second. In the first case, the two aspects of the baseball judgment (the game's rules and its proceedings) can be demonstrated by empirical statements; conversely, Street maintains that *normative statements cannot be entirely explained through observational language*. According to her, no empirical observation enables us to conclude that the player reaching the base before the ball *entails that the player is safe*. The reduction operated by Railton makes the practical point of view superfluous. According to Street, such a position does not enable us to properly explain what a rule-based judgment is.

Through the discussion in this section, we have identified four main features of metaethical constructivism (and specifically Humean constructivism): 1) the centrality of the actors' evaluative judgments (understood as attributive acts); 2) the rejection of subjectivist projectivism over the collective and intersubjective character of evaluations (which will serve as criteria for future evaluations); 3) a specific form of mind-dependent ethical antirealism; and 4) the rejection of naturalist reductions.

In what follows, I will demonstrate that John Dewey's theory of evaluation can be considered an early form of Humean constructivism. Specifically, I will endeavor to show that Dewey's commitments prefigure Street's characterization of the practical point of view and ethical antirealism, without falling under the scope of projectivism. In other words, I will demonstrate that it is possible to qualify John Dewey's pragmatic work as a precursor of Humean metaethical constructivism.

3. Early Form of Metaethical Constructivism in Dewey's Work

In order to uncover the constructivist trends in John Dewey's pragmatism, I will start by briefly describing his theory of value through his concept of *experience*. First, note that Dewey struggled all his life with the question of *value.* Even though he never wrote a full book on the subject, Dewey tried to make sense of value and evaluation from his early writings (in the early 1890s) to the very end of his academic career (at the end of 1940s). Here's a non-exhaustive list of his works on value:

1913: "The Problem of Value" in *Journal of Philosophy*
1915: "The Logic of Judgments of Practice" in *Journal of Philosophy*

1916: "Educational Values" in *Democracy and Education*

1918: "The Object of Valuation" in *Journal of Philosophy*

1922: "Valuation and Experimental Knowledge" in *The Philosophical Review*

1925: "Value, Objective Reference and Criticism" in *The Philosophical Review*

1929: "Existence, Value and Criticism" in *Experience and Nature*

1938: "Judgments of Practice: Evaluation" in *Logic*

1939: "Theory of Valuation" in *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*

1943a (*June*): "Valuation Judgments and Immediate Quality" in *Journal of Philosophy*

1943b (*September*): "Further as to Valuation as Judgment" in *Journal of Philosophy*

1944 (*August*): "Some Question About Value" in *Journal of Philosophy*

1949: "The Field of Value" in *Value: a Cooperative Inquiry*

Before answering the central question of this paper ("how, exactly, does Dewey's conception of value prefigures Street's definition of metaethical constructivism"?), I wish to present a quick overview of John Dewey's theory of value. One of the most important features of this theory is its organization into two different but interconnected stages. First, there is an initial valuation: a direct appreciation or depreciation of things as they present themselves to us with a "minimum of incidental reflection" (Dewey LW, 1.15). In direct valuation, it is something like our *evaluative sensitivity* that is mobilized. This is the realm of desires and enjoyment (for instance, the fact that we may not appreciate the feeling of the seatbelt in a car). Here, we are at the level of what Dewey calls "primary experience" (Dewey LW, 1.17). But, as Dewey notices: "the fact that something is desired only raises the question of its desirability; it does not settle it" (Dewey LW, 4.206). This direct act of appreciation (valuation)

leads to a second—and more important—stage: *intellectual or reflective evaluation* (this is the realm of value judgments). Note that the "reflective" character of this second stage is understood as the appraisal of a valuation *under the aspect of its relationships with other things*. In short, reflective evaluation—or judgment—is defined by Dewey as the act of relating a direct valuation to any other relevant matters (for instance, putting our dislike of the car belt into consideration with safety). This is the level of "secondary or reflective experience" (Dewey LW, 1.16).

According to Dewey, the question of value judgment goes as follows: *is something I value in primary experience really worthy of value?* I can only answer this question by putting my direct valuation into relation with any other relevant considerations (reflective experience). The result will be an evaluation that will guide my future actions (and that can be corrected and improved upon with experience). It is precisely this act that I will analyze below to reveal its potential similarities with Street's version of Humean constructivism.

3.1. The Centrality and Nature of Value Judgments

Showing the centrality of judgments (and more precisely of value judgments) in Dewey's theory is straightforward. In one of his first systematic treatment of the question of value, a 1915 paper called "The Logic of Judgments of Practice" published in the *Journal of Philosophy*, Dewey develops what he calls "a theory about valuation-judgments," arguing that such judgments are a particular kind of practical judgments (judgments *aimed at guiding action*). Dewey retained this view on value judgments until the very end of his career, almost 30 years later. In many ways, his emphasis on the question of judgment reflects the claims of contemporary constructivism. Despite the 85-year lapse, the similarities between Dewey's and Street's statements are sometimes striking:

> The claim is that we have an understanding of [the attitude of valuing] even if we do not yet understand what value itself is. (Street 2010)

> No matter what value is or is taken to be, certain traits of evaluative judgments as judgments can be formulated. (Dewey 1925)

Like Street, Dewey aims to derive a theory of *evaluation* before giving a theory of *value*. Their shared stance is that ontological questions do not have priority in metaethical matters. As I will show in what follows, this distinction signifies that Dewey's analysis is, before anything else, oriented towards the *act* of evaluation (and not the *nature* of value as such). What, then, are "evaluations" for Dewey? As we just saw, Dewey contends that the primary function of evaluations is to guide *action*. In his important 1939 article "Theory of Valuation", Dewey asserts that evaluations state "a rule for *determination of an act to be performed*, its reference being to the future and not to something already accomplished or done" (Dewey LW, 13.209). It is precisely this link to the future and to human conduct that Dewey uses to oppose logical positivism's methodology. According to Dewey, the fact that evaluations constitute *anticipation of future action* shows that they have a "means to ends" form (Dewey LW, 13.211).

For Dewey, evaluations are subject to some form of scientific inquiry. As noted by S. Morris Eames, Dewey "maintained that his theory of evaluation is a 'special case' of his general method of inquiry" (Eames 2003, 41). All of Dewey's attention is set on the notion that evaluations can be tested. As early as 1915, Dewey asserts that "if something were done, then certain consequences would follow, *which would be liked or valued*" (Anderson 2005, §2). Dewey seems to be saying that we are—and need to be—constantly evaluating the result of our evaluations. Furthermore, it is precisely this disjunction between our personal evaluations and the evaluations of their practical upshots that opens a path for Dewey to talk about an "experimental" verification of value judgments: some kind of *a posteriori* evaluation that can confirm or lead us to a change in conduct.

Thus, the "scientific" or "experimental" character of evaluations in Dewey's lies in the fitness between *what our evaluations aimed at* and their practical upshots (hence the idea, in Dewey's, that the validity of value judgments can only be taken into account *a posteriori*). As Dewey asserts:

> There is always some observation of the *outcome attained* in comparison and contrast with that intended, such that the comparison throws light upon the actual fitness of the things employed as means. It thus makes possible a better judgment in the future as to their fitness and usefulness. On the basis of such observations certain modes of conduct are adjudged silly, imprudent, or unwise, and other modes of conduct sensible, prudent, or wise, *the discrimination being made upon the basis of the validity of the estimates reached about the relation of things as means to the end or consequence actually reached*. (Dewey LW, 13.211–212, my emphasis).

The appraisal of fitness between the aim and the outcome of an evaluation is a measure of that evaluation's validity. But the central question remains: for Dewey, is evaluation an act of recognition, expression, or attribution? If we are dealing with an act of value attribution, there is an important parallel to be drawn with Humean constructivism. As I observed in the introduction, Dewey maintains that his concept of value judgment aims at "determining the value-status of the thing or person in question" (Dewey LW, 15.104). But what does he mean by "determining"?

Answering this question reveals the first significant similarity between Dewey's theory and Humean metaethical constructivism. Dewey's account of the nature of value judgments is unambiguous: for Dewey, "to value" means "putting a value upon" something. In *Theory of Valuation*, Dewey explicitly states that reflective evaluation (or what he calls "appraising") consists in "assigning value to" something (Dewey LW, 13.195). Through reflective evaluation, we attribute value to the objects and phe-

nomena that surround us. For Dewey, evaluation is, first and foremost, an "activity" of attribution. Its aim is to "[bring] a value to existence" (Dewey MW, 11.4).

3.2. A Model of Subjective Preferences?

Next, let us consider whether Dewey's practical point of view resists reduction to a form of projectivism. If it does not, his theory cannot be adequately characterized as forerunning Humean metaethical constructivism, despite its focus on value judgment. Can Dewey's theory account for a) the fact that our world is axiologically charged (without, on the other hand, predicating any form of ontology) and b) the fact that value judgments are not simply subjective projections of our preferences onto the world, but are, collectively, criteria for future judgments? Below, I will argue that Dewey explicitly answers these questions in the final section of his paper "Theory of Valuation," a section entitled "Valuation and the Conditions of Social Theory."

   Dewey's fondness for a certain form of axiological inheritance is shown when he writes that: "upon the whole, in the past values have been determined by customs, which are then commended because they favor some special interest" (Dewey LW, 13.243). According to Dewey, one of the main defects of the evaluative theories of his time was that they underestimated the tie between value and culture: "when current theories are examined which, quite properly, relate valuation with desires and interests, *nothing is more striking than their neglect—so extensive as to be systematic—of the role of cultural conditions and institutions in the shaping of desires and ends and thereby of valuations*" (Dewey LW, 13.248, my emphasis). These comments lead Dewey to a consideration of the existence of typically *collective* evaluations. Discussing the possibility of studying the various value judgments that structure the world, the pragmatist author maintains that "what individuals *and groups* hold dear or prize and the grounds upon which they prize them are capable, in

principle, of ascertainment, no matter how great the *practical* difficulties in the way" (Dewey LW, 13.243, my emphasis). Note in particular, here, the explicit reference to *collective* evaluations, made by *groups* of people—and not only by individuals. In his paper, Dewey asserts that any theory of value should include a "theory of human relations"—what he also calls a "cultural anthropology"—in which a transformation of our evaluations can be observed under the influence of "their interaction with the cultural environment" (Dewey LW, 13.248).

   Dewey is clearly sensitive to the concept of evaluations elaborated collectively, although he does not fully develop the idea—for instance, he does not explain the difference in status between individual and collective evaluations in inquiries, nor the political function of some evaluations. However, it is within his "theory of human relations" that Dewey offers one of his most interesting claims:

> Human beings are continuously engaged in valuations. *The latter supply the primary material for operations of further valuations and for the general theory of valuation.* (Dewey LW, 13.243, my emphasis)

We can only elaborate and judge future evaluations in the light of our existing evaluations; these existing evaluations provide a strong standard against which we can inquire about value. Dewey affirms that "improved valuation must grow out of existing valuations, subjected to critical methods of investigation that bring them into systematic relations with one another" (Dewey LW, 13.245). This focus on cultural anthropology and the idea that today's evaluations serve as criteria for tomorrow's demonstrates amply that Dewey's theory cannot be reduced to the model of subjective preferences and shows, once again, the similarity between his theory and Humean metaethical constructivism. The quotes amassed in this section make it clear that, in Dewey's theory of value, it is current and past evaluations that comprise the raw materials for future judgments.

3.3. Dewey and Ethical Antirealism

The similarities between Dewey's value theory and metaethical constructivism become even more obvious when his view on ethical realism comes into play. In this section, I will show how Dewey's constructivist tendency is evidenced by his attachment to a certain form of ethical antirealism that echoes Street's descriptions.

  The first demonstration of Dewey ethical antirealism appears in his 1918 paper "The Object of Valuation," a clarification of certain aspects of his theses of 1915. This text introduces what Dewey considers to be the "exotic character" of his theory for the philosophers of his time. Dewey's explanation of this character warrants our attention:

> [My view does not have a good reception] for the prevailing view is that goods, ends, "values" *are all given, given in the sense of being completely there for knowledge, provided only we could get at them.* Disputes in ethical and social theory have concerned themselves for the most part only with the question of where and how the goods are given: whether in experience, feeling, sensation, or in thought, intuition, reason; whether in the subject or in the object; whether in nature or in some transcendental realm. The important fact (provided it be a fact) that serious inquiries into conduct, individual and collective, must be concerned with a hypothetical and experimental effort *to bring new goods into existence, an attempt made necessary by the slipping away of all given determinate goods*, fails to secure recognition. I console with a belief that while my own inexpertness in statement is largely responsible for my failure to make myself understood, some of the difficulty lies with the immensely difficult transformation in methods of thinking about all social matters which the theory implies. (Dewey MW, 11.9, my emphasis)

This radical rejection of the idea that all our values are *given* is ubiquitous in Dewey's work, which argues vigorously that individuals and communities must "bring new goods into existence" rather than merely recognizing a pre-existing value of objects and phenomena. Dewey strengthened this view in 1939, when he wrote that "the object which *should* be desired (valued), does not descend out of the *a priori* blue nor descend as an imperative from a moral Mount Sinai" (Dewey LW, 13.218). As Street suggests, value statuses are not entities independent from us; they do not exist as ontological attributes of an object. Dewey's late career work picks up the same theme; in 1944, he affirms that, "as a thing previously hard becomes soft when affected by heat, so, on this view, something previously indifferent takes on the quality of value when it is actively cared for in a way that protects or contributes to its continued existence" (Dewey LW, 15.103–104).

  Based on these similarities, we may venture the hypothesis that Dewey would have supported the idea that "the truth of a normative claim consists in that claim's being entailed from within the practical point of view" (a claim that I will further corroborate in what follows). Certainly, he would have agreed that there exists "no normative truth independent of the practical point of view."

3.4. Dewey's Non-Reductionist Naturalism

The final point I will analyze here is metaethical constructivism's rejection of naturalist reductions. This aspect of constructivism may seem antithetical to John Dewey's own position as a "naturalist" philosopher. The first question I wish to raise in this vein concerns the meaning given by pragmatists—and especially by Dewey—to the term "naturalism". To address this definitional issue, I refer to a recent paper by Misak, "Pragmatism and the Naturalist Project in Ethics and Politics: Lessons from Peirce, Lewis and Ramsey" (2016), and another entitled "Dewey on Naturalism, Realism and Science" written by Peter Godfrey-Smith (2002).

  According to Misak, the pragmatists' definition of naturalism tends to be more exhaustive than that definition supported by

philosophy of science. As she argues in her paper, pragmatism uses the term "naturalism" to focus attention on the fact that "we find ourselves immersed in the world and in an inherited view of that world, unable to step outside of our practices and system of belief so that we might figure out first principles" (Misak 2016, 4). From the standpoint of a theory of evaluation, if classical pragmatism maintains that the evaluative and ethical worlds are an "extension of the natural world," the role of this extension must be first and foremost to link human action—or the "spirit," as Dewey puts it—to the natural world. Godfrey-Smith fosters a similar definition when he writes that:

> Dewey's naturalism holds that philosophy should conduct its investigation of mind and knowledge (etc.) from within a framework provided by our best current scientific description of human beings and their relations to their environments. Philosophical work on these issues should also be informed by the details of continuing scientific work. (Godfrey-Smith 2002, 2)

In Dewey's view, human beings are thus "biological systems" inserted in, and connected to, a "common natural world." That connection is explained by biology and the other natural sciences—but it is the role played by the "human spirit" in Dewey's naturalism that should retain our attention. On this subject, Godfrey-Smith assures that "for Dewey, the role or function of mind is precisely to be a factor in the transformation and modification of the agent's environment . . . . A naturalistic theory of the role of mind in nature is partly a theory of a special set of dependence relationships between the mind and external objects" (Godfrey-Smith 2002, 4).

To understand why Dewey would have refused naturalist reductions, we need to understand *the function* of these reductions in Railton's theory. Crucially, for Railton, *the moral facts that make moral statements true are natural facts*. Railton's reductionism aims at *justifying* moral statements; naturalist reductions seek to explain and justify moral truth. It is fairly easy to see why Dewey

would oppose such reductionism. As I have argued elsewhere, Dewey's view on moral and evaluative justification was "open-ended" (Dostie Proulx 2012): where moral validity is concerned, Dewey refuses any kind of reductionism (and especially scientific or naturalistic reduction). Even though he never overtly argues against explaining moral attributes through natural attributes, Dewey's own methodology would have prohibited an exclusive—or reductionist—approach to such explanation. For instance, Dewey welcomes a "hermeneutics of the self" when moral validity needs to be justified.[3] His argument against logical positivism has the same "open-ended" structure. In his introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, Dewey argues that "the attempt to secure unity by defining the terms of all the sciences in terms of some, one science is doomed in advance to defeat. In the house which science might build there are many mansions" (Dewey LW, 13.276). It seems fair to say that this methodology, which is a hallmark of Dewey's thought, is in strong tension with Railton's views.

Even if Dewey's view on evaluation may strike us as fairly typical today, it was clearly innovative in the first half of the 20th century. The fact is that, notwithstanding G. E. Moore's intuitionism and the growing popularity of logical positivism, which promoted strict verificationist criteria for ethics, there was no prominent conception of evaluation in the American scholastic world at that time. The considerations put forward in this paper indicate that Dewey's theses echo the main pillars of contemporary metaethical constructivism. Already at the turn of the 20th century, Dewey's theory of evaluation contained the seeds of a metaethical position that would only be developed systematically decades later.

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[3]Dewey argues, alongside George Santayana, that "to esteem a thing good is to express certain affinities between that thing and the speaker; and if this is done with self-knowledge and with knowledge of the thing, so that the felt affinity is a real one, the judgment is invulnerable and cannot be asked to rescind itself" (Santayana 1980, 214).

The parallel sketched in this paper between contemporary metaethical constructivism and John Dewey's classical pragmatism is significant to the history of analytical philosophy for at least two reasons. First, I would argue that the potential of classical pragmatism remains insufficiently exploited in metaethics and requires more careful analysis. Second, the metaethical conception underpinning pragmatism reveals some groundbreaking claims in the development of analytical philosophy, especially when considered in the context of the metaethical landscape of the early 20th century. The theory of evaluation proposed by Dewey thus appears as an early form of a distinctly convincing metaethical thesis.

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