

Chapter 1

Introduction

A Pragmatist Approach to Human Nature

1. Looking for a Pragmatist Anthropology: Issues and Methods at Stake

Pragmatism is philosophy with the people in.¹ I would sum up this philosophical posture through the words used by Tim Ingold to distinguish anthropology from ethnography and ethnology, regarded as merely descriptive and strictly comparative enterprises (2008). Hence, Pragmatism is (one of) the best candidate(s) to develop a philosophical anthropology, although only a few scholars have attempted to take some steps along this path and none of the Classical Pragmatists fashioned an organic anthropological theory out of their rich yet scattered insights.

My aim in this book is to contribute to the development of a philosophical picture of human nature as a form of life that is contingent, yet also relatively stable and marked by some basic common features that are still open to change and reshaping because of their constitutive dependence on a natural and naturally sociocultural environment. In other words, I will develop a philosophical anthropology within a cultural naturalistic framework, by relying on a series of contributions mainly taken from John Dewey, but also from George Herbert Mead and William James.² Methodologically, I will recover the most significant contributions from their legacy in order to develop an organic—yet not exhaustive—view of humans as naturally cultural organisms embedded in an environment they contribute to changing from the inside. By making deliberate use

of these sources to create a new philosophical anthropology, I will bring the Pragmatists' arguments into relation to one another within a more coherent framework, radicalize them when needed, and compare them with other interesting positions in the current debate on the specificity of human sensibility, habitual behavior and the intertwining of experience and language. From the point of view of content, my main interest is to investigate some relatively stable features of human organic-cultural behaviors on which both rationality and normativity are based—a qualitative background that is dynamically reshaped by appropriating the results of more reflective practices. Of course, personhood (Margolis 2017), as well as autonomy and responsibility, is a crucial factor to define the characteristically human way of being and deserves to be considered an essential step for developing a “pragmatistic anthropology” (Quante 2018). Nonetheless, the distinctive contribution of the present book lies in the fact that it looks at human practices primarily as hinging on a shared human sensibility, as scaffolded by habits of conduct, thought, feeling, and belief, and as shaped through the thick and mongrel (in Margolis's sense) fabric of enlanguaged human experience. Certainly, human practices also involve giving and asking for reasons (Brandom 1994), but I am interested in inquiring into the background from which explicit reasons and established norms emerge and to which they return—describing a mixed, nonfoundational dynamic. Both James and Dewey—but probably even Peirce—were interested in bringing into focus the qualitative background of life in which both logic and norms are rooted (Dewey 2004; Dewey 1985a), because “Existentially speaking, a human individual is distinctive opacity of bias and preference conjoined with plasticity and permeability of needs and likings” (Dewey 1981, 186).

Consequently, I will focus on three main issues, with no pretense to exhaustiveness. The first issue—to be worked out in chapters 2 and 3—is a conception of sensibility broader than sensory perception that I propose we ground in organic life exposure to the environment and define as the affective capacity to discriminate between living conditions as favorable or adverse, in contrast to the standard ascription of feeling and qualitative experience to a merely subjective realm. In the chapter 2, my central aim will be to consider how this capacity to perceive the environment as dangerous or welcoming, which is already widespread within animal life as reconfigured by the highly social environment peculiar to humans, as well as by the cultural-linguistic characterization of the human niche. In the chapter 3, I will integrate this topic through a pragmatist approach

to the emotions, by setting them within the broader framework of human sensibility, rather than considering them as specific entities (mental representations? psychic states? neuro-programs?). By bringing together and radicalizing James's, Dewey's, and Mead's contributions to the topic through a comprehensive outline, I will be able to suggest an account of emotions as modes of behavior, including affective, evaluative, and practical aspects, because of their contextualization within human beings' structural exposure to a natural and naturally social environment.

The second issue will be habits, assumed to be pervasive and structural features of human behavior characterizing human acting, thinking, and feeling. I will argue that habits are already pervasive in human life at a prepersonal level: individuals acquire most of their habits from an already habitualized social environment, by being entrained and attuning their acts, feelings, and thoughts to already existent ways of doing things and interacting with one another. In chapter 4, I claim that habits are a relatively flexible channeling of both organic and environmental resources, deriving from the strong social interdependence of human beings that is rooted in their natural fragility from birth. Through a comparison with Bourdieu's account of habitus, I will suggest a view of habits as contingent features of human conduct that are plural and exposed to change, rather than a hidden matrix of behavior.

In chapters 5 and 6, I will develop a conception of human experience as enlanguaged—a conception that goes beyond the artificial opposition between experience and language, and assumes that language is irreversibly part of each human's experience, but also that human experience is always embedded in linguistic contexts and practices, although this circumstance has come about contingently, because of the natural circumstances of human development. Consequently, I propose that we approach language not only from the perspective of each individual's utterances but also as a characteristic of the human environment, configured by the broadly linguistic practices of our ancestors and continuously reshaped by our own. Hence, language is pictured not as a separate domain but as an integral part of the human form of life. In light of this, I consider language to be a complex of various sorts of utterances, embedded in—and scaffolding—different practices: not just making reference to absent things and working virtually, but also establishing and maintaining social bonds, both with intimates and strangers; making things in common; and influencing other people's conduct.³ I will also emphasize that language is fully embodied in gestures, sounds, prosody, and rhythm—all of them

aspects of the material structure of language. In the last chapter, I will further focus on the various facets of my thesis of a strong continuity between sensibility and language. Within a naturalistic framework, and by contrast to quasi-transcendentalist approaches, I will suggest that we regard linguistic utterances as deriving from previously existing organic and environmental resources. I will also consider the profound reorganization of animal sensibility, action, and cognition caused by the advent of linguistic practices, as well as the deep intertwining of both qualitative-holistic and analytic features in linguistic habits and practices.

Certainly, such a proposal is limited and could be integrated by further research in other fields—from the point of view of contents, the issue of humans as tool makers and of the disrupting and reshaping effect of media and artifacts on human lives would be important; from the point of view of the sources, a pragmatist anthropology could be significantly enriched by reconsidering Peirce's semiotic investigations with a more specific focus on human nature and behaviors.

The method I follow in this volume is an updated version of the mixed method—partly theoretical and partly historical—I have derived from my “continental” philosophical education in Venice, where I have learned to make use of conceptual and argumentative resources inherited from the past in order to engage with current problems. This means considering historical reconstruction not as an end in itself but as a strategy to engage with the topics at stake, by exposing those resources to any criticism and integration provided by more recent theoretical debates. This sort of engagement can involve the adoption of a different vocabulary as well as a different set of references that could help consider old issues through alternative points of view. Such an approach might sound strange in most of the current English-speaking philosophical world, with its usual sharp division between, on the one hand, theoreticians engaging with philosophical problems that are dealt with independently of the discussions they have engendered in the past and, on the other hand, historians of philosophy reconstructing past ideas and philosophies with textual and historical accuracy, but with no pretense to solve any issue at stake or formulate it in an alternative way.

My preference for the mixed method also reflects a conscious choice to reject methodological individualism as the default approach in philosophy: I share the Pragmatists' assumption that a social group, an institution, a mother tongue, or a cultural tradition is already there when we are born, and that our self-identity gradually emerges out of the shared form of life

we are embedded in from birth—namely, out of “the human family,” in James’s words (1975, 92). The old Cartesian assumption that one should start thinking exclusively by oneself and must do so in order to give up false prejudices seems artificial in light of the socially and culturally shared constraints of our individual experience (Ruggenini 2006). By contrast, I think that a person’s own contribution and originality consists in the ways he or she filters, criticizes, integrates, reorganizes, or even distances him- or herself from the cultural heritage he or she comes from when exposed to different existential conditions and different sets of categories, including discourses. We cannot ignore the consequences—in terms of the way we do philosophy—of the assumption that knowledge has a social character, which is to say: the view that a new particular thought becomes true insofar as it corresponds to the complex web of previous beliefs, already stocked opinions, and rules of action each person has inherited from the previous generations (James 1975, 34 and ff.). This approach to the philosophical task can sometimes make it difficult to distinguish between an individual contribution and the inherited culture from which it takes shape, disappointing both philologists and analytical philosophers. However, I think it is worthwhile to run this risk, because discrimination is possible. In this specific case, I will draw most of my arguments from the Classical Pragmatists, as readers who are familiar with this field of research will easily see. However, the peculiar focus on sensibility and the proposal to identify the latter with the already meaningful perception of living conditions as favorable or harmful are mine alone, and cannot be found in any of the authors whose writings I make use of. I will also stress Dewey’s investigations on habits in order to offer a provisional, working definition of habits as the relatively flexible channeling of resources coming from both the environment and the organism, against the background of a conception of behavior as the integral output of organic-environmental interactions. I will develop a theory of habit acquisition from the social, prepersonal level to the individual one, beyond the Pragmatists’ explicit arguments. Finally, I will use arguments and ideas derived from Dewey, Mead, Frank Lorimer, and even James to support the thesis that language has become an integral part of the human niche. I will focus, in particular, on the disrupting feedback effects it has had—and still has—on humans’ ways of interacting with their world, far beyond their explicit and sometimes ambivalent statements.

Of course, the point of departure for any specifically individual contribution is not bound to be other philosophies, as in my case: it

might be biology, physics, or even a picture of the complex variety of everyday life, as is the case for phenomenologists as well as anthropologists dealing with the interpretation of ethnographic material. I tend to adopt a pluralistic attitude with reference to the body of knowledge one decides or happens to start from, but I think that there is no a priori best term of comparison—as, for example, physical reductionists believe.

In this regard, a philosophical anthropology should still look like an armchair enterprise to most current people involved in ethnographic work. However, my point is that not even armchair philosophers are closed within their own minds and shut off from the rest of the world. Rather, for the most part they engage with a restricted yet significant portion of the shared world, namely, the cultural heritage of concepts and arguments derived from a specific past and tradition. Certainly, that part of the world philosophers engage with is limited and different from everyday life in the traditional or contemporary societies studied by anthropologists, but I see no reason to disregard the portion represented by intellectual history and assume it did not contribute to the shaping of human forms of life.

Through the Pragmatists, I contend, we can identify some features in human behaviors that seem to be shared and relatively stable, given the natural history of humanity up to the present. These common features, as will become evident, clear the field and set the ground for the great variety and variability of human behaviors, rather than for a narrowing down of human conducts to some main possibilities, assumed to be instantiable in different ways. Philosophical anthropology has usually been identified with the German intellectual tradition developed by Arnold Gehlen and Helmuth Plessner, and generally based on a phenomenological background (Max Scheler and also Martin Heidegger), with further insights provided by theoretical biology (Jacob von Uexküll and Adolf Portmann). While sharing some important elements of this intellectual tradition (Fischer 2009), my proposal of a philosophical anthropology developed from pragmatist arguments and insights adopts a more coherent cultural naturalistic stance, with no emphasis on an allegedly radical break in organism-environment relations between man and other animals. World precariousness and stability are not seen as an exclusively human experience, as was the case in existentialism and in German philosophical anthropology, but rather as a basic fact of life in general. By contrast, I wish to emphasize the ways in which new organic and environmental conditions—including sociocultural aspects—have

exercised feedback actions and contributed to reorganizing already existing animal interactions by reshaping previous forms of animal sensibility, habitual behavior, and modes of gestural communication.

An important part of the method adopted here is the constant exposition of the Pragmatists' arguments to different approaches and vocabularies from other naturalistic, but nonreductive, fields. The book makes broad references to the work of contemporary scholarship on the mind's radically embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended condition (Gallagher, Di Paolo, Colombetti, Nöe, and Hutto, among others), as well as to works on other topics that are crucial for both progressive trends in current cognitivism and for pragmatist anthropology. My contention is that a treatment of subjects such as perception and emotions, habits versus representations, and linguistic bodies could be provided more coherently by shifting the field of research from the philosophy of mind and cognition to an anthropological view of the above features as something characterizing the specific form of human life within a naturally sociocultural environment. Seen from a pragmatist perspective, cognition appears to be rooted in the phenomenon of living and limited to specific phases of experience, which leaves us enough room to draw distinctions between human forms of intelligence and other organic modes of intelligence. Likewise, the mind is approached as an emergent quality of specific human forms of interaction with the environment, but it is not assumed to be the only decisive feature shaping human behavior.

Furthermore, a pragmatist approach to human nature and its contingent history can represent a significant contribution to paleoanthropological research on human phylogenesis. In what follows, I will make some important references to the claims supported by Tattersall and Tomasello. A pragmatist anthropology shares their hypothesis of language as an *exaptive* phenomenon having disruptive effects on human development, as well as the idea of a mutual interdependence of the cultural and biological aspects of the environment and the assumption that human sociability is qualitatively different from other animal modes of being social. I will argue that pragmatist anthropology could provide a significant theoretical input for investigations of this kind, pushing them, on the one hand, to definitely abandon the residual computational framework (partly) characterizing their idea of language and, on the other hand, to definitely emancipate themselves from a mentalistic conception of intersubjectivity.

Pierre Bourdieu is also regarded as an important point of reference in the third chapter, where similarities as well as divergences with respect

to Dewey's theory of habits prove crucial for highlighting the peculiarity of a pragmatist approach to the topic.

Furthermore, I will be making some references to developmental psychology, and particularly to Trevarthen's work on very early forms of multimodal communication between new and old members of the human species. This perspective is significant because of its consequences for the issue of human ontogenesis, but also because it carries on the Classical Pragmatists' early interest in this field of inquiry.

2. The State of the Art

As I hinted above, only a few scholars have sought to outline a philosophical anthropology through a pragmatist lens. Arguably, the most remarkable attempt has been made by Joseph Margolis, whose philosophical anthropology seems to be the ultimate outcome of his previous investigations into the philosophy of the arts, the avenue for a form of naturalism without reduction, and an opportunity for radical historicity (2016). In Margolis's first *Venetian Lecture* (2017),⁴ it becomes clear that the central issue he is addressing is the problem of the human "gap" in animal continuity: this is the basic paradox characterizing human beings and Margolis's challenge is to interpret the distinctiveness of humans—including intentional, cultural, and self-reflective features—without resorting to extra-naturalistic causes or sources, as well as by avoiding any form of eliminativism or reduction of the personal and the cultural to physical entities. By acknowledging the complexity of the animal world—both in its social aspects and in its nondiscursive forms of intelligence—Margolis considers sociality to be an extremely important feature of being human, but believes that it is not enough to understand the emergence of human persons. Adopting such an approach would mean overlooking the highly refined forms of societal life characterizing many animal species—where nonetheless we cannot appreciate the level of self-reflectivity that is distinctive of human beings. On the contrary, the acquisition of a natural language remains a distinctively human characteristic: although it is grounded in the completely natural favorable changes in the human vocal apparatus and brain, it contributes to producing the processual construction of selves out of human animals. Margolis does not hesitate to speak of a metaphysical transformation of human primates into selves or persons, exactly as he did when supporting the idea that works of art emerge as new kinds of entities from

other sorts of things or properties—whose reality cannot be denied by viewing physical entities as the sole or paradigmatic kind of real entity. However, he avoids all Kantian sirens and does not consider language to be a transcendental condition of possibility for humanity. Joseph Margolis conceives the genesis of language among human primates as a wholly natural and fortuitous process, which nonetheless produces actual changes in the previous configuration of the natural world. In speaking of persons as “natural artifacts,” Margolis is not assuming a direct and one-sided causal link between language acquisition by early hominids and/or by human infants and their becoming self-reflective persons with narrative identities. On the contrary, the two changes are understood as the two sides of the same process. In other words, humans produce natural languages that, while founded on the peculiarities of human physiology, develop as a means to configure meanings that overtly exceed the mere physiological action of noises or sounds. The hybrid character of natural language, in turn, contributes to shaping humans as self-reflective beings, whose ways of operating within the environment are always naturally charged with meaning in the widest sense of the term. In other words, he sees the genesis and natural history of languages and of humans as a circular one: the contingent emergence of natural languages introduces something new in the world of early hominids, something which reacts on them by transforming them into human persons. However, we have no privileged external vantage point from which to examine it, we can only see it from within the loop we are part of.

For sure, Margolis’s anthropological conception is convergent with Dewey’s and Mead’s proposals, but his strong emphasis on human distinctiveness is indebted to Marjorie Grene’s philosophy and her original appropriation of some radical instances of Plessner and Gehlen’s *Philosophical Anthropology* (Peterson 2010). Although brilliant when it comes to highlighting the role of language in shaping humans, Margolis’s discourse tends to leave in the shadows other important features, such as the complex structure of human sensibility and pervasively habitual human behaviors. In this book, I deepen and integrate Margolis’s insights, by exploring the conception of animal and human sensibility, its relationships with language, the role of habits in shaping human conduct, and the refusal to assume an opposition between experience and nature within the human world.

Twenty years ago, Sami Pihlström published a book on *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology* (1998) that was more focused on providing reasons for developing a pragmatist anthropology, rather than in actually

working it out. The two main reasons considered are both good: on the one hand, it becomes clear that a Jamesian ethics involves a lucid investigation into the structures of humanity and human behavior. The core issue concerns the view of men and women we adopt if we consider that there is no final and definitely correct answer to a moral problem and that, nonetheless, each answer will contribute to shaping our own identity. On the other hand, Pihlström is strongly interested in pointing out that epistemological and ontological issues related to realism, constructivism, and solipsism involve a conception of the place and role of humans with respect to the world, mainly when assuming, as William James did, that “the trail of the human serpent is [. . .] over everything” (James 1975, 37; Pihlström 1998, 4). Moreover, Pihlström gives his proposal a transcendental arrangement—closer to Kant’s first and second *Critique*, rather than to his *Critique of Judgment* and to his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*—that I do not share, as will become clear in the course of my analysis. His “transcendental naturalism” aims to determine the enabling, if contingent, conditions of our experiencing and representing the world—an enterprise indirectly related to “the question of what it is like to be a human being” (1998, 101).

On the anthropological side, Michael Jackson found an important ally for his existential anthropology in James’s radical empiricism and in Dewey’s empirical naturalism because of the Pragmatists’ antiintellectualistic stance (1989; 1996). Both James and Dewey argued against the dominant trend in modern philosophy to assume that experience is equal to or eminently represented by cognition and that epistemology is the decisive philosophical issue at stake. However, further steps in Jackson’s project are developed in a more phenomenological vein, gravitating as they do around a heterodox understanding of the phenomenological *epoché* as involving a “practical relativism”: “the suspension of inquiry into the divine and objective truth of particular customs, beliefs, or worldviews in order to explore them as modalities or moments of experience” (1996, 10). I say “heterodox” because even though Merleau-Ponty reached the conclusion that the result of the phenomenological *epoché* is that the world cannot be suspended (2002), Husserl’s original aim was to give philosophy a foundation through what was still a Cartesian strategy. I guess that Jackson’s original relativistic interpretation is not alien to the pluralistic influence of Classical Pragmatism on his anthropological attitude, and I would definitely argue that Pragmatic pluralism provides a

better framework than phenomenological foundationalism for developing a philosophical anthropology.

3. Why the Pragmatists?

Before proceeding any further, I should probably provide more detailed reasons in support of my preference for the tradition of Classical Pragmatism as a good framework for developing a philosophical anthropology. Let's start from some general historical remarks. My idea is that the Pragmatists, particularly Dewey and Mead, felt that they were contributing to a shared philosophical enterprise, by deepening and even redefining some widespread issues and topics. For sure, James's tension between his effort to develop a naturalistic psychology, on the one hand, and a sincerely pluralistic ethics, on the other, opened a gap that could be filled by anthropological means. As colleagues in Chicago—a key place for the development of the social sciences at the end of the nineteenth century—Dewey and Mead preferred to label their reflections on human nature and behavior as “social psychology,” instead of “philosophical anthropology.” This choice is connected to their challenging vision of psychology as not primarily centered on methodological individualism and mentalism, but as capable of dealing with human conduct—including cognitive and discursive behaviors—as something primarily socially shaped (Mead 2011, 9–17). A later remark by Dewey suggests that in his advanced years he began to doubt the actual capacity of scientific psychology to free itself from its Cartesian roots and expressed a preference for anthropology.⁵ In any case, Dewey had a scientific interest in anthropology and personal connections with the two leading figures in cultural and social anthropology in his day, Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski (Zask 2007; 2015; Dreon 2012). Mead had continuous exchanges with comparative, infant, and evolutionary psychologists, expanding his rich view about the emergence of intelligent behaviors and self-identities out of social transactions by drawing on empirical research. Moreover, all of the Classical Pragmatists were strongly influenced by Charles Darwin's investigations into the origins of humanity, mainly through the work of Chauncey Wright (Parravicini 2012). As becomes clear in Dewey's writing on Darwin's influence on philosophy (2007), these thinkers gave a strongly antisubstantialist as well as antideterministic, nonteleological

reading of Darwin's teaching, which led them to consider the nature of living beings as something not fixed once and for all, but rather dynamically configured and open to change.

Mead and Dewey, but also James in his own way and a much less known figure, Frank Lorimer, constantly posed the question of the peculiar traits of humans within the continuity of animal life. Even Peirce provided some important conceptual tools for disentangling the issue, although his focus remained matters of logic for most of his philosophical career, which ended with a cosmological, rather than anthropological, turn (Hookway 1997; Maddalena 2003).⁶ In any case, I would argue that this group of thinkers did not put much emphasis on "the human difference," as was instead the case in the works of German Philosophical Anthropology, which strongly reflected the heritage of Martin Heidegger's existential analytics. Certainly, the Classical Pragmatists were very attentive to the many differences characterizing humans in comparison to nonhuman animals as well as to the continuity among living beings.⁷ However, Dewey and Mead never shared the idea that those differences could give rise to an ontological divide between organic life and human existence. They assumed continuity in life as a general framework and considered actual human conditions to derive from fortuitous yet irreversible trends in natural circumstances, and to be open to further changes and to the course of history.

In the same spirit, I make no pretension to display an exhaustive and definitive picture of what it means to be human—not least because of the huge limits of any theoretical enterprise, mine included. The main reason is that, following the Pragmatists, I endorse an idea of being human as the product of a natural history, which is to say as a conception that is not given once and for all, but constantly becomes what it is by unfolding within a dynamic environment of which it is part. Very briefly, human nature is not interpreted as an allegedly innate, fixed, and preconstituted endowment that is later exposed to cultural events, a social world, nurture, and empirical occurrences. Human nature is not behind or below the course of events happening to us: it is constituted by the rich complexity of organic and environmental circumstances—including material constraints, cultural conditions, and social factors—that are exposed to relative fixation, stratification, changes, and loop effects. Using Kant's brilliant formula against the prevailing reading of his philosophy, I would say that human nature is constituted by "the fertile *bathos* of experience" (1997, 125), itself without any ground supporting it from

below or behind.⁸ Of course, there are more stable kinds of interactions between eminently organic aspects and environmental features, relatively invariant relations, and common features, which we can and should discern among the immense variability of behaviors, practices, and actions that ethnologists are helping us to discover. However, I think we should resist the fascination of transcendental options: they push us to consider these relative invariances, constancies, and commonalities as quasi-a priori enabling conditions for empirical actions and events; on their turn, empirical events are assumed to be mere instantiations of general traits.

Before really delving into the topic of human nature, I can further illustrate my preference for a pragmatist framework for developing a philosophical anthropology by listing some of the main arguments and theses I derive from the Pragmatists and deploy in the different chapters of the book. In doing so, I will try to further distinguish my own original contribution from the pragmatist legacy I draw on.

In the second chapter, I question the conception that sensibility is primarily constituted by sensorial perception and reflects an eminently cognitive characterization of experience. The Pragmatists philosophical efforts offer a means for me to support a shift of focus from a conception of sensibility modeled on its possible foundational role in a representative view of cognition to sensibility understood primarily as a structural dimension of animal life in general and of human life, more specifically. Dewey and Mead basically provide the biosocial framework for the conception of sensibility I suggest: sensibility coincides with selective exposition to the environment and the active feeling capacity to discriminate between favorable and noxious aspects by an organism whose primary experience of the surrounding environment is social because of the organic conditions of emphasized interdependence from others characterizing the human form of life. Against this general background, I develop a conception of qualitative, aesthetic, or affective aspects of human experience as basically characterizing organic-environmental relationships, thereby going beyond their traditional ascription to a merely subjective realm. Moreover, by radicalizing Dewey's conception of the interdependence between qualitative experience and reflection, I endorse a nonfoundational approach to human sensibility, which is to say a conception of human feeling and perception as something that both shapes and is shaped by the sociocultural linguistic environment constituting the peculiar human niche—in opposition to a view of sensibility and language as hierarchically ordered. Finally, I put forward a theory of

emotions resulting from James's, Dewey's, and Mead's combined efforts, in the context of the above-mentioned conception of sensibility as a basic feature characterizing human engagement with the environment.

The account of habits I will propose is grounded in the Classical Pragmatists' attribution of a crucial, positive, and pervasive role to habits in human experience, cognition, and will. Making use of Dewey's insights on habits, I radicalize his view and formulate an explicitly ecological, holistic, and transactional notion of habits, requiring cooperation from both the organism and its natural and naturally social environment. I suggest defining habits as the more or less flexible channeling of both organic energies and environmental resources—that are not only natural but also social and cultural, given the marked social interdependence of human beings. This idea is connected with a wider redefinition of the concept of behavior I derive from both Dewey and Mead, whereby behavior is taken to be the result of mutual and constitutive transactions between an organism and the environment it is embedded in, instead of being conceived as the property or the way of being originated by a single agent. Even in the case of habit, Dewey and Mead's general biosocial framework allows me to explicitly anchor human habits in the organic-environmental condition of human life, and to support my contention that habits originate mostly at a prepersonal and prereflective level, rather than through the repetition of an initially conscious individual act. Through a detailed comparison with C. Lloyd Morgan's conception of habit, I show that a naturalistic view of habits can avoid methodological individualism and associationism, which are the standard approach for interpreting habit, considered as the automatization of a primarily individual way of responding to a stimulus. Finally, by engaging with Pierre Bourdieu's conception of habitus, I endorse a Deweyan understanding of habit as favoring a more pluralistic, revisable view of human behaviors, definitely renouncing any distinction between actions and their alleged quasi-*a priori* matrix.

In the last parts of the book, I make broad use of the Pragmatists' scattered yet recurrent reflections on language to avoid any artificial opposition between experience and language, but also to support my thesis that human experience is fortuitously yet irreversibly reshaped by the advent of language. From the Pragmatists I derive a picture of language as a real part of our lives. Language is far more than a mere vehicle for rationality; it is a range of other things: a way to

establish contacts, to maintain relations, and to act on them, as well as something that can be enjoyed or suffered. It is also a very powerful tool for sharing and making something common as well as for doing things together, in addition to being the most powerful means to think through symbols and meanings. The Pragmatists, I argue, were attentive to the rich complexity of human languages and offered some important contributions. From Dewey and, more extensively, from Frank Lorimer I draw an account of the natural genesis of the human mind out of previous forms of animal behavior and of the appearance of language. Lorimer is even seen to develop an idea of language as something that is continuous and functions holistically before it becomes subject to analytic distinctions—an idea originally foreseen by James and Dewey. In my view, Mead complements Dewey and Lorimer's account on the growth of language out of already existing forms of organic intelligence through a theory of the genesis of verbal gestures out of communication contexts based on a primarily affective-based mutual regulation of actions. Finally, I rely on Mead and Frank Lorimer to suggest an interpretation of the transition to properly referential and symbolic language, with marked cognitive powers. I suggest we consider their two approaches complementary. Lorimer provides an account of human reason from animal intelligence by means of words, focusing on signs as a device to refer to something absent toward which an action is directed. Mead explains the transition to verbal gestures and significant symbols through the social extension of the conversational context.

Nonetheless, a pragmatist objection might be that making use of arguments and ideas derived from James, Dewey, and Mead is not sufficient to characterize a philosophical proposal as pragmatic.⁹ The pragmatic method has to do with the practical consequences of a specific notion, namely, with the difference it can make with respect to current existential conditions, as stated by James (1975, 28). Even if Michael Quante's proposal is not grounded in Pragmatism, I agree with his claim that, in order to be pragmatistic, a philosophical anthropology should assume that each concept or theory requires questions like: "How is this related to human action? What place does it have in the context of our actions?" (2018, 22).¹⁰

I honestly think that my proposal does not go so far as to provide any real answers about ways to ameliorate human problems and enrich human life. Nonetheless, the kind of conceptual distinctions I

am suggesting certainly make some difference, insofar as they entail a change of habits in facing problems and acting in the present context. This means that before we attempt to draw a balance of the pragmatic value of the idea I am supporting in this book, we should wait until the end of the whole enterprise, when it will be possible to take its practical consequences into account. However, I can already suggest an example in order to give an idea of the ways in which a philosophical anthropology might function in our society.

Even aside from the evident health problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the education of the young generations is a serious issue, and one that unfortunately is often underestimated by politicians and public opinion. Online lessons and classes have represented a decisive emergency solution in both schools and universities throughout the world. Through this tool, we have been able to fill a void (at least partially) in a way that would not have been possible during similar pandemic emergencies in the past—I am thinking of the spread of poliomyelitis in the twentieth century, for example. However, the consequences of this method of schooling—both teaching and learning—should be attentively evaluated. What kind of habits of conduct do they support? Certainly, they have represented a moment of crisis for both teachers and students, who have been—and still are—compelled to change or reorient their previous habits. Crises can be something positive, as Dewey pointed out, because they oblige people to explicitly consider their previous, largely prepersonal, habits of conduct. But what new habits of attention and interlocations do on-line lessons favor? How is the pupil's and the teacher's capacity to take the role of the other affected? Obviously, it is also the case that the education of the young generations cannot be reduced to the mere transmission of contents. Among other things, it concerns the acquisition of implicit and explicit norms of social behavior, which are largely transmitted to students via their affectively oriented sensibility, by developing a sense of asymmetries and similarities, belongings and exclusions. To what extent does the isolated and very restricted context of being alone in front of a computer condition both learning and educational processes? Of course, I have no definite analysis and solutions to offer in relation to this huge issue. Yet I believe that this is a case where it makes a difference to adopt a view of humans as largely habitual beings, and to envisage normativity as grounded in affectively oriented sensibility.

4. What Human Nature?

As hinted above, a philosophical anthropology can have important practical consequences that should be taken into account. Speaking of “human nature” risks getting into a thorny issue, open to misunderstanding. The situation is particularly complex because, evidently, this is not a merely theoretical issue; rather, it has serious existential implications, both moral and political. As Dewey reminds us in his entry for the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, dealing with human nature means singling out thorny problems related to people’s personal cultural preferences and aversions, beyond their explicit positions and choices; in other words, it means dealing with people’s sensibility, in the sense in which this term will be explored in the second chapter. Writing in 1932, Dewey rhetorically wondered whether social facts such as war and selfishness were rooted in human nature or whether some races were inferior by nature (1985b). Many years later, John Dupré emphasized the weight of a conception of human nature guided by the tendency to maximize one’s own selfish interests in economics, as well as the influence of a reductive view of human structures in diagnosing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and treating it through drugs (2001, 3, 14). Whether we consider human nature to be fixed or changeable can make a great difference in the real lives of people. Serious consequences come from assuming that behavior is determined by nature or depends on the social context. Dealing with a specific kind of action, either as innate and inherited or as due to environmental influences, opens up different practical scenarios.

Nonetheless, even if we wish to focus on a theoretical analysis of the concept, the idea of human nature seems to display a tangle of problems, punctuated by distinctions that could be useful when treated as functional and connected to specific contexts, but which are actually turned into dogmatic oppositions. One first form of dualism concerns the opposition between the innate and the acquired, between the allegedly innate equipment existing on the genetic or neural level and the properties and ways of behaving this is assumed to give rise to. To give but one example, based on Chomsky’s influential hypothesis, the idea of a neural program for producing grammar encoded in our genes has been assumed to be an efficient (and sometimes sufficient) cause for specific linguistic practices. From this point of view, nurture, culture, and institutions seem to be something completely different from nature, since

they supervene on an already fixed material substratum as an adjunct. In turn, cultural additions can be considered either something that must be reduced to some other feature, as is the case with eliminativists and reductionists, or as a distinctive human feature, producing an ontological gap within nature. Genetic determinism and cultural reductionism can be seen as the two extreme results of this kind of dualism. It is no longer necessary for this gap to be represented by the old-fashioned contrast between the material and the cultural: a more acceptable distinction has emerged between norms established as a theoretically self-standing realm and the allegedly closed physical realm of efficient causes. This distinction has become paradigmatic in the debate on naturalization, fueled by Jaegwon Kim's work.

The opposition between nature as innate and nurture as acquired evidently tends to slip into the dualism between a priori structures and their a posteriori instantiations in a given social and cultural environment. The asymmetries between two levels of features, stabilizing and changing at different speeds and in different times, are assumed to be ontologically different—as a priori, unchangeable enabling conditions, per se independent from contexts, on the one hand, and empirical variations of the same universal character, exposed to historical, geographical, and cultural variability, on the other hand. From an anthropological point of view, this kind of dichotomy is particularly pernicious, because it tends to stiffen two opposite positions: on one side, there are the supporters of the view of human nature as characterized by universal features that are expressed in different ways in different cultural environments. On the other side, there are the cultural relativists, who deny the existence of universal characteristics and assume the incommensurability of cultures. From the treatise on *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* to Paul Eckman's influential support of Darwin's position, this has been the case for most of the debate on emotions, for example. Nonetheless, the two factions share the common assumption that either human nature is something deep, unchanging, and preestablished for all human beings prior to the varieties of human behavior and practices it can give rise to, or there is no human nature at all. Taking a monolithic conception of human nature for granted and having to tackle the infinite range of human actions and conducts, cultural relativists deny the existence of such universal features and regard human behaviors as the result of cultural conditioning, and as having nothing to do with a natural endowment. This was the case, for example, with the controversy about the expe-

rience of time among the Hopi, which was sparked by Benjamin Lee Whorf in the 1940s (and challenged by Malotki in the 1980s). Famously, Whorf claimed that Hopi people's perception of time did not involve the experience of a continuum, proceeding at equal rates everywhere in the universe, because of the specific structures of verbs in the Hopi language.

Furthermore, cultural relativism tends to flow into a theory of cultural incommensurability that extends the misleading logic of methodological individualism to cultures, assuming the immediate accessibility of one's own first-person experience while doubting that it is possible to access the experience of other subjects. In other words, the idea of the insularity of one's own mind is mirrored by the assumption of the insularity of each culture. In a pragmatist vein, I would argue that pluralism and variability do not involve incommensurability as a necessary consequence. The incommensurability position disregards the common circumstance that linguistic and cultural translations work—they may be more or less precise, but they are often successful in meeting specific goals. A partial overlapping of different meanings, family resemblances between languages, and different linguistic games are frequent; consequently, common features, rather than universal properties, are actually shared. Moreover, common aspects are usually not substantive properties, but ways of being and relating to an environment that are largely indeterminate and a factor of change in themselves: consider learning as a common feature of humans, constituting a continuous source of change and reorganization of previous dynamics and energies (Dewey 1985b, 32).

Even the characterization of human nature as innate is problematic, and it is basically connected to the underestimating or neglecting of growth as a constitutive aspect of organic life. As Morgan said in his book on *Instinct and Habit*, a purely congenital organic action among many kinds of animals can be supposed to take place only at its very first occurrence because the second occurrence will be influenced by the result of previous experiences, however limited they may be (Morgan 1896, 136). In his entry for the *Encyclopaedia*, Dewey claims that isolating the allegedly native and original constitution of human nature is possible only through the assumption of a static point of view on it, for example, by privileging features at birth over traits characterizing the intrauterine past or the organism's future development and adulthood. As is widely known, Aristotle saw maturity as the stage most revealing of human nature because, according to him, it is only during this phase that individual potentialities are fully enacted. Taking this or that snapshot of a

human could be a useful intellectual expedient in specific circumstances, but “[b]iologically all growth is modification and all organs have to be treated and understood as developments out of something else and as pointing forward to still something else” (Dewey 1985b, 32–33). Growth and change are constitutive parts of human nature as well as of each living being—although with crucial differences of degree. This is the reason why it might seem ambiguous, for example, to speak of habits as a second nature, thereby assuming that they grow out of a previous nature that is already established before any habits emerge. Human nature is not independent from its natural history, including growth and change as constitutive elements.

Likewise, human nature is not independent from the environment, including its natural and social structure, where nature develops and is what it is. The abandonment of the strongly influential paradigm of the modern self-standing subject who comes to know a reality existing “out there” is due to the acceptance of an obvious biological fact (Dewey 1989): living beings, differently from any alleged disembodied consciousness, cannot live in a vacuum, but only in and through the environment they are embedded in—an environment they are part of and which they contribute to changing through their dynamic interactions, constituting life itself. More specifically, the human environment reveals itself to be a strongly social one, because of the high degree of interdependence and cooperative action required in order for humans to survive—although, for the most part, this working together is not a harmonious affair at all.

Disregard for this aspect has led philosophers to a further dichotomy between the individual with her or his allegedly innate tendencies (which can be either good, according to Rousseau, or aggressive and selfish, according to Hobbes and Freud) and the social institutions that are necessary for her or his survival. The point in such cases is that human nature is considered to establish itself prior to any exposition to a social world, as if being human were something quite separate from the fact of living in a natural and naturally social environment and being reshaped through continuous interaction with the environment one belongs to, within a mutual, albeit asymmetrical, relationship. As stated above, by primarily focusing on life and the organic continuity between humans and other animals, the Pragmatists have exposed the philosophical fallacy of separating an organism from the environment where it lives and, as such, is what it is. Translated into metaphysical vocabulary, this means assuming that an *essence* can be separated and considered prior to its *existence*: *what*

a human being is would be established independently of *how* he or she is (Heidegger 1962). In the case of humans, the mistake is even worse because it is based on a failure to take account of the social nature of the human environment, given that human mammals are particularly dependent on a mature social group in order to survive and develop.¹¹ This was a crucial point for Dewey and Mead, who emphasized the obvious biological fact of infants' huge degree of dependency at birth long before Adolf Portmann and evolutionary biologists. The extreme fragility of human mammals at birth represents a core anchoring of human sociality; premature exposure to culture within human physiology gives rise to a sociocultural niche in which even the most animal-like vital processes in young humans are embedded from the very beginning.¹² Cultural naturalism is a formula used to emphasize that our pronounced cultural development as human beings has its roots in our organic constitution, without being reducible to mere physical structures and chemical processes. In other words, social and cultural development appears to be required by the very physiological-environmental conditions characterizing humans (see also Peterson 2010). We share most of our natural history with other animals, but we have become what we are now through the specific combination of environmental conditions and the organic constitution that has befallen us, without the intervention of external forces, but only through the peculiar dynamics engendered among their components. These are the reasons why I believe it is important to continue to speak about human nature, although the concept has a complicated, often problematic history and remains open to misunderstanding.

To conclude this section, I will mention a further fallacy connected to the assumption of human nature as the real structure determining or enabling the complex variety of human behaviors and cultures in the physical and empirical world, which is to say as a cause or a prior condition instantiated in the several empirical occurrences it can have in the reality "out there."

In his paper on the influence of Darwin on philosophy, Dewey argued against the tendency to search for possible causes and principles underlying contingency and variability, as if the latter could not subsist independently.¹³ As usual, he emphasized the ethical and political consequences of an approach that is still meta-physical, and which posits an ultimate, decisive cause for everything there is even in an evolutionary context. Dewey criticized the concept that the "duty of wholesale justification" providing the final cause or principle of empirical occurrences once

and for all endorses the “habit of derogating from present meanings and uses” (2007, 10). It implicitly nourish the idea that concrete conditions of life are irrelevant compared to the alleged deep essence of things. In contrast, abandoning the logic of ultimate causes in order to focus on concrete problems and the chance to modify specific material and social conditions “introduces responsibility into intellectual life” (2007, 11).

More recently, in her essay *The Nurturing of Natures* (Oyama 2002), Susan Oyama puts forward an argument that is similar, in many respects, to Dewey’s. Her point of departure is not the evolution of individual organisms, but developmental systems, assumed as complex, contingent, and ever-changing systems of interactants composed of organic factors as well as of environmental characteristics, including biotic, abiotic, and social aspects. Of course, there are causal relations between the different components of the system, but none of them can be considered an ultimate cause that gives rise to the processes occurring on the alleged surface. Oyama’s antireductionism is based on the assumption that no one factor is more decisive than others for the development of the system, or can be taken as a deep, hidden cause manifesting its products on the mere surface. For example, the genome cannot be assumed to be the profound nature manifesting itself at phenotypic level, as if we were dealing with two different levels—reality and mere appearance. Rather, each organism should be considered the result of a complex web of factors—genomic factors as well as other organic aspects and further environmental conditions—and none of them is more decisive or deeper than the process itself. Oyama rejects the idea of nature as an allegedly deeper structure, beyond organisms’ effective being. She explicitly repudiates the logic of searching for an ultimate cause belonging to a deeper level beyond concrete existence, whether it be the idea of the genome as a hidden principle behind its phenotypic manifestation or the idea of emotions as psychic events or neurological programs lying behind their alleged external display through bodily and facial expressions. Moreover, like Dewey, she emphasizes the political consequences of assuming that what happens is triggered by one ultimately decisive cause within a developmental system. She mentions the debate about the alleged correlation between IQ levels and race that could be used, for example, as a possible justification for the lack of public investments in certain schools. By contrast to this kind of logic, both Dewey and Oyama consider the nature of an organism to be constituted according to what the organism effectively is and what happens to it, denying it

is something buried deep beyond a superficial veil. “Nature thus has no existence prior to or separate from the concrete living organism in its concrete, often living, surroundings: no Platonic ideals here, no underlying reality more basic than the being itself, no instruction manuals or little engineers in the cell nucleus” (Oyama 2002, 2).

However, Susan Oyama’s proposal with regard to the concept of human nature is even more radical than the Pragmatists’. Instead of emphasizing the nature-nurture continuum as the most reasonable option, she suggests reconceptualizing nature and nurture as the two sides of the same process. “Nurture” would be the developmental process of organisms, the history of the complex organic and environmental interactions through which organisms become what they are. “Nature” would be the continuously changing and contingent result of the developmental process, the totality of the features characterizing an organism in its own environment, without assuming that they are the effect or manifestation of a more profound principle or reality. As for the Pragmatists, they embraced the idea of growth as something constitutive of human nature and, in so doing, strongly problematized the boundaries between the innate and the acquired, as in the case of the distinction between instinct and habit. However, they preferred to maintain a continuum between nature and culture, and I think this is still a good move if we are to ensure the possibility of drawing distinctions between organic nature and its contingent but irreversible development through culture, understood as a system of practices scaffolded by languages, songs, and meanings—that is, if we wish to argue that nurture can enfold human beings and their world in a variety of ways.

5. Cultural Naturalism, Loop-Effects, and Designless Emergentism

As has become more and more evident, the conceptual framework for my approach to human nature is represented by cultural naturalism—that is, a nonreductive form of naturalism that assumes culture to be continuous with nature, rooted in the very organic and environmental conditions of human life, and yet irreducible to the mere association of preexisting resources.

Among the biological features favoring the emergence of culture particular emphasis must be placed—*de facto*, which is to say without