

On the lived truths of atmospheres: the qualities of existential contexts

Sobre as verdades vividas das atmosferas: as qualidades de contextos existenciais

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Abstract: This article starts from Dewey's claim that neglect of context is the single greatest disaster that philosophical thinking can incur. It explores the heuristic value of Dewey's notion of a context not just for philosophy but for thinking and living as a whole. Contexts have deep existential power in as much as we have embodied ourselves in them. Contexts work behind our backs, as determining backgrounds, influencing in extensive ways as fore-structures our forms of feeling, our patterns of action, and the idioms in which we describe ourselves and our worlds. Dewey also thinks of contexts as kinds of atmospheres or hazes and connects them with the defining qualities of the problematic situations in which we find ourselves. I support Dewey's argument with analytical tools supplied by Michael Polanyi's analysis of embodiment and the tacit nature of premises and by Gernot Böhme's exploration of the notion of atmospheres and toned spaces. Recognition of the various kinds of contexts in which people live and out of which they speak is essential for arriving at the kinds of trust that reduce the appeal to force and make possible agreement in common meanings while recognizing the existential roots of difference.

Keywords: Atmospheres. Contexts. Dewey. Embodiment. Gernot Böhme. Polanyi.

Resumo: *Este artigo começa com uma afirmação de Dewey que retirada do contexto consiste no maior desastre que o pensamento filosófico pode incorrer. Ela explora o valor heurístico da noção de Dewey de um contexto não apenas para a filosofia, mas para o pensamento e a vida como um todo. Contextos possuem poder existencial profundo tanto que os temos encarnados em nós mesmos. Contextos funcionam como panos de fundo, conforme determinam embasamentos, influenciando de maneira ampla como ante-estruturas de nossas formas de sentimentos, nossos padrões de ação, e os idiomas nos quais nos descrevemos, bem como nossos mundos. Dewey também pensa em contextos como espécies de atmosferas ou brumas, conectando-os com as qualidades determinantes das situações problemáticas nas quais nós nos encontramos. Sustento o argumento de Dewey com ferramentas analíticas fornecidas pela análise da encarnação e da natureza tácita de premissas de Michael Polanyi, e pela exploração da noção de atmosferas e espaços harmonizados de Gernot Böhme. O*

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reconhecimento dos diversos tipos de contextos, nos quais as pessoas vivem e a partir das quais elas falam, é essencial para chegarmos aos tipos de confiança que reduzem o apelo à força e possibilitam acordos em significados comuns enquanto reconhecem as raízes existenciais da diferença.

Palavras-chave: *Atmosferas. Contextos. Dewey. Encarnação. Gernot Böhme. Polanyi.*

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... neglect of context is the single greatest disaster which philosophic thinking can incur.

John Dewey

Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has meaning.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

... any experience, the most ordinary, has an indefinite total setting. Things, objects, are only focal points of a here and now in a whole that stretches out indefinitely. This is the qualitative "background" which is defined and made definitely conscious in particular objects and specified properties and qualities.

John Dewey

1 Framing context

John Dewey claimed in his 1931 article, *Context and Thought*, that “[...] the most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to neglect of context” (p. 207). A context, as Dewey conceives it, involves the “inclusive mental life” that encompasses all the “[...] habits and present disposition of the subject” (1931, p. 209). He assimilates a context to a background “[...] implicit in some form and to some degree in all thinking, although as background it does not come into explicit purview; that is, it does not form a portion of the subject matter which is consciously attended to, thought of, examined, inspected, turned over” (1931, p. 211). This subject matter, for Dewey, is life itself, our very existence articulated in what he called “[...] the boundless multiplicity of the concrete experiences of humanity” (1931, p. 216).

Attempts to understand this “subject matter,” including the subject matter that is the unique life of each of us, generate what Ben-Ami Scharfstein (1989) called the various “dilemmas of context.” Each context, as a multileveled interpretation frame, “locates” or “places” its “subject”—in both senses of the term—in widening relational fields of various sorts (micro, macro, correlational, and so on), an interpretive process resembling a Russian doll. Scharfstein’s problem, and ours, is to avoid quite generally the false choice between the vortex of relativism as well as the iron cage of modernist objectivism—or the bottomless pit of cynical indifference and relentless aggression, the examples of which permeate history, which oscillates between being a sporadic march toward freedom in various forms or a butcher’s block.

The habits and present dispositions that Dewey ascribed to “inclusive mental life” are informed or weighted down by traditions, “[...] ways of interpretation and of observation, of valuation, of everything explicitly thought of. They are the circumambient atmosphere which thought must breathe; no one ever had an idea except as he inhaled some of this atmosphere” (1931, p. 211). Such an atmosphere gives felt life and existential pertinence to the idea. There is an existentially deep and paradoxical fact about the embodied nature of our multileveled ways of being-in-the-world, where feeling, action, and various modes of signification are indissolubly intertwined as dimensions and not as layers or strata.

About this embodiment Dewey writes:

We cannot explain why we believe the things which we most firmly hold to because those things are a part of ourselves. We can no more completely escape them when we try to examine into them than we can get outside our physical skins so as to view them from without. Call these regulative traditions, apperceptive organs or mental habits or whatever you will, there is no thinking without them (1931, p. 211-212).

This problematic, inevitably paradoxical, process of explanation of our beliefs takes many forms. It is also at the same time a process of criticism. Criticism, for Dewey, is philosophy’s principal reconstructive and existentially pressing task:

[...] criticism of the influential beliefs that underlie culture; a criticism which traces the beliefs to their generating conditions as far as may be, which tracks them to their results, which considers the mutual compatibility of the elements of the total structure of beliefs. Such an examination terminates, whether intended or not, in a projection of them into a new perspective which leads to new surveys of possibilities (1931, p. 215).

Philosophy on this account is clearly not a search for universals that have their only home in philosophy. Dewey’s philosophical practices forcefully showed such an exclusive search to be a “[...] sure sign of isolation and artificiality” (1931, p. 216), far from what Kant called the “fertile lowland of experience” that Dewey’s pragmatist experimentalism is concerned with.

On Dewey's reckoning—shared by many others—we can never objectify or make totally explicit the whole contextual background of our thinking, functioning as a constellation of premises, any more than we can objectify our lived body. So, we can ask, “where” are we when we engage in this reconstructive criticism? And what would motivate it or hinder it? Dewey writes, in a sentence of astounding generality, that if “[...] the finally significant business of philosophy is the disclosure of the context of beliefs, then we cannot escape the conclusion that experience is the name for the last inclusive context” (1931, p. 215). “Experience”, on pragmatist principles, is not an indifferent characterless empty space to be filled with externally related content. Rather, as we all know, it must be thought of as body-based sets of processes in which the organism—namely, ourselves—responds into and reconstructs the problematic situations in which it finds itself, relying upon the sedimentation of habits of various sorts as it navigates what James called the “eddies” and “currents” of the stream of experiencing which is historical through and through.

James Baldwin wrote about this process in a powerful passage:

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations (BALDWIN, 2016).

These frames, identities, and aspirations make up the roots, both nourishing and also in some cases dying, upon which we rely. Michael Polanyi, working in or out of a quite different philosophical tradition, characterizes our situation in a way that offers complementary analytical tools:

All thought contains components of which we are subsidiarily aware in the focal content of our thinking, and all thought dwells in its subsidiaries, as if they were parts of our body. Hence, thinking is not only necessarily intentional, as Brentano has taught: it is also fraught with the roots it embodies. It has a from-to structure (POLANYI, 1966, p. x).

He points out these roots, manifested in the from-to structure of abductive perceptual integrations of experience and multiple forms of skills, also include “[...] the idiom in which we interpret our experience in terms of which we erect our articulate systems” (POLANYI, 1958, p. 301). These articulate systems of all sorts, the world of symbolic forms, that philosophical semiotics studies are also indwelt, as Dewey put it, “funded”, steering as well and informing our habits and modes of attending. The omnipresent familiarity of our distinctive idiom of interpretation of our experience makes it seem a transparent, even self-evident, medium or set of lenses, until we are asked what our idiom presupposes about the way the world is and why we

presuppose that it, and not another idiom, bears the truth about things, including especially our deepest held beliefs.

In this respect, Polanyi remarks, writing from the point of view of a practicing scientist turned philosopher, that “[...] the curious thing is that we have no clear knowledge of what our presuppositions are and when we try to formulate them they appear quite unconvincing” (1958, p. 61). Premises are not to be thought of as something we are necessarily conscious of or can formulate in any explicit or formal way, even if we are radically dependent on them and they inform in different ways all the dimensions of our lives, especially those that put us “on edge” or “on the edge”. They are lighted up, as the Socratic practice showed, when we are contradicted in an argument, confronted with an alternative interpretation or meaning system or form of life, or find ourselves failing to respond to situations that must be resolved appropriately by acting or feeling. This involves more than merely being “at a loss for words”.

Premises should be seen as fore-structures embedded in experiential and interpretive contexts in which we are ourselves embedded. Dewey follows in his own way in various places in his work the triad of feeling, action-reaction, and thought, which Peirce also used, but such a triad is a constant theme in philosophical reflection in many traditions and Dewey makes no attempt to correlate them to Peircean semiotic categories although they are, as I will indicate, clearly applicable. The fore-structures of *feeling* make up a kind of affectively charged Deweyan “disposition” that marks a fundamental “feeling tone” that accompanies and conditions all our access structures to the world, a kind of “attunement” resonating with Heidegger’s existential category of *Befindlichkeit* and with Peirce’s defining *quale*. The fore-structures of *action-reaction*, with their Heideggerian patterns of pragmatic “circumspection” and “fore-seeing,” encompass embedded perceptual habits and skills, habitual modes of attending to and into “the given” that progressively becomes discriminated and divided up into terms and relations, a process Dewey calls, in an aesthetic context, “intuition”. The fore-structures of *thought* encompass the antecedent conceptual structures and systems of signs that represent and articulate symbolically the “meanings” or “significations” of the experiential flow, the raising of the “dumb creature” above the “flux of existence”.

Structured contexts of experience preexist each one of us. They give rise, in multiple ways and with no operative action on our part, to vast arrays of Peircean affective, energetic, and logical “interpretants”. These “proper significate effects” constitute the basic premises upon which we depend and, as Peirce showed in the *Fixation of Belief*, they are hard to let go. We assimilate these premises not primarily by decision but by being assimilated *to* and *into* them and, at the metaphysical margin, we bet our lives on them. Polanyi writes about the process in a passage with Deweyan and Peircean resonances:

When we accept a certain set of presuppositions and use them as our interpretive framework, we may be said to dwell in them as we do in our own body. Their uncritical acceptance for the time being consists in a process of assimilation by which we identify ourselves with them. They are not asserted and cannot be asserted, for the assertion can be made only within a framework with which we have identified ourselves for the time

being; as they are ourselves our ultimate framework they are essentially inarticulable (POLANYI, 1958, p. 61).

All these frameworks and conceptual structures have standards proper to themselves with varying degrees of universality and contestability—and perhaps, as Polanyi and Scharfstein claim, accessibility. They make up a tangled web of different types of contexts, frames, and backgrounds in which human life and its multiplicity of interests are carried on and within which and by means of which they are thought about and reflected on. They all ideally involve “getting things right,” and those who do so, Polanyi holds, have attained a skill through a kind of apprenticeship in a tradition of practices, whether benign or malign. A tradition, as both Dewey and Polanyi hold, is the ultimate active background. Polanyi points out, however, that “[...] traditions are transmitted to us from the past, but they are our own interpretations of the past, at which we have arrived within the context of our immediate problems” (1958, p. 169), in which are posed “[...] the kind of questions which seem reasonable and interesting to explore” (1958, p. 169)—and perhaps to answer and live by.

2 Broadening context

Dewey writes of a “spatial background” that is the synchronic background of inquiry. It “[...] covers all the contemporary setting within which a course of thinking emerges” (1931, p. 212), including, I would say, the self-reflection and existential inquiry of philosophical reflection as well as the differential orderings of our political, social, and religious lives in common. How does one become aware to some degree and in what form of “all the contemporary setting,” with its multiple Jamesian universes of meaning? Certainly, an external interpreter can attempt to reconstruct such a setting or settings but if we are embodied in it, how can we ascend to such a level that we can make it into an object of investigation? And how can we be sure that we have reconstructed the contemporary setting? And what is a “setting?” Dewey thinks of the “[...] focal material of thinking as having a kind of solidity and stability,” (1931, p. 212) while nevertheless it is situated in a vague contextual setting, its inescapable background. We do not so much master or control such a background. It has mastered and gained control of us. This setting, Dewey holds, is “no mere fringe” (1931, p. 212)—certainly an allusion to James. Nor, as Peirce himself asserted, is vagueness as such a defect. The very vagueness of the contextual background can, or could, be a sign of fullness of potential meaning, which always indeed recedes within the “long run” of the search for understanding and truth. Or, its felt vagueness, with the concomitant feel of affective and impending existential nullity, can be a mark of a sickness unto death.

We can rightly have, Dewey holds, a genuine “affection for a standpoint,” which is not exclusively interpretive or argumentative in the conceptual or discursive sense. A standpoint as a *tout ensemble* grounds us and establishes “where we are” and “how things are with us,” giving us existential thickness and a “location”—but it also “positions” us toward what is at stake, what is of existential import. Dewey’s point is radical: a “[...] standpoint which is nowhere in particular and from which things are not seen at a special angle is an absurdity” (1931, p. 212).

Yet, standpoints, contexts, interpretive frameworks are not monolithic or even uniformly coherent and stable things, with clearly discriminated components, over which we have full reflective or rational control and awareness. They have fuzzy edges which we can attempt to capture through systematic reflection by moving to a “logically higher” framework, but at the end, as Polanyi argued, we arrive at a kind of Wittgensteinian point where our shovel is turned and we simply have to commit ourselves, even if we cannot articulate or justify the full reasons.

The full recognition of the boundless multiplicity of the forms of experiencing is protection against what Dewey called the “fallacy of premature generalization,” a fatal flaw of much philosophizing about where to look for “truth.” Dewey is right to argue that disclosure and criticism of the lived contexts of beliefs, philosophy’s core task, leads to the conclusion that “[...] experience is the name for the last inclusive context” (1931, p. 215) where meaning-making and engagement of every kind with the world occur, leaving, as Dewey put it, “[...] a qualitative impress upon it” (1931, p. 213). This is an objectively oriented impress of feeling upon and a reciprocal being affected or impressed by the world’s *luring* quality, our being grasped by its “importance,” as Whitehead explored in the opening chapter of *Modes of Thought*. For Whitehead, “[...] the two notions of importance and perspective are closely intertwined” (1938, p. 11). Importance, as he puts it, is “[...] that aspect of feeling whereby a perspective is imposed upon the universe of things felt” (1938, p. 11). The general point is deep: “[...] intellectual freedom issues from selection, and selection requires the notion of relative importance in order to give it meaning. Thus, importance, selection, and intellectual freedom are bound up together, and they all involve some reference to matter of fact” (WHITEHEAD, 1938, p. 7) and do not belong to a world of abstractions apart from the deepest currents of life. But it is precisely these deepest currents rooted in feeling and the lived qualities of things that must be recognized and submitted to continuous criticism and clarification.

In his seminal 1930 essay, “Qualitative Thought,” an indispensable piece of philosophical writing, Dewey writes:

The world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive, succeed, and are defeated is preeminently a qualitative world. What we act for, suffer, and enjoy are things in their qualitative determinations. This world forms the field of characteristic modes of thinking, characteristic in that thought is definitely regulated by qualitative considerations. [...] that thought which has to do with objects involved in the concerns and issues of living (1930, p. 195).

These objects and the concerns and issues of living in which they are embedded make up the “subject-matters” of life, which we confront in what Dewey called “problematic situations,” each with a “unifying qualitiveness” that is accessed through “feeling.” Such a qualitiveness holds engagement with the world together and frames it affectively, giving our engagements an overarching “toned aboutness.” Dewey writes that “[...] we are aware of it not by itself, but as the background, the thread, and the directive clue in what we do expressly think of” and find “problematic” (1930, p. 198). “Background,” “thread,” “directive clue” focus on

different aspects of the role and function of contexts, which are kinds of multi-leveled heuristic force fields in which we dwell and within which, and from which, we make our conceptual decisions and existential commitments. They can be thought of as indwelt vector fields of different sorts guiding us toward a “focus.”

Being in a multiplicity of different kinds of “problematic situations” is the originary experiential matrix of that itch or irritation that engenders the search for a true understanding, an “adequate” (in the sense of *adequatio*) response not just *to* situations but *into* them, as Dewey showed in his classic 1896 paper on the reflex arc. The pervasive toned quality of a situation or existential context, including scientific contexts but encompassing every form of everydayness, gives it a distinctive feel: happy, melancholic, depressing, welcoming, languid, interesting, threatening, demanding, and so forth.

The pervasive quality of situations and existential contexts is noticed as an overarching and permeating *tone*. Such noticing of a quality of a situation or of a focus of thought or subject matter, especially if we cannot pin it down, gives rise to thought—as in the fascination of a scientific problems. “The sense of something problematic, of something perplexing and yet to be resolved, marks the presence of something pervading all elements and considerations. Thought is the operation by which it is converted into pertinent and coherent terms” (1930, p. 198), that is, “goes out into symbolization,” as Dewey puts it. As Peirce wrote: “There is a distinctive *quale* to every combination of sensations so far as it is really synthesized—a distinctive *quale* to this moment as it is to me—a distinctive *quale* to every day and every week—a peculiar *quale* to my whole consciousness” (CP 6.223). Such a peculiar *quale* is also a central factor in our inability or refusal to recognize incompatibilities between the various lived contexts of our lives or our ability to accept them even if we recognize them in some way or the other. It is the source of a deep biasing of perception.

Experience as inclusive mental life does not stand outside this “pervading something,” exemplified for Dewey—with general import—in the initial prethematic grasp of paintings. Dewey writes that:

[...] its quality is not a property which it possesses in addition to its other properties. It is something which externally demarcates it from other paintings, and which internally pervades, colors, tones, and weights every detail and every relation of the work of art. The same thing is true of the ‘quality’ of a person or of historic events (1930, p. 196).

This regulative quality as an all-pervasive influence “biases” the process of determination, but not necessarily in single directions, as art works and historical events and persons show. Backgrounds and contexts have their own defining qualities. As indwelt, however, we attend to the world both *from* and *within* them. As to their operative *from-character* they are not objects but access-structures and indwelt settings of various sorts. As to their dynamic *within-character* they are, as we saw Dewey claiming, “[...] the circumambient atmosphere that thought must breathe” (1931, p. 211). This is no “mere” metaphor.

3 Between contexts and atmospheres

It would be worth considering Gernot Böhme's parallel, or seemingly overlapping, development of the concept of an "atmosphere" to see to what degree, if any, it offers a confirmation, reconfiguration, and supplementation of Dewey's claims about contexts and atmospheres. Böhme remarks in his *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* that the "[...] expression 'atmospheric' is applied to persons, spaces, and to nature" (2017a, p. 11). Atmosphere, according to Böhme, is the Janus-faced *in-between* joining the feeling organism with a complex environment, especially the built worlds in which we live embedded in and transforming nature, which Böhme explored in his *Atmospheric Architectures* (2017b). Atmospheres, while real, he argues, are not free-floating independent things. They are rooted in the material and social world's supporting structures. They are characterized in different ways in language, which has a power to stabilize, in the semiotic sense, atmospheres and even engender new forms of classification and discernment about how they affect us as moods or forms of attunement. They are not just felt but named although those affected by atmospheres may be at a loss to name them and instead let someone else do it for them, submitting the naming power to one who proclaims, "I am your voice," often with catastrophic consequences.

But "being affected" is itself an interpretation, in the sense of the "proper significate effect" of engagement with an environmental context. Böhme, along with Dewey, argues that an atmosphere is something quasi-objective, something that exists intersubjectively. Atmospheres are not merely private or inner states. Their naming, in the work of criticism undertaken by philosophy, is, as Dewey put it, the interpretive and evaluative process of "[...] going out into symbolization and analysis" [1930, p. 205n4]. This is a process that could also lead to profound discord or dissonance if the affectively charged descriptive frames to which we have been assimilated are not grounded in coherent configurations of "generating" particulars of the atmosphere but are used to cloak them. Such is the pernicious case of the slogan, "Make America Great Again," with its paradoxical and divisive appeal. But there are other large-scale historical examples, both past and present, of such rhetorical and mythical appeals that come readily to mind.

Atmospheres, on Böhme's account, dis-pose us by our dwelling in and growing into them. Although the notion of atmosphere has a meteorological origin, like a certain mood hanging in the air as weather patterns exemplify (see INGOLD, 2011a, 2011b), Böhme proposes that we can best think of atmospheres as *tuned spaces*, that is, spaces with a certain mood. They are not "objects" but the "tone" emitted by object-grounded situations, places, and events. Atmospheres are "spatial" and emotional places in which we dwell, move around in, and which surround us, such as the acoustic world, the intertwining of music and architecture, and so forth (BÖHME, 2017a; INGOLD, 2013, 2015). They are named by attending to their characteristics, their "tendencies to modify my own mood" (2017a, p. 2), a naming process handed down to us by the "idiom" in which we come to mental life or to which we have been assimilated or toward which we have been "lured" by a Pied Piper. This process happens behind our backs, tacitly, with no operative action on our part and thus become part of our form of existence, forming a kind of affective

semiotic skin (NEDERGAARD, 2016). And we can have affection for them and not just be affected by them. Such affection, history has shown, is not always benign.

Looked at through Böhme's lenses, contexts and situations of thought, Dewey's multi-leveled "inclusive mental life," are marked by the "atmosphere they are radiating" (1971a, p. 6). Confirming Dewey's core insight, Böhme claims that "radiating atmospheres" of all sorts is a universal phenomenon of the lifeworld, resulting, now with the rise of new technologies of the image, in a "[...] ubiquitous aesthetization of our lifeworld [...] of staging of everything, every event and performance" (*Ibid.*, p. 6), joining affect-laden perception, rooted in the body, and the explicitly semiotic world of the articulate—lying—animals that we are.

Atmospheres, however, according to Böhme's contentious claim, have a "peculiar intermediary status" between subject and object in that both are "in" it, rather than its merely being in them. Clearly, as affecting the body, atmospheres are "in" the subject as a distinctive permeating *quale* or affective tone, as Peirce showed. And in being dependent upon what Böhme calls the ec-stasies of their generators, the situations with their objects and patterns of relations, both problematic and otherwise, are latently in these objects and patterns as powers or energies that are "realized," whether spontaneously or staged. Böhme connects the concept of an atmosphere with Walter Benjamin's notion of aura (see index to 2017a). Aura, Böhme asserts, in a remarkable parallel to Dewey, is "almost something like a breath or a haze."

Böhme, with reliance on Hermann Schmitz's "new phenomenology," focuses on the explicit connection of atmospheres with the body (see SCHMITZ, 2019). This phenomenology, Böhme remarks, is not bound to things, but to the spatial character of atmospheres, "[...] without borders, disseminated and yet without place, that is, not localizable" (2017a, p. 16), yet felt as *present*. Atmospheres are "[...] affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods" (2017a, p. 16), such as the strained atmosphere of a room, an oppressive thundery atmosphere, the serene atmosphere of a garden, the tension of a political debate or rally (*Ibid.*, p. 16), or an uplifting pragmatism meeting in São Paulo. We undergo these atmospheres, are taken up, even seized and changed by them. Our body becomes a locus of tension and expansion and in its affectivity manifests itself in bodily impulses and symbolic actions, declarations, and gestures of all sorts [see Maddalena (2015) for a pragmatist development of this]. These atmospheres can clearly interrupt us or surprise us or alienate us—or seduce us. But looked at positively they are also forms of attunement accommodating us to the world and its "toned" objects and situations with distinctive qualities within which these objects and their relations appear. Developing these atmospheres becomes an existential task for building communities founded on meaning and not maintained by force. Such a task is that pursued by the tradition of critical theory as well of a Deweyan liberal pragmatism.

4 Ecstatic energies

In a famous chapter in *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey wrote of the organization of energies, referring both to the energies of the perceiver and the energies of things, their potencies and their varying shades of expressiveness. There is an obverse

phenomenon here: felt disorganization of energies, scattering, lack of center and central control, incoherence. Böhme proposes, from a phenomenological perspective, in analogous fashion that we think of things and their “ecstasies” and not of things and their determining subject-independent properties. We live in a world of powers. Like Dewey, Böhme claims that our relation to the field of experience is not first and foremost to “objects” which we “represent” in neutral fashion. Such a conception leads to what Dewey called “intellectual lockjaw.” Our fundamental intertwining with the environmental field is marked by a dynamic awareness of “[...] my state of being in an environment—how I feel here” (BÖHME, 2017a, p. 18). This feeling is the affective-energetic interpretant of the ways in which things go forth from themselves with radiating power and elicit from us appropriate responses. The feeling-configuration that marks our existence strives to find a “fitting” characterization and participatory response to them. Often our own words fail us, and we instead have recourse to the voice of another, or of The Other, which we take over at our own risk.

Böhme, working within an extended phenomenological framework, goes so far as to think of even “so-called primary qualities such as extension and form as ecstasies,” not being enclosed within limits, but taking away “the homogeneity of the surrounding space” and filling it with “tensions and suggestions of movement” (BÖHME, 2017a, p. 19)—including the movements of symbolization in its many forms, including the gestural, rooted in the body as a field of expressions and significant gestures in Mead’s sense. This is a generalizable point. The “movements” in atmospheres are not just physical but also social, such as joining in a riot, being swayed to vote or to support a candidate who “radiates” a distinctive “tinctured” atmosphere rather than a coherent program—as in the rise of mass movements and of variably motivated right wing populisms throughout the world. This notion of a space, including social space, is of something “being tinctured” or created by the radiating presence of things, persons, and environmental constellations (BÖHME, 2017a, p. 19). It is not something “free floating.”

Conceived in this fashion, atmospheres are neither something objective, that is, qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thing-like, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities—conceived as ecstasies. Nor are atmospheres something subjective, determinations of a psychic state. And yet they are subject-like, belong to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this sensing is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space (BÖHME, 2017a, p. 19).

Atmospheres define or ground a distinctive sense of whereness, the sharing of which grounds habits of “trust between people” (BÖHME, 2017a, p. 126), like the odor of a nest with its aura of safety and commonality, giving it a feel of home. Every *indwelt* space “enters our disposition as a touching character,” eliciting from us or motivating us to acknowledge, and act accordingly, that we are participants not observers of the atmospheres in which we live and produce through our own actions—including allowing those produced through the actions of others (BÖHME,

2017a, p. 129). The failure, on both the individual and the social levels, to live up to or to construct “qualitatively rich” frameworks for living is a form of existential untruth with deep affective and actional consequences, a condition cognate to false consciousness.

The existential contexts of our lives are emergent *atmospheres* that actively inform our fundamental perceptual experiences of the world, permeating *aisthesis*, processes of the embodied sensory plenum out of which all other forms of meeting and constructing the world are differentiated and developed. These atmospheres tune us into what Böhme calls “the great concert of the world.” But we are also in substantial ways living in a world out of tune, a world that is “untrue” to our existence and to our hunger for experiential meaning and where we are out of focus. A “bad” atmosphere is a kind of experiential “untruth,” devoid of affectively tuned *aesthetic* fulfillment, introducing existential and symbolic imbalance. Atmospheres as emergent qualities arising from their “generators” shape the very felt contexts of our existence and form over time distinct sensibilities in those who dwell in them (see INNIS, 2017). How difficult, then, to try to free ourselves from, or even to recognize, the affective force of these contexts, our *Sitz im Leben* or forms of life informed by multileveled traditions in which we are embodied. One is reminded of Wittgenstein’s aphorism that if a lion could speak, we would not be able to understand her—or feel or act “in concert” with her.

5 A heuristic epilogue

In his *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion* Ben-Ami Scharfstein makes the following claim:

The deepest conceptual structures—or, as I prefer, conceptual-emotive structures—of our thinking are largely hidden from us; and because we cannot bring them to clear consciousness or imitate them in symbols, they are beyond our ability to express in any way but intuition and action. Yet there is a natural continuum between what we can and cannot see clearly, and those who specify exactly what we can never know have often been proved to have drawn the line too sharply. Maybe, then, our condition is almost musical (SCHARFSTEIN, 1993, p. 158).

If so, then our “almost musical” condition imposes on us the demand to recognize the natural continuum of scales of differences in the lived tones of contexts and the differences in intuition and action that make up the great argumentative concert of the human world. Differences, however, can lead to forms of dissonance that border on cacophony. And in the search for complex harmonies the great temptation is the quest for certainty and the turn to monotonal privileged insight and conceptual ultimates as the locus of a self-ascribed authority to impose their acceptance, a temptation that the pragmatist tradition is not alone in opposing at every point.

In *The Public and Its Problems* John Dewey focuses precisely on this issue:

The ties which hold men together in action are numerous, tough, and subtle. But they are invisible and intangible. We have before us the tools of communication as never before [...] Communication can alone create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible [...] A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. 'Force' is not eliminated but is transformed in use and direction by ideas and sentiments made possible by means of symbols (DEWEY, 1927, p. 152).

The “ties” that Dewey refers to are not just our ties to one another. We are tied to the multileveled lived contexts in which we communally and individually engage in “combined action.” Dewey wrote elsewhere that “[...] to fail to understand is to fail to come into agreement in action; to misunderstand is to set up action at cross purposes” (1925, p. 179). Joseph Grange (2004), echoing Dewey, wrote that “[...] the circle binding values, actions, and meanings is a closed one. Failed action signals a failed value. Signs, symbolic codes, and rituals of social action are not external to the situation within which they have application. They *are* the situation” (2004, p. 61). The threat of a distorted ratio between embodied fore-structures, what Grange called our “habitual body”, entails that the “failure of one aspect of the habitual body will echo through all its other responses,” especially our responses to others radically different from us or to situations radically different from the customary. We must develop what Grange called “vectors of response” when “[...] great cracks appear in the walls of our publicly shared house of understanding” (2004, p. 60). Criticism of the other through force must turn to forceful self-criticism both individual and communal.

In his *Truth and Method*, H-G. Gadamer draws attention to an originary “center” out of which language, as the paradigmatic form of symbolic articulation and the medium of discourse, emerges:

Every word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole, through which alone it is a word. Every word causes the whole of language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole view of the world which lies behind it to appear. Thus every word, in its momentariness, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and indicating [...] All human speaking is finite in such a way that there is within it an infinity of meaning to be elaborated and interpreted” (GADAMER, 1965, p. 425-426).

The infinity of meaning that language strives to capture in finite means is to be found not just in language but in what Dewey called the “[...] boundless multiplicity of the concrete experiences of humanity” (1931, p. 16). This is the center from which the word breaks forth and which it makes appear even if it cannot fully grasp it in its lived reality. William James is right in affirming that “[...] conceptual knowledge

is forever inadequate to the fullness of reality to be known” (1911, p. 78), a position Dewey also affirmed. Language and other symbol systems nevertheless help us institute various forms of interpretive order within the boundless multiplicity of our experiences. Their very multiplicity points *locates* the infinity of meaning in the lived contexts and atmospheres of our unique lives in time. There is no guarantee that accepting this multiplicity of lived contexts will lead to Böhme’s “trust between people,” but not accepting it will not only block our access to the worlds of others but our access to our own worlds.¹

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1 I have treated issues linked with the present themes in a series of papers to be found in the list of references.

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