

**IMMEDIACY AND EXPERIENCE  
IN WITTGENSTEIN'S NOTION OF  
'IMPONDERABLE EVIDENCE'**

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**ABSTRACT:** The subject of this paper is the notion of 'imponderable evidence', employed on a few occasions by the later Wittgenstein. Our perception of others' feelings, thoughts and emotions, Wittgenstein observes, is ordinarily guided by an imponderable evidence, which, while remaining unmeasurable and ultimately ungraspable, gives us access to an immediate – yet fallible – form of understanding. This understanding, I will argue, is essentially qualitative.

Section 1 of the paper introduces the issue through the examination of some remarks on how our attitude towards living beings differs from our attitude towards objects. Sections 2 and 3 present the notion of imponderable evidence in the framework of Wittgenstein's approach to the philosophy of psychology and his remarks on aesthetic judgment. In section 4, I will turn to Dewey's conception of 'qualitative thought' as an aid to clarify further the sense of Wittgenstein's terminology. The final section concludes on why philosophers should care about the qualitative dimension of human existence.

**Keywords:** Ludwig Wittgenstein; John Dewey, imponderable evidence; qualitative thought; immediacy

**Introduction**

This paper investigates a seemingly elusive notion that the later Wittgenstein employs only on a few occasions: the notion of 'imponderable evidence', which he mostly associates with the related concept of 'Menschenkenntnis', the knowledge of human beings or the knowledge of human nature. Our perception of others' feelings, thoughts and emotions, Wittgenstein observes, is ordinarily guided by an imponderable evidence, which, while remaining unmeasurable and ultimately ungraspable, gives us access to an immediate – yet fallible – form of understanding. This understanding, I will argue, is essentially qualitative. In order to clarify this, I will compare Wittgenstein's remarks on imponderable evidence and Menschenkenntnis with John Dewey's conception of 'qualitative thought'. Without claiming that the two

perspectives overlap, I will more modestly put them side by side and point out some affinities, with the aim of shedding some light on an important dimension of our life, too often neglected in philosophy.

Section 1 of the paper introduces the issue through the examination of some Wittgensteinian remarks regarding our attitude towards living beings and how it differs from our attitude towards objects. Sections 2 and 3 present the notion of imponderable evidence in the framework of Wittgenstein's approach to the philosophy of psychology and his remarks on aesthetic judgment. We shall see that *immediacy* and *experience* are intertwined in imponderable evidence. In section 4, I will turn to Dewey's conception of qualitative thought as an aid to clarify further the sense of Wittgenstein's terminology. The final section concludes on why philosophers should care about the qualitative dimension of human existence.

**1. Inanimate objects and living beings**

The expression 'imponderable evidence', *unwägbar* *Evidenz*, where *wägen* means 'to weigh' or 'to ponder', is used by Wittgenstein chiefly in some late writings on the philosophy of psychology, dealing with our relationship with the other(s). As we shall see, in this context Wittgenstein is addressing the mixture of immediate certainty ('evidence') and uncertainty or indeterminacy ('imponderable') that characterizes our perception and understanding of other peoples' emotions, expressions, feelings, reactions, intentions, and thoughts. By paying attention to the ordinary practices and exchanges that belong to our everyday life, more generally, Wittgenstein is engaged in the dissolution of a traditional problem of philosophy, namely, the problem of skepticism about other minds. The notion of imponderable evidence is (also) part of this reflection.

A good starting point for introducing the issue is Wittgenstein's reasoning concerning the difference between our attitude towards living beings and our attitude towards objects or minerals, in the *Philosophical Investigations*. This reasoning is strictly connected with

the so-called 'Private Language Argument', where Wittgenstein contests the idea that an absolutely private language is possible, or even coherently conceivable. Without entering the larger debate on this topic (see Candlish & Wrisley 2014 for an overview), let us just examine a few passages:

[O]nly of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious. (PI<sup>1</sup> § 281)

Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations. – One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation* to a *thing*? One might as well ascribe it to a number! – And now look at a wriggling fly, and at once these difficulties vanish, and pain seems able to get a *foothold* here, where before everything was, so to speak, too *smooth* for it.

And so, too, a corpse seems to us quite inaccessible to pain. – Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead is not the same. All our reactions are different. – If someone says, 'That cannot simply come from the fact that living beings move in such and such ways and dead one's don't', then I want to suggest to him that this is a case of the transition 'from quantity to quality'. (PI § 284)

Think of the recognition of *facial expressions*. Or the description of facial expressions – which does not consist in giving the measurements of the face! Think, too, how one can imitate a man's face without seeing one's own in a mirror. (PI § 285)

Different points are made in these remarks. A general one seems to be that there is something strange in the idea that we ascribe feelings to others on the basis of our knowledge of our own internal states and the consideration of the similarity between our own and others' bodily behaviour. In seeing pain in the wriggling fly, a much more immediate process seems involved: something more akin to perception, maybe, rather than 'ascription' of pain to the fly. More precisely: it is our *immediate* attitude and *natural* reactions towards that

living being that are different from the immediate attitude and natural reactions we have towards, say, a stone or an object.

This is connected to a second point: Wittgenstein's attention is focused on our *attitude* (*Einstellung*), not on our *knowledge* of others and of others' minds. This shift of focus is central to Wittgenstein's overall strategy in the context of the problem of other minds. The skeptical challenge regarding other minds, in fact, is an *epistemic* challenge: its core claim is that we are unable to prove that we have or can have knowledge of other peoples' mental states (thoughts, emotions etc.). Wittgenstein's claim, by contrast, is *not* simply that we do have knowledge of others' mental states; rather, he shows that talk of knowledge in a strict sense, in this context, is inappropriate. Even more radically, he shows that it is precisely talk of knowledge that makes the problem itself arise. Indeed, once we frame the question in epistemic terms, we cannot but give credit to the hypothesis that there are some things (others' mental states) waiting to be known. And once in this framework, it is a short step to also accept that in our attempt to know the other person's state of mind, we face a problem, because we do not have a direct epistemic access to her or his state of mind, due to the asymmetry between first and third person.<sup>2</sup> As Wittgenstein puts it some years later:

My attitude towards him is the attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul (PPF § 21)

Attitude, in this sense, precedes knowledge, and it is attitude rather than knowledge that governs our life with others (cf. Gangopadhyay and Pichler 2016).

A third point that emerges from the quoted passages above, has to do with *measurement*. In recognizing and in describing the expressions of a face, we do not

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<sup>1</sup> For abbreviations of Wittgenstein's works, see the list of references.

<sup>2</sup> There is a form of scientism in this craving to know: we are inclined to shape the problem of other minds as science does, that is, as a matter of empirical knowledge. See Child (2017).

measure: we do not care about how many millimeters the lips or the eyebrows of the person raise when she is happy or angry, nor do we judge her happiness based on the width of her smile – though, of course, the width of a smile, just like the number of someone's tears or the frequency of his pulse rate, do have connections with the intensity of that person's emotions. The point is that we do not measure these elements in order to know how she is feeling. A transition 'from quantity to quality', says Wittgenstein, is at stake here.

Let us keep in mind this point: the difference in our attitudes when we are concerned with human (and more generally, living) beings rather than inanimate objects has to do with the difference between quantity and quality. This is something Wittgenstein does not linger on, but we shall return to it, because one aspect that the notion of imponderable evidence helps us to see is precisely the qualitative dimension of human life, and especially of human life with others.

## 2. Imponderable evidence and the other minds

I will now proceed to examine the passages in which Wittgenstein talks of imponderable evidence.

We saw that our relationship with living beings is different from our relationship with inanimate objects. One shape that this difference assumes is that in the context of interpersonal relationships, the rules of evidence, as well as those of agreement and disagreement, are peculiar.

I am sure, *sure*, that he is not pretending; but some third person is not. Can I always convince him? And if not, is there some mistake in his reasoning or observations?

'You don't understand a thing!' – this is what one says when someone doubts what we recognize as clearly genuine – but we cannot prove anything. (PPF §§ 353-354)

While the truth of empirical claims about inanimate objects is ascertained through observation and reasoning, and can be proved or confuted, when it

comes to the genuineness of a person's expressions of feelings, these methods, so to speak, lose their grip. Yet, the impossibility of proving the genuineness or authenticity of a person's expressions does not entail that one cannot be *sure* about them. Certainty and proof are disconnected here.

This aspect shows the distance from the context of empirical knowledge, in which if someone knows something with certainty, they are normally able to give evidence and reasons for their knowledge, and can be asked to produce evidence and reasons. It is common to disagree in judgments about a person's sincerity, and although in discussion one may be asked to give reasons for one's beliefs (for instance, to recall other situations in which the person in question behaved in such and such a way and was or was not genuine in her expressions), these are not decisive in convincing others. To reiterate: the absence of proofs does not disrupt the possibility of being legitimately sure about another's sincerity. Quite the opposite, the impossibility of proof is part of the ordinary practice of judging the other's feelings, in such a way that without it (without the impossibility of proof), the practice itself and the patterns of life in which it occurs would be radically and unpredictably different.

Interestingly, this constitutive absence of proof is not an absence of criteria for judgment, neither is it an absence of 'expert judgment' on others' feelings. 'Here too – Wittgenstein observes (§ 355) – there are those with "better" and those with "worse" judgment', and '[i]n general, predictions arising from judgments from those with better knowledge of people [*des bessern Menschenkenners*] will be more correct' (ibid.). *Menschenkenntnis*, clearly, is not a form of knowledge in a strict sense, but rather a sort of sensibility to the physiognomy of the human, a capacity in perceiving and judging the others' nature, moods, dispositions, and states of mind, which to a certain extent can be learned and taught.

Can one learn this knowledge [*Menschenkenntnis*]? Yes; some can learn it. Not, however, by taking a course of study in it, but through 'experience' [*Erfahrung*]. – Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right tip. – This is what 'learning' and 'teaching' are like here. – What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people [*Erfahrene*] can apply them rightly. Unlike calculating rules. (PPF § 355).

Experience, therefore – not in the sense of lived experience (*Erlebnis*), but in the sense of training, repetition, 'varied observation' (PPF § 357), and learning by doing – can provide a person with this special kind of skill or familiarity with human nature, an ability or a disposition to judge correctly the genuineness of others and to predict correctly their future behavior from their present actions. This experienced knowledge is perhaps more akin to a form of knowing-how than a knowing-that: it is a capacity, whose rules are *not* the systematic rules of a calculus, but the unwritten, implicit and hardly definite rules of experience.

Although there is no proof here, there is a form of evidence – and here we come to the notion of imponderable evidence:

One can indeed be convinced by the evidence that someone is in such-and-such a state of mind: that, for instance, he is not pretending. But there is also 'imponderable' evidence here. (PPF § 358)

The question is: what does imponderable evidence *accomplish* [*leistet*]? (PPF § 359)

The first thing to underline here is that Wittgenstein is not drawing a sharp distinction between (ponderable) evidence and imponderable evidence. Both can be at work in our judgments concerning someone's state of mind. In distinguishing between the two, Wittgenstein is trying to understand what imponderable evidence does, performs, accomplishes, provides, or affords; in other words, what is its place or role in our life.

The case is compared in the following lines with evidence concerning the chemical structure of a substance, and the genuineness of a work of art:

Suppose there were imponderable evidence for the chemical (internal) structure of a substance; still, it would have to prove itself to be evidence by certain consequences which *are* ponderable.

(Imponderable evidence might convince someone that a picture [*Bild*] was a genuine ... But this *may* be proved right by documentation as well). (ibid.)

In the case of the chemical structure, imponderable evidence *has* to be also supported by ponderable evidence: if for some reasons I were miraculously equipped with the capacity to know the internal, invisible structure of a substance, this kind of evidence would not suffice. Something measurable would also be needed.

The case of the genuineness of a work of art seems to stand midway between human expressions and the internal structure of a substance: in judging whether a painting is (say) a Titian, an art critic can have imponderable evidence for this, but this evidence *may* also be confirmed (or not) by documentation (scientific information on the dating of pigments, for instance).

Notice that the reflection pivots on the internal/external distinction: in each case, evidence, be it ponderable or imponderable, is supposed to provide knowledge or understanding of something that seems to be, in some form, *inside* the object and not in plain view. Wittgenstein draws on a range of cases: for inanimate objects, even if imponderable evidence were possible, ponderable evidence would be necessary; for a work of art, both ponderable and imponderable evidence are possible and can supplement each other; for human states of mind, both forms are possible, and imponderable evidence seems to have the most important role. I am probably oversimplifying here, but my point is that Wittgenstein is comparing various forms of evidence in various contexts, making us aware of how our epistemic practices and our interactions vary, and at the same time how boundaries are not as sharp as we might tend to think.

Ponderability and imponderability, he seems to suggest, are not mutually exclusive, and even in the domain of interpersonal relationships ponderable evidence is possible. In fact, feelings, emotions, and intentions are bound to the external criteria, behavior – visible actions that to a certain extent can be evaluated, documented, and 'weighed'. Therefore, if on the one hand it would not be satisfactory to negate the role of imponderability in our judgments, on the other hand, it would equally be unsatisfactory to say that the genuineness of an expression can *only* be 'felt' by gifted people who can feel it (see PPF § 357). We do not measure the width of a smile in order to know 'how much happiness' someone feels, and yet we do not simply 'feel' or have an inexplicable private intuition of that person's happiness. We are aware of someone's state of mind because we are acquainted and familiar with her behavior and with human behavior in general, in all its nuances and complex variability.

Imponderable evidence includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone.

I may recognize a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one (and here there can, of course, be a 'ponderable' confirmation of my judgment). But I may be quite incapable of describing the difference. (PPF § 360)

When we recognize the authenticity of another person's expression, *something* in her way of behaving makes us certain of her psychological state; and yet we are not able to explain exactly what it is. As ter Hark puts it, '[i]mponderable evidence is evidence which can make us certain about someone's psychological state, without our being able to specify what it is in their behaviour that makes us so sure' (ter Hark 2004, 140). This immediate and yet expert certainty can be utterly impossible to put into words.

### 3. Having an 'eye' for something

As we saw, Wittgenstein touched on aesthetic judgment as a case in which imponderable evidence has a role, though it may also be supported by ponderable elements. I would like now to expand a little on imponderable evidence and aesthetics. Aesthetic *creation*, instead of judgment, is also called for in the second part of PPF § 360, immediately following the quoted passage above. After stating that by imponderable evidence it is possible to distinguish between a genuine and a pretended loving look, but we 'may be quite incapable of describing the difference', Wittgenstein continues:

[T]his is not because the languages I know have no words for it. Why don't I simply introduce new words? – If I were a very talented painter, I might conceivably represent the genuine and the dissembled glance in pictures. (ibid.)

While words would not help us in describing what it is in that look that makes us certain of its sincerity, we may – talent permitting – represent a genuine look, and others would recognize in the representation sincerity or insincerity. The internal state, so to speak, is displayed in the look and can be displayed in a represented look, if the artist is good enough in capturing and rendering the expression. Notice that the representation need not be an exact portrayal: the talented artist is able to represent 'the' genuine glance, not this particular one. The good painter knows how a genuine loving glance looks like, and how it is embedded in and connected with bodily movements, gestures, and attitudes.

How does the painter know? Not only does he or she develop the capacity to depict the genuine glance; first and foremost, the artist develops the capacity to see and recognize the genuine glance in people around him or her, and to see in the glance the feeling, emotion, or state of mind of the person. To a greater or lesser degree, this capacity is naturally developed by human beings in general as they grow up. But there are also

many specific contexts, most notably aesthetic ones, in which some people develop a particular 'eye' for something, a marked sensibility or ability to perceive subtle nuances, differences, and tones. This is what enables them to fully appreciate the overall quality of a performance, or a work of art, for instance.

Ask yourself: How does a man learn to get an 'eye' [*Blick*] for something? And how can this eye be used? (PPF § 361)

The 'eye' for something can be trained and refined through experience and practice; more specifically, through the kind of experience and practice that a master can teach to an apprentice.

An important fact here is that we learn certain things only through long experience and not from a course in school. How, for instance, does one develop the eye of a connoisseur? Someone says, for example: 'This picture was not painted by such-and-such a master'--the statement he makes is thus not an aesthetic judgment, but one that can be proved by documentation. He may not be able to give good reasons for his verdict.--How did he learn it? Could someone have taught him? Quite.--Not in the same way as one learns to calculate. A great deal of experience was necessary. (LS I § 925).

The continuous immersion in a context and involvement in its practices, with the imitation of more trained participants and sometimes the explicit guide of experts, progressively sharpens the capacity to perceive nuances, as well as to respond appropriately when a response is expected. As time passes, what initially had to be made explicitly conscious, is acquired as part of a *Bildung* and begins to work in the background, becoming 'natural'. Aesthetic reactions are therefore, at the very same time, immediate and experienced, in the sense of trained or made expert. *Immediacy*, we might say, is the expression of experience.

The affinity between the aesthetic eye and the perception of human emotions and states of mind is also touched on by Wittgenstein in his lectures on aesthetics. In discussing our use of words like 'good' and 'beautiful'

in aesthetic reactions and judgments, he points out that these words themselves are unimportant, while what matters is the 'enormously complicated situation in which the aesthetic expression has a place' (LC, 2). Other adjectives, not strictly descriptive, can be used more efficaciously by an art critic or a music expert: a melody, for instance, could be called 'youthful', 'springly', 'stately', or 'pompous' (ibid, 3). But notice:

If I were a good draughtsman, I could convey an innumerable number of expressions by four strokes [omitted: sketches of faces]

Such words as 'pompous' and 'stately' could be expressed by faces. Doing this, our descriptions would be much more flexible and various than they are as expressed by adjectives. If I say of a piece of Schubert's that it is melancholy, that is like giving it a face (I don't express approval or disapproval). I could instead use gestures or [Rhees] dancing. In fact, if we want to be exact, we do use a gesture or a facial expression. (ibid, 4).

Even when we can find words to express the impression that a melody or a painting produces on us and what we think of it, a facial expression – including a drawn facial expression, like the sketches proposed by Wittgenstein, oddly similar to smileys – would be more *exact*. This is the exactness of an appropriate expression, not the exactness of a measurement: it is a sort of 'imponderable exactness', we might say, that belongs to the person who has an 'eye' for something.

All we have seen thus far indicates that imponderable evidence is inextricably interwoven with the variability and indeterminateness of the phenomena of human life. A selection of passages from Wittgenstein's later remarks on the philosophy of psychology can help us to consolidate this theme.

Sufficient evidence passes over into insufficient without a borderline. A natural foundation for the way this concept is formed is the complex nature and the variety of human contingencies.

A facial expression that was completely fixed couldn't be a friendly one. Variability and irregularity are essential to a friendly expression. Irregularity is part of its physiognomy.

The importance we attach to the subtle shades of behaviour.

That the evidence makes someone else's feelings merely probable is not what matters to us; what we are looking at is the fact that *this* is taken as evidence for something; that we construct a statement on *this* involved sort of evidence, and hence that *such* evidence has a special importance in our lives [...]. (RPP II §§ 614, 615, 616, 709)

The last remark makes clear Wittgenstein's general point: rather than focusing on the fact that shades of behavior give us only a probable evidence of the other's state of mind, we should consider that this is the kind of evidence we normally go by: *this is how we act*; imponderable evidence is part of our form of life (see also LS II, 89). Neither imponderability nor the imperfection of this form of evidence should worry us. Absolute epistemic certainty is neither what we need, nor what we actually look for when we interact with one another. As he puts it in LS (II, 81), 'That our evidence makes someone else's experience only probable doesn't take us far; but that this pattern of our experience that is hard to describe is an important piece of evidence for us does. That this fluctuation is an important part of our life'.

Acquiring an 'eye' for something, just like acquiring *Menschenkenntnis*, is only possible in virtue of our belonging to a form of life in which fluctuations in the pattern of experience and imponderable evidence are important, so important that they contribute in an essential way to its characterization. In fact, we would not really even be able to imagine how our life would be, without imponderable evidence. Convinced by the skeptic, we might wish to eliminate imponderable evidence from our life, in favour of an alternative scenario in which we could always *know* with ponderable and verifiable evidence what is in another person's mind. Notice that this scenario is ultimately what is called for in the commonsensical, yet scientific urge to 'read' another's mind, or to know via scientific instruments what the other's thoughts and desires really

are (cf. Child 2017). A similar outlook is tacitly at work in the dispute between 'Theory Theory' and 'Simulation Theory' characterizing the debate of the last decades in cognitive science<sup>3</sup>. Suppose we took this urge seriously, and built a portable mechanical 'lie-detector' that would reveal, 100% accurately, any lies in our interpersonal exchanges. 'Lie' would be redefined as 'that which causes a deflection on the lie detector'. Now, Wittgenstein asks:

Would we change our way of living if this or that were provided for us?--And how could I answer that? (LS II, 95)

The reason why the question remains open, if my reading is correct, is that in such a scenario our life would be so profoundly different, that we cannot really imagine it. Some of our most fundamental concepts would be involved in the change, such as those of evidence, prove, truth, and lie. The point is that imponderable evidence is *conceptually* bound to our form of life, and to suppose that our lack of knowledge of other minds is a defect, something that we might overcome, amounts to not being able to see how central this imponderability is in our way of living. Thinking that it is possible to turn this qualitative aspect into something measurable, is not merely making an empirical hypothesis: it is an attempt compelled by a misleading picture, which betrays, in the end, a conceptual confusion.

<sup>3</sup> Both approaches indeed aim at explaining how one acquires the capacity to 'mind-read' an agent's intentions by acquiring knowledge of her or his internal mental states (be it through a system of concepts, as in 'Theory Theory', or by using one's own mind as a model, as in 'Simulation Theory'). For a survey of this literature, see Marraffa (2011).

#### 4. Dewey's qualitative thought

With the aim of clarifying the qualitative nature of Wittgenstein's notion of imponderable evidence and possibly extending its purport beyond Wittgensteinian literature, I will now make use of another thinker's perspective, which shows interesting affinities with this Wittgensteinian reflection: John Dewey's. Yet, I will approach Dewey only with respect to some aspects of his conception of 'qualitative thought', without claiming either to offer a full description of this conception, or to draw a general comparison with Wittgenstein.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of remaining focused on the theme of quality, I will also leave aside Dewey's reflections on the expression and understanding of emotions, on which other parallels with Wittgenstein's approach would undoubtedly be interesting, but would require a much more extensive work<sup>5</sup>. My use of Dewey's perspective is therefore admittedly instrumental.

Dewey defends the qualitative dimension of experience on a number of occasions. In *Experience and Nature*, for instance, against the typical philosophical fallacy of reifying those features of reality which appear most stable and permanent into ontological entities, he vindicates the ineffable and qualitative character of events as they are immediately enjoyed or suffered (see in particular Chapters 3, 4, and 7). 'Empirically,' he says, 'things are poignant, tragic, beautiful, humorous, settled, disturbed, comfortable, annoying, barren, harsh, consoling, splendid, fearful [...]' (Dewey 1925, 96<sup>6</sup>). From an empirical point of view, he claims, aesthetic quality,

in a broad sense, characterizes situations and events as they occur in the world, and in the end science, even quantitative science, must recognize that it has its basis in qualitative events (p. 86).

In his 1930 article titled 'Qualitative Thought' Dewey puts forth some ideas which are particularly illuminating for our purposes. The world in which we live, he claims, is primarily qualitative, and *thinking* itself, including logic, is shaped and informed by an intrinsic qualitative background. The very beginning of the article is straightforward:

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. (Dewey 1930, 243)

It is a fundamental mistake, Dewey argues, to exclude the qualitative dimension from logic. In fact, this 'leaves thought in certain subjects [e.g. aesthetic matters, morals and politics] without any logical status' (245). Conversely, taking aesthetics as the exemplary case, the quality of a work of art (but the same holds for a person or an historical event) is what internally 'pervades, colors, tones, and weights every detail' of it, and externally demarcates it from other entities (ibid.). Such underlying and pervasive qualitative dimensions need to be acknowledged. The core of Dewey's argumentation is the following, based on the distinction between 'situation' and 'object':

By the term 'situation' in this connection is signified the fact that the subject-matter ultimately referred to in existential propositions is a complex existence that is held together, in spite of its internal complexity, by the fact that it is dominated and characterized throughout by a single quality. By 'object' is meant some element in the complex whole that is defined in abstraction from the whole of which it is a distinction. The special point made is that the selective determination and relation of objects in thought is controlled by reference to a situation--

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<sup>4</sup> Although I'm inclined to think that there are significant affinities between Wittgenstein and the pragmatist tradition in general (Boncompagni 2016), and although many thinkers (most notably, but also contentiously, Rorty 1979) have claimed that Wittgenstein and Dewey have a similar outlook and similar objectives in their conception of philosophy, I would not underestimate the differences between the two; see Volber 2012 on this.

<sup>5</sup> Besides Dewey (1925), see in particular Dewey (1894), (1895) and (1934, chapters 3 and 4).

<sup>6</sup> Notice the similarity here with William James' (1976) characterization of affectional facts in his *Essays on Radical Empiricism*.

to that which is constituted by a pervasive and internally integrating quality, so that failure to acknowledge the situation leaves, in the end, the logical force of objects and their relations inexplicable. (Dewey 1930, 246)

The qualitative situation, therefore, is the implicit and tacit background that underlies any propositional symbolization and regulates its pertinence, relevancy, and force (248). Logic selects its objects with reference to a situation, and excluding the situation from logic would be nonsense. A situation is grasped by 'intuition', where intuition is taken in its everyday sense, without any mystical implication (249): intuition is what precedes reflection and rational elaboration, catching the pervasive quality of the situation.

Now, what is especially interesting and has relevance in respect to the Wittgensteinian reflection above, is that the immediate grasping of a situation is not conceived of by Dewey as a kind of unmediated perception of elements in reality: rather, it is an intuition essentially shaped by habit and training. Immediacy is mediated by a complex system of meanings, ultimately grounded in human practices and their history<sup>7</sup>. This is evident in Dewey's treatment of ejaculations and interjections and of aesthetic judgments.

Some ejaculations, he observes, have an intellectual import. For instance, expressions like 'Alas,' 'Yes,' 'No,' 'Oh' may be 'the symbol of an integrated attitude toward the quality of a situation as a whole', and an expression like 'Good!' may 'mark a deep apprehension of the quality of a piece of acting on the stage, of a deed performed, or of a picture in its wealth of content', in a way that is *not* adequately replaceable by more complicated words and long disquisitions (250). These ejaculations are meaningful because they carry with them habits, past experiences, and past reflections, unifying them in a single reaction. In Dewey's words:

Such ejaculatory judgments supply perhaps the simplest example of qualitative thought in its purity. While they are primitive, it does not follow that they are always superficial and immature. Sometimes, indeed, they express an infantile mode of intellectual response. But they may also sum up and integrate prolonged previous experience and training, and bring to a unified head the results of severe and consecutive reflection. (ibid.)

Notice that Wittgenstein too underlined that words are unimportant and may be not the best way of expressing a global and *exact* aesthetic judgment, while facial expressions and gestures may accomplish the task better. Moreover, just like Wittgenstein, Dewey invokes the example of recognizing immediately the author of a work of art, before analytically examining the picture:

A man sees a picture and says at first sight that it is by Goya or by some one influenced by him. He passes the judgment long before he has made any analysis or any explicit identification of elements. It is the quality of the picture as a whole that operates (259).

Again, like Wittgenstein, Dewey notes that it is also possible to accomplish a more technical and detailed analysis of the painting, which will prove the initial intuition right or wrong; nevertheless, the 'basic appreciation of quality as a whole' is already a reliable ground for such an analysis, more dependable than the judgments of a critic 'who knows history and mechanical points of brushwork but who is lacking in sensitiveness to pervasive quality' (ibid.).

Although aesthetic judgment is Dewey's paradigmatic case of the qualitative dimension, his other examples in the introductory lines of his article were a person and a historical fact: in these cases too, quality is grasped as a whole. Concerning the person, in particular, his or her character or personality, including the ethical aspects, forms his or her 'quality'. In other words, quality is *not* an attribute to be added to the person; the qualitative dimension *is*, in the end, the person, and we are able to see and recognize it thanks to our acquaintance with a complex net of social habits, rules,

<sup>7</sup> See Ryan 1994 and Colapietro, this issue (2018).

and customs. Dewey also makes the example of a person's expression, where the expression itself is not a single feature among his or her traits but 'a total effect of all elements in their relation to one another' (260). He also mentions *family resemblances*, which, he observes, we are often able to detect immediately in two faces or in two people in spite of our inability to specify *where* exactly these resemblances are.

I hope it is clear from putting Wittgenstein's and Dewey's quotes side by side, the former with his notion of imponderable evidence and the latter with his notion of qualitative thought, that despite the differences that there may be in their overall perspectives, the two philosophers seem to be pointing in the same direction: for both, especially in some contexts (chiefly, interpersonal relationships and aesthetic judgment), there is a form of understanding which is at the same time immediate and experienced, and cannot be accounted for in strictly epistemic or cognitive terms, that is, as a form of knowledge. Both highlight that this is *not* marginal: rather, it is what deeply characterizes our life and the everyday exchanges we have with each other and the world. We live primarily in a qualitative dimension, in which immediacy and experience are bound together. Our immediate reactions are experienced reactions, and they are so in virtue of our upbringing in and belonging to a form of life. This dimension, at once complex and immediate, is for both what must be acknowledged as 'the given'.

[T]he original datum is always such qualitative whole. [...] What is 'given' is not an object by itself nor a term having a meaning of its own. The 'given', that is to say the existent, is precisely an undetermined and dominant complex quality. (Dewey 1930, 253)

What has to be accepted, the given, is – one might say – forms of life. (Wittgenstein, PPF § 345)

It goes without saying that there are differences between the two approaches. Most notably, in Dewey's view, since quality is the substratum of cognitive

processes overall, it is a pervasive aspect characterizing *all experiences*, while Wittgenstein deals with imponderable evidence with the primary aim of highlighting some features of our experience with living beings, and of aesthetics. Yet, within the domain of human life and its social and cultural practices, Dewey's 'qualitative whole' is not distant from Wittgenstein's 'forms of life', in that both perspectives, to a certain extent, stem from the refusal to reduce the 'given' to sense data or similar postulated entities. Both thinkers show themselves to be interested, instead, in catching the immediacy of human life in its complex and qualitative dimension.

#### 5. Imponderable evidence and the qualitative dimension of human life

The comparison with Dewey's conception of qualitative thought helps us to see Wittgenstein's notion of imponderable evidence in a wider framework. We might consider it as one example of a way of doing philosophy centered (or re-centered) on the qualitative dimension of human life and of human forms of life, that is, on what usually is either neglected or taken for granted (or neglected because taken for granted) in philosophy. Paying attention to imponderable evidence is a way of turning the direction of the gaze, as far as possible, to this tacit and immediate background of everyday practices, exchanges, and thoughts, which is, in the end, what gives them meaning and sense.

Grasping this 'whole hurly-burly, [...] the background [which] determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions' (in Wittgenstein's words, RPP II § 629), or 'the immediate existence of quality [as] the background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking' (in Dewey's, 1930, 261) is an unusual task for philosophers: a background cannot be put in the foreground without losing its nature. The background is, so to speak, the shadow cone of phenomena, and deciding to investigate the background implies accepting the inevitable vagueness and blurredness of its

boundaries. This vagueness characterizes in particular the imponderable evidence regulating the expression and understanding of feelings and emotions, which varies in flexible, continuous, and irregular ways. Importantly, this indeterminacy is not a defect, but rather a constitutive feature of imponderable evidence. As ter Hark has it, 'the absence of conclusive criteria is not a shortcoming in the evidence, but is akin to the impossibility of scoring a goal in tennis' (ter Hark 2004, 128), that is to say: indeterminacy belongs to the very grammar of imponderable evidence, to its rules. Wittgenstein explains this point by highlighting that:

A sharper concept would not be the same concept. That is: the sharper concept wouldn't have the *value* for us that the blurred one does. Precisely because we would not understand people who act with total certainty when we are in doubt and uncertain (LW I § 267)

Attention to the intrinsically vague 'hurly-burly' of everyday life allows us to see that epistemic certainty with regard to others' feelings and emotions not only is impossible: more radically, it is neither attained nor needed, because it has no role in our life. I am not claiming that one does not want to be sure about others' feelings: this is in fact something that happens quite often. Rather, the point is that this sureness (and unsureness) has different criteria and rules than the criteria and rules of justified true belief about empirical facts. The evidence one has of the other's feelings is imponderable: it cannot be weighed according to quantitative standards. This is part of our life with others, and it is an *important* part of it.

Dewey warns that losing sight of the qualitative dimension leaves us vulnerable to 'a large part of the artificial problems and fallacies that infects our theory of knowledge and our metaphysics, or theories of existence' (1930, 261). One of these artificial problems, Wittgenstein teaches us, is the urge to know, with quantitative methods, what is 'inside' a person's head. If this were really achieved, as we saw in respect to the 'lie detector' example above, our form of life would not be

better: it would be an utterly different form of life, one we are hardly able to conceive. A related artificial problem in the philosophy of mind is the idea that there is an ontological divide between brain and mind and a consequent explanatory gap that waits to be filled (Boncompagni 2013). Conversely, attention to imponderable evidence shows that 'psychological indeterminacy has nothing to do with either unbridgeable ontological divides or epistemological defects, and everything with the enormous variety and flexibility of human life' (ter Hark 2004, 142). The depth, complexity, and thickness of psychological concepts is saved, together with the naturalness and immediateness with which we ordinarily live and use them. This perspective more generally suggests that 'intersubjectivity is first and foremost based on a special, practical attitude of responding that precedes epistemological discussions of knowledge, beliefs, justifications, and doubts' (Gangopadhyay and Pichler 2016, 1318). This also makes room for a novel strategy that avoids skepticism with regard to other minds by recognizing that knowledge, as epistemology has it (i.e. justified true belief), is *not at stake* in interpersonal relationships. Stanley Cavell would put it this way: there is a truth in skepticism, namely, the truth that our relationship with the world and with the others is *not* primarily epistemic in character; this relationship is *not one of knowing* (Cavell 197, 45)<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, there is an ethical aspect in all this. By returning to the imponderable evidence of the everyday practices with others, and claiming that *this* is what is important in our form of life, philosophy advocates for itself the task of educating, or re-educating, our sensibility towards what matters in human phenomena.

<sup>8</sup> According to Volber (2012, 110-11), reading Wittgenstein through these Cavellian lenses highlights a contrast between his philosophy and Dewey's, a contrast that has to do precisely with knowledge. Though I agree that this is generally true, I also think that with respect to the topics we are dealing with, Dewey too insists that our relationship with quality is not one of knowing; see for instance Dewey 1925, 86.

Indeed, not being able to see and perceive the complex and qualitative dimension of life not only results in theoretical failures: what is worse in this neglectful attitude is that it fosters inattention and indifference in our relationships themselves. Not being able to see pain, joy, curiosity, suffering in the other's expressions and gestures, or to capture subtle nuances of behavior and appreciate the complexity of the person in front of us, is the first step towards insensibility. If it ignores these immediate aspects of understanding in favour of discussions on the unknowableness of the other's mind, philosophy facilitates this amnesia. If conversely it ceases these discussions in favour of the reappraisal of the everyday, immediate and yet experienced sensibility with regard to others' feelings and emotions, it can help to focus the attention on these aspects and can enrich our capacity for understanding others and attuning ourselves to situations of interaction.

To borrow a line of argument that Floyd (2017, 371) applies to the concept of acquaintance, but that (in my view) fits perfectly well with our topic:

[Wittgenstein] returned 'acquaintance' to our everyday sense of the word: the sort of acquaintance, or experience, we may have with an object or a person or animal. This sense of 'acquaintance' requires comportment, discernment, attunement, response, experience, sensitivity to context, some elements of convention (handshaking, nodding, smiling) and, in the case of a person or animal, at least some shared sense of interests and instincts. It involves looking and response, acknowledgement of another who is expected to respond back with a look.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that the Wittgensteinian notion of imponderable evidence is an example of how philosophy can investigate the qualitative dimension of human life, a dimension in which immediacy and experience are interwoven in an inextricable way. After introducing the topic through the examination of how Wittgenstein accounts for the difference in our attitudes towards inanimate objects and living beings, I have considered the notion of imponderable evidence as it appears in his notes on the philosophy of psychology and in some remarks on aesthetic judgment. In order to clarify this notion further and to interpret it in a wider framework, I have invoked John Dewey's conception of qualitative thought, pointing out some affinities with the Wittgensteinian outlook that helped to elucidate some aspects of it. Though the two philosophers have different perspectives overall, an interesting point of contact is that both emphasize the importance for philosophy of acknowledging the interplay of immediacy and experience in our ordinary practices and exchanges with the world and others. For both, the aim here is to 'come to understand better what is already within the common experience of mankind' (Dewey 1925, 36-7), a task that philosophy can accomplish by paying attention to the pervasiveness and importance of qualitative elements in our existence (and co-existence).

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