

## Hermeneutic Migrations: Jose Gaos on Heidegger and Dewey

by Santiago Rey

### English Abstract

During the 1940's, José Gaos translated two seminal texts of twentieth-century philosophy: John Dewey's *Experience and Nature* and Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Gaos's interpretation of Dewey, and particularly his prologue to *Experience and Nature*, is filled with references to Heidegger's existential phenomenology, revealing both the tensions and affinities between two major philosophical traditions. Indeed, Gaos offers very deep and insightful remarks on issues that are rarely touched upon in contemporary discussions of the relationship between German existentialism and American pragmatism. In this paper, I would like to offer a brief sample of Gaos's interpretation, trying to trace the different threads of his argument and reconstruct some of the motivations for his comparison.

### Resumen en español

Durante la década de los cuarenta, José Gaos tradujo dos textos ejes de la filosofía del siglo veinte: *La experiencia y la naturaleza* de John Dewey y *Ser y tiempo* de Martin Heidegger. La interpretación de Gaos sobre Dewey, y particularmente su prólogo a *La experiencia y la naturaleza*, están llenos de referencias a la fenomenología existencial de Heidegger, lo cual revela tanto las tensiones como las afinidades entre dos importantes tradiciones filosóficas. De hecho, Gaos ofrece comentarios muy profundos e interesantes sobre temas que son tratados con poca frecuencia en las discusiones contemporáneas en torno a la relación entre el existencialismo alemán y el pragmatismo norte americano. En el presente artículo, quisiera ofrecer un breve ejemplo de la interpretación de Gaos, procurando seguir los diferentes hilos de sus argumentos y reconstruyendo algunas de las motivaciones que inspiraron esta comparación.

### Resumo em português

Durante os anos de 1940, José Gaos traduziu dois textos seminais da filosofia do século XX: *Experiência e Natureza*, de John Dewey e *Ser e Tempo*, de Martin Heidegger. A interpretação de Dewey feita por Gaos, em particular seu prólogo a *Experiência e Natureza*, é recheada de referências à fenomenologia existencial de Heidegger, revelando tanto as tensões quanto as afinidades entre duas grandes tradições filosóficas. Com efeito, Gaos faz observações muito profundas e penetrantes sobre questões que raramente são tratadas nas discussões contemporâneas da relação entre o existencialismo alemão e o pragmatismo americano. Neste artigo, eu gostaria de oferecer uma pequena amostra da interpretação de Gaos, tentando rastrear as diferentes linhas de seu argumento e reconstruir algumas das motivações para sua comparação.

In one of his late lectures dedicated to a broad survey of the history of philosophy, Jose Gaos begins his interpretation of Dewey's philosophy with the following remark:

It is generally believed that the United States found in pragmatism a truly original and characteristically North American doctrine, both historically and universally important. This has been corroborated in the Prologue to my translation of *Experience and Nature* where I make an unprecedented comparison between pragmatism and existentialism, or more precisely, between *Experience and Nature* and *Being and Time*.<sup>[1]</sup>

Gaos's assessment is remarkable not so much for its boldness, but because it was written years before influential philosophers like Richard Rorty, Hubert Dreyfus, John Haugeland, and Mark Okrent began worrying themselves about bringing together pragmatism and existentialism under the same discursive roof. But who is this pioneer and audacious mediator between traditions, and why is it important to read him today? Although it would certainly be right to say that Gaos anticipates many of the issues discussed in the work of recent commentators of the Dewey/Heidegger relationship, I believe his interpretation offers a fresh perspective that has the potential to both complement and challenge current readings. Indeed, Gaos offers very deep and insightful remarks on issues that are rarely touched upon in contemporary discussions of the relationship between German existentialism and American pragmatism. In this, paper I would like to offer a brief sample of Gaos's interpretation, trying to trace the different threads of his argument and reconstruct some of the motivations for his comparison.

### **I. A Messenger Between Philosophical Traditions**

Born in Asturias in the turn of the century, Jose Gaos received a philosophical education that many would envy, being the disciple and friend of three of the most important Spanish philosophers of the twentieth century: Jose Ortega y Gasset, Xavier Zubiri, and Manuel Garcia Morente. Although he already showed signs of philosophical curiosity during his high school years in Oviedo<sup>[2]</sup>, it was in the Philosophy department at Universidad de Madrid where he became acquainted with the latest trends and tendencies in philosophy, including neo-kantianism, phenomenology, the philosophy of value, historicism, and existentialism.<sup>[3]</sup> During this time, he combined his readings of Dilthey, Husserl, Scheler, and Hartmann with a rigorous study of ancient and modern languages. By the end of the 1920's, Gaos was "up to date" with what was going on in the philosophical world and he was ready for a new venture, a philosophical encounter that would change his life forever. As he vividly recalls in his *Confesiones Profesionales*, it was during a gathering of intellectuals in Madrid during the early 1930's that he first overheard the name of Heidegger, who by that time was already a rising star in the

German scene. “Husserl, Scheler, and Hartmann were beginning to be eclipsed by the dark brilliance of a new star; although it was uncertain whether it was a new sun, a black moon, a planet or a comet and no one knew for how long it would eclipse the other thinkers just mentioned.”[4]

Gaos was intrigued by the rumors of this hidden king from the Black Forest, and he made sure to get his hands on a copy of his recently published book *Being and Time*, which he started reading with Xavier Zubiri, a young and gifted Spanish philosopher who had just returned from a two year stay with Heidegger in Freiburg. Together, they embarked on a close reading of Heidegger’s *magnum opus*, meeting every Saturday evening at Gaos’s house in Madrid and sometimes staying up till the break of dawn discussing specific passages of the text. Unfortunately, all this came to an abrupt end during the Spanish civil war. Gaos had to leave Spain and seek asylum in Mexico, the country where he would consummate his philosophical work;, part of which includes his pivotal translations of *Being and Time* and *Experience and Nature*, which appeared almost simultaneously in the late 1940’s.

## II. The Pragmatic Origin of Our Meaningful World

Both *Being and Time* and *Experience and Nature* were published during the second half of the 1920’s. Destined to become classics, each of these books radically altered the philosophical landscape and opened new fields of inquiry on both sides of the Atlantic. One was the work of a young German philosopher trying to break free from the constraints of Husserlian phenomenology and neo-Kantianism; the other, a set of lectures delivered in 1925 by America’s most influential philosopher and educator who wanted to present “a more systematic and careful statement of the main points of his philosophy.”[5] At first sight, nothing seems to tie these two books together. They were written for different purposes in radically different styles by two philosophers belonging to opposite philosophical traditions with no real acquaintance of each other. And yet, in his prologue to *Experience and Nature*, written around 1948, Jose Gaos makes a daring comparison between Heidegger’s existential phenomenology and Dewey’s pragmatism, shedding light on those issues where the trains of thought of these two thinkers seem to coincide. Unfortunately, Gaos’s comments about this philosophical intersection are rather unsystematic and cryptic; more an invitation than a fully-fleshed philosophical interpretation. Reading Gaos can be both exciting and frustrating. He offers fascinating and profound comments on the relationship between Dewey and Heidegger, but never quite puts the pieces of the puzzle together. It is our task as readers—as it always is in one way or another—to reconstruct Gaos ‘s position and come up with a more or less coherent portrait of his views. In what follows I wish to undertake such a hermeneutic adventure, following the trail of Gaos’s remarks in an attempt to secure a better understanding of his groundbreaking comparison between pragmatism and existentialism.

In a lecture delivered at Universidad Central de Venezuela in 1961, Gaos argues that both Dewey and Heidegger emphasize the priority of practice in their respective

accounts of our being-in-the-world. Furthermore, he affirms that there is a striking resemblance between Dewey's theory of the practical and social origin of meanings and language, and Heidegger's analysis of equipment, signs, and meaningfulness (*Bedeutsamkeit*) in the first half of *Being and Time*.<sup>[6]</sup> In the fourth chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey writes:

Objects and events figure in work not as fulfillment, realizations, but in behalf of other things of which they are means and predictive signs. A tool is a particular thing, but it is more than a particular thing, since it is a thing in which a connection, a sequential bond of nature is embodied. Its perception as well as its actual use takes the mind to other things. The spear suggests the feast not directly but through the medium of other external things, such as the game and the hunt, to which the sight of the weapon transports imagination. Man's bias towards himself easily leads him to think of a tool solely in relation to himself, to his hands and eyes, but its primary relationship is toward other external things, as the hammer to the nail, and the plow to the soil.<sup>[7]</sup>

Notwithstanding the reference to a "sequential bond of nature"—something to which we shall return later—this passage might well have been written by Heidegger himself. Furthermore, Dewey's description possesses a phenomenological power that rivals even Heidegger's most inspired moments. But this is not the only, or even the most important, aspect of this passage. What is truly remarkable is the fact that both Dewey and Heidegger believe that what ultimately matters in our everyday being-in-the-world is not *this* or *that* isolated tool or object, but rather the referential totality that emerges in our practical projects. Strictly speaking, claims Heidegger, there 'is' no such thing as an equipment<sup>[8]</sup>: "to the being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is .... Equipment always is in terms of its belonging to other equipment: ink-stand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table, lamp, furniture, window, doors, room."<sup>[9]</sup> Here is where Gaos rightly locates the shared pragmatic core of *Being and Time* and *Experience and Nature*; the precise juncture where Heidegger's phenomenology and Dewey's "descriptive study of the generic traits of existence" coincide. As he tells us in his 1961 lectures on contemporary philosophy: "Dewey's theory of the social and practical origin of significations and language is remarkably close to Heidegger's account of language and discourse—in their reduction of significations to human practical dealings with things, they both end up endorsing some sort of practical idealism or pragmatism, so to speak."<sup>[10]</sup>

But this is not the end of the story. Just after making this apparently straightforward comparison between Heidegger and Dewey—one must always keep in mind that Gaos is writing this in the 1950's, years before the publication of Dreyfus's influential book on Heidegger—Gaos argues that both pragmatism and existentialism vindicate the priority of existence over essence. He writes: "According to Dewey, the essence that emerges from the various significations that change with the more or less fleeting conditions and intentions of the subjects of existence, is much like the concept of "existence" that we find in existentialism—it is similar in the broadest possible sense because in it the priority of existence with regards to the essence is not reduced to the

priorities of men, but rather it extends to everything.” Dewey’s existentialism, according to Gaos, insofar as it underscores the continuity between human experience and nature, is much broader in scope than Heidegger’s existentialism, which focuses exclusively on the sphere of human interactions. Here Gaos is emphasizing the fact that for Dewey ‘Existence’ includes not only experience but all natural transactions.[11] As Richard Bernstein points out:

We can distinguish different types or levels of transactions according to the complexity, functions and consequences of these transactions. There are no sharp breaks within nature that demand the introduction of “nonnatural” categories. For most of his life, Dewey was concerned primarily with the level of natural transactions that are exhibited in human experience, and he sought to delineate some of the major varieties of human experience. But he never would have accepted the consequence that there is nothing more to nature or reality than what is manifested at the level of human experience. Indeed, experience is in nature; it is one type of natural transaction embedded in a much wider range of natural transactions.[12]

The question here is whether we can still follow Gaos and call Dewey’s position existentialism. Gaos himself is ambivalent at this point; he believes there are deep similarities between Heidegger’s existential analytic and Dewey’s pragmatism, but he is also well aware of the crucial discontinuities and irreconcilable differences that separate them. In the final section of his Prologue to *Experience and Nature*, Gaos acknowledges the difficulties of his comparison and concludes that

the existentialism we can attribute to Dewey, in view of the use he makes of the concept of “existence”, would have a unique sense, radically different from the existentialism that we find in someone like Heidegger. “Existence” is what Dewey reduces to nature, and what, for Heidegger, is irreducible to nature; Dewey’s “instrument” is the means for such reduction, while Heidegger’s “tool” is the point of departure for his explanation of the irreducibility of men to nature.[13]

But is not Gaos sawing off the branch on which he is seated? After all, his interpretation of the Dewey/Heidegger relationship largely depends on the premise that they both employ a compatible concept of existence. If it is indeed true that Dewey’s sense of existence is radically different from Heidegger’s use of this notion, then the whole point of making a comparison between them seems to evaporate. Even the thesis of the priority of practice that we examined above would collapse under the weight of such incompatibility because there would be no common ground to establish a comparison in the first place. The impasse is a serious one; and Gaos offers little to no advice on how to solve it. Indeed, there seems to be an indissoluble tension at the heart of Gaos’s comparison of *Experience and Nature* and *Being and Time*, something that threatens the conversation between traditions that he is trying to promote.

Have we reached a philosophical dead end here? Must we settle ourselves with the conclusion that when Heidegger and Dewey talk about the “generic traits of existence” they are referring to different things? I think Gaos would answer ‘yes’ and

'no.' Although there is no way to fully breach the gaps between Heidegger's existential analytic and Dewey's metaphysics, one can still defend the idea that there is enough common ground between them to allow a fruitful encounter. Instead of trying to sweep the differences under the rug and forcibly assimilate both notions of existence, we must find the exact juncture where the trajectory of these two thinkers coincides. Fortunately, our task is made easier by the fact that Gaos himself has a pretty good idea of where this might just be. As was already mentioned above, Gaos believes there are striking resemblances between the analysis of meaningfulness in *Being and Time*, and Dewey's own discussion of meaning and language in *Experience and Nature*. Without getting too technical, here we must remember that Dewey "distinguishes three primary levels of natural transactions: the physico-chemical, the psycho-physical, and the level of mind or human experience." [14] Although the main point of his book is to defend the existential continuity of these primary levels, and thus undermine the separation of man and experience from nature, Dewey is no reductionist; he does not think that there is only one primordial transaction to which others are to be completely reduced. [15] While there is no isolated occurrence in nature, Dewey tells us, "yet interaction and connection are not wholesale and homogeneous." [16] The difference between the physical, the psycho-physical, and the level of human experience is not ontological but quantitative, a matter of increasing levels of complexity and interaction among natural events. Thus, Dewey is able to account for the differences that we find in nature without building metaphysical walls between diverse types of transactions. More importantly, his non-reductive naturalism is able to accommodate the peculiar sphere of meaningfulness that we inhabit as speaking creatures. Language, writes Dewey, is "the cherishing mother of all significance"; [17] the distinguishing feature of human experience that separates man from beast. The third plateau that Dewey identifies in his description of the generic traits of existence is none other than the realm of intelligibility that is proper to meaning, which Heidegger, in his existential analytic, calls 'world'.

If Gaos is right, then it is in this third field of transactions that Dewey's pragmatism and Heidegger's existentialism come together, at least for a little while. Even though there is no point-for-point relation between their respective notions of existence, there is a moment when both philosophers dwell on the same existential landscape. Perhaps a good way to illustrate their relationship is to view it in a cinematic way. Imagine the following scene (the quintessential Heideggerian image): A man in a small cabin is using a hammer to fix a wobbly table. You can see the whole context of interrelated objects that constitute his work-world: hammer, nails, table, pencil, leveler, etc. Moreover, through a series of camera moves and edits you can get a sense of the aim and motivation of the practical project, the general meaning of the action taking place. But then, just as you begin to make sense of what is happening in the scene, the camera starts to slowly zoom back from the little hut into the open space outside, revealing for the first time what lies beyond the specific references that constitute the practical world of the man inside. Now you can see all the different references and transactions that are taking place outside the cabin; animals and plants interacting with each other in diverse ways and, with the help of some special effects, a whole series of "mass-energy" transactions that reveal the inner workings of the physical universe. To

succeed in its purpose, however, the whole scene must fulfill two requirements at the same time; on the one hand it must clearly call attention to the differences between the three levels of transactions (the physical, the physic-chemical, and the human), and, on the other, it should disclose the continuity between the different fields. If everything goes right with our imaginary movie scene, at the end we will be able to see that the meaningful world of the man inside the cabin is part of a much larger picture undivided by metaphysical or ontological breaks and that various levels of complexity account for the differences between fields of transactions. Of course, this illustration has serious limitations and is incapable of grasping all the complexity of Heidegger's phenomenological approach to the meaningful world of human interactions and Dewey's description of what he calls "the generic traits of existence." What is worse, it might give the impression that Heidegger's notion of existence is just a provincial concept compared with Dewey's broad and comprehensive understanding of the continuity between human experience and nature.

There is simply no easy comparison between Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Dewey's *Experience and Nature*. If we really want to do justice to the depth and originality of these philosophical giants of the twentieth century, we must be sensitive, not only to what brings them together, but also to what keeps them apart. Gaos was great in this. He was able to detect some of the most fascinating parallels between their thought, without losing sight of their irreconcilable differences. He knew that it is not enough to call Heidegger a *pragmatist* or Dewey an existentialist. Such easy labels ignore the nuances of their thought and forcefully assimilate one tradition into the other. Thus, Gaos's ambivalence vis-à-vis the very possibility of his comparison is not the result of his failure to see the evident, but rather it reflects his sensibility to the tensions that arise when we try to bring together thinkers belonging to different philosophical traditions.

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## Notes

[1] Gaos, Jose. 1982. *Confesiones Profesionales*. Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, Coordinación de Humanidades.

[2] In his professional autobiography, Gaos remembers with deep affection his first encounter with philosophy during his school years at Colegio de Santo Domingo. It was during the first half of 1915 that one of his teachers gave him a copy of Jaime Balmes' *Curso de Filosofía Elemental*, a book that would exert a huge influence on his overall philosophical outlook.

[3] Gaos, J. *Confesiones Profesionales* (Mexico: Universidad Autonoma de Mexico, 1982) 60.

[4] Ibid, 63.

[5] Bernstein, R. *John Dewey* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1966), 76.

[6] Gaos, J. *Filosofia Contemporanea* (Mexico: Nueva Biblioteca Mexicana, 2007), 249.

[7] Dewey, J. *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 122.

[8] Equipment (*das Zeug*) is Heidegger's chosen term to translate the Greek word πράγματα, "that which one has to do with in one's concerned dealings (πραξις)." (*Being and Time*, 96)

[9] Heidegger, M. *Being and Time* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), 97.

[10] Gaos, Jose. 2007. *Obras Completas de Jose Gaos: Filosofia Contemporanea, Tomo XI*. Nueva Biblioteca Mexicana. UNAM.

[11] Bernstein, R. "Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience," *The Journal of Philosophy* 58, 1 (Jan 5, 1991), 10.

[12] Bernstein, R. *John Dewey*, 87.

[13] Gaos, Jose. 1948. *Prologo a "La Experiencia y la Naturaleza" de John Dewey*. Fondo de Cultura Economico. Mexico.

[14] Bernstein, R. *John Dewey*, 84

[15] Dewey provides a nice overview of the different "fields" of transactions in the following passage: "In general, three plateaus of such fields may be discriminated. The first, the scene of narrower and more external interactions, while qualitatively diversified in itself, is physical; its distinctive properties are those of the mathematical-mechanical system discovered by physics and which define matter as a general character. The second level is that of life. Qualitative differences, like those of plant and animal, lower and higher animal forms, are here even more conspicuous; but in spite of their variety they have qualities in common which define the psycho-physical. The third plateau is that of association, communication, participation. This is still further internally diversified, consisting of individualities. It is marked throughout its diversities, however, by common properties, which define mind as intellect; possession of and response to meanings" (*Experience and Nature*, 272).

[16] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 27.

[17] Dewey, John. 1958. *Experience and Nature*. New York: Dover Publications. p.186