Introductory Lecture on John Dewey

Dewey lived in the period between the Civil War and the Korean War (1859-1952), and was born the year that Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* was published. During this time period the United States moved from being a largely agricultural and rural country to a largely industrial and urban country. The Burlington Vermont of Dewey's youth was an industrialized and urbanized town, but there were immense social changes in the country during Dewey's life. In his *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, Alan Ryan notes that there are marked similarities between Dewey's America and our own:

> ...Dewey was moved to write about individual unease and social and political failures in a context that resembles our own in crucial ways. Dewey's America was one in which the problems of the inner city were appalling. In the early 1890s homelessness in Chicago sometimes reached 20 percent; unemployment frequently hit one in four of the working population. Disease was rife, and medical services were out of the reach of the poor....The upper classes were apparently indifferent to the fate of the poor and even to the fate of the working near poor. In the cities the response of the better-off was to remove themselves to the suburbs....[1]

Dewey was a social activist (though some would have him be more active to qualify for the term) as well as a theoretical philosopher. As Cornell West notes, for Dewey

> ...philosophy is neither a form of knowledge nor a means to acquire knowledge. Rather philosophy is a mode of cultural critical action that focuses on the ways and means by which human beings have, do, and can overcome obstacles, dispose of predicaments, and settle problematic situations.[2]

The importance of "social activism" for Dewey can be gauged by the organizations he helped found among which are: The American Civil Liberties Union, The American Association of University Professors, and the New York City Teachers Union. Another (although much disputed) measure of his activism is his influence on the American educational system. The "Lab School" at the University of Chicago (1896-1904) was Dewey's creation. As West notes,

> the aim of the school was not only to serve as a model of how meaningful and enriching education could take place, but also to make a practical intervention into the national debate on education. This practical intervention was, for Dewey, a form of political activism in that the struggle over knowledge and over the means of its disposal was a struggle about power, about the conditions under which cultural capital (skills, knowledge, and values) was produced, distributed, and consumed. In sharp contrast to curriculum-centered conservatives and child-centered romantics, Dewey advocated an interactive model of functionalistic education that combined autonomy with intelligent and flexible guidance, relevance with rigor and wonder. Of course, Dewey's functionalistic education, a critical education for democratizing society, could easily be mistaken for a functional education, a fitting education that simply adjusts one to the labor market possibilities.[3]

In his *The Metaphysical Club*, Louis Menand maintains that:

> Dewey's pragmatism was a consequence of the success of the Laboratory School. The school established for him the validity of his hypothesis ***that thinking and acting are just two names for a single process—the process of making our way as best we can in a universe shot through with contingency***. It also showed him what was wrong with philosophy, and Dewey's career after Chicago can be divided into two parts: from his arrival at Columbia until the United States entered the war in 1917, he defended pragmatism against the arguments of other philosophers....From the war until the end of his life, he addressed the issues of his time in a pragmatist spirit.
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> Philosophers, Dewey argued, had mistakenly insisted on making a problem of the relation between the mind and the world, an obsession that had given rise to what he called "the alleged **discipline of epistemology"—the attempt to answer the question, How do we know? The pragmatist response to this question is to point out that nobody has ever made a problem about the relation between, for example, the hand and the world.** The function of the hand is to help the organism cope with the environment; in situations in which a hand doesn't work, we try something else, such as a foot, or a fishhook, or an editorial. Nobody worries in these situations about a lack of some preordained "fit"—about whether the physical world was or was not made to be manipulated by hands. They just use a hand where a hand will do.
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> **Dewey thought that ideas and beliefs are the same as hands: instruments for coping.** An idea has no greater metaphysical stature than, say, a fork. When your fork proves inadequate to the task of eating soup, it makes little sense to argue about whether there is something inherent in the nature of soup that accounts for the failure. You just reach for

> a spoon. But philosophers have worried about whether the mind is such that the world can be known by it, and they have produced all sorts of accounts of how the "fit" is supposed to work—how the mental represents the real. Dewey's point was that "mind" and "reality," are like "stimulus" and "response," names for nonexistent entities: they are abstractions from a single, indivisible process.[4]

It should not be surprising, then, that Dewey's activism was a consistent part of his life, and it is consistent with his "theoretical philosophy." He maintained that philosophy is the intellectual expression of conflicts in culture, and he maintained that the *main task for philosophy in his day was to find a solution to the divisive and destructive cleavage between science (or "facts") and values*:

> the problem of restoring integration and cooperation between man's beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life. It is the problem of any philosophy that is not isolated from that life.[5]

> Philosophy is called upon to be the theory of the practice, through ideas sufficiently definite to be operative in experimental endeavor, by which the integration may be made secure in actual experience. Its central problem is the relation that exists between the beliefs about the nature of things due to natural science and beliefs about values—using that word to designate whatever is taken to have rightful authority in the direction of conduct.[6]

Dewey's Early Philosophical Orientation:

In his [early] intellectual autobiography ("From Absolutism to Experimentalism"), Dewey says that "social interests and problems from an early period had to me the intellectual appeal and provided the intellectual sustenance that many seem to have found primarily in religious questions."[7] He identifies four main aspects of his intellectual development: (a) the importance of the practice and theory of education; (b) the scandal involved in the dualism (of both the logic and method) of science and morals;[8] (c) the importance of William James' *Psychology*;[9] and (d) a recognition of the importance of social categories.

As Gail Kennedy notes:

> when Dewey was an undergraduate, during the late seventies, at the University of Vermont, philosophy was still in what Professor Morris Cohen has called its "glacial age." The Scottish "common-sense realism" introduced into this country before the Revolution by President Witherspoon of Princeton was designed primarily as a defense of Christian faith against the deism, materialism, and scepticism of the eighteenth century. Favored by the peculiar American combination of church and college, it became here the orthodox academic philosophy grafted on to Protestantism. For a hundred years it was taught in virtually all the New England colleges as an arid and abstract rationalization of theological doctrines.[10]

It was in this tradition that Dewey began his philosophical studies. After graduation, he taught high school in Oil City, Pennsylvania and Charlotte, Vermont. He read German and German philosophers (especially Kant and Hegel) with one of his Vermont professors and submitted essays *to The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* ("The Metaphysical Assumptions of Materialism," and "The Pantheism of Spinoza"). He then went to Johns Hopkins for two years where he studied German Idealism (with George Morris) and developed a life-long interest in psychology (through his studies with G. Stanley Hall). As Kennedy notes, the "German Idealism" which attracted Dewey:

> ...was a better means of defending religious traditions and of putting science in its proper subordinate place that German idealism came so rapidly to supplant the moribund Scotch [sic] realism within academic halls. Here was a way, it seemed, by which one could keep the faith and believe in "evolution" too....What interested him was Hegel's treatment of human culture, of institutions and the arts. In Hegelian idealism, and particularly in Thomas Hill Green's version of it, Dewey found...a basis for his social idealism....Dewey, then, at this stage was, like Marx, a "left-wing Hegelian" (though they developed very differently). Each of them thought he had found in Hegel the clue to the means of utilizing the results of science in the interests of social progress.[11]

In 1884 Dewey began teaching at the University of Michigan. He moved from Michigan to the University of Minnesota and then back to Michigan. Throughout this period Dewey worked on Kant, Hegel, and T.H. Green, and on psychological issues. As Kennedy notes:

> ...Dewey was attempting what he later realized to be impossible, a consistent synthesis of his Hegelian idealism with the results of science. He was trying to bring the experimentalism of Hall within the framework of his own metaphysics. [12]

In 1890 William James's *Principles of Psychology* appeared and had a profound influence upon Dewey. In his *Philosophy and Civilization* [1931] Dewey maintains that two fundamental theses of James' were highly influential upon the development of his instrumentalism:

> the one is a reinterpretation of introspective psychology, in which James denies that sensations, images, and ideas are discrete and in which he replaces them by a continuous stream which he calls "the stream of consciousness." This conception necessitates a consideration of relations as an immediate part of the field of consciousness, having the same status as qualities....[and this leads to James' criticism]...of the atomism of Locke and Hume as well as the *a priorism* of the synthesis of rational principles by Kant and his successors....
>
> The other aspect...is of a biological nature. It shows itself in its full force in the criterion which James established for discovering the essence of mind. "The pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment are thus the mark and criterion of the presence of mentality in a phenomenon."[13]

Dewey found in James the basis for his instrumentalism in a manner which allowed him to fuse his Hegelian view that the workings of mind are objectively expressed in social traditions and institutions with his evolutionary views.[14] While it took Dewey a while to free himself from his Hegelian idealism, he replaced it with a naturalistic orientation which treated idealism as an example of what he came to call "the intellectualist fallacy" of treating the real as both known and firmly fixed.

Dewey's Theory of Inquiry:

Dewey's view of inquiry was heavily influenced by Darwinian biology. The theory of inquiry offers an "organic" conception of thought and action—it takes **organic interaction** as its basic notion. That is, it emphasizes the ***organism***, the ***environment***, ***and*** the ***interaction between them***. According to this theory, this interaction often yields a ***tension*** (either discrete or continuous) which, in turn, leads to ***effort***s to resolve the tension so as to "return to" an ***equilibrium* state**. The first step in a thoughtful inquiry process is the *specification* of the initial problem. This is important since the problematic situation is, initially, *indeterminate*. This may be done either by *habit* or by *thought*. In *thoughtful inquiry* the problem is specified, the conditions in the environment are examined in light of the specified problem, a hypothesis is formed, its consequences are examined, and, then, the hypothetical action is either undertaken or the process begins anew.

Human beings, for Dewey, are neither primarily souls nor are they primarily matter. Instead, they are **creatures of *habit and instinct* inhabiting a world which is neither malevolent nor benevolent**. At times, human habitual ways of functioning are insufficient (they reach impasses where their habits break down). At these times human beings pause to consider which way to turn. Dewey's instrumentalism holds that mind or intelligence develops from and is an instrument for problem-solving. Dewey rejects the "spectator" view of knowledge (which holds that our knowledge or beliefs are to "mirror" the essential, and unchanging, character of the world) and believes that our experimental processes are piecemeal processes—they proceed gradually, and their results are temporary.

Dewey did not offer an exclusive emphasis upon the "practical" side of our lives however. He also emphasized the importance of the aesthetic experiences of human beings. He characterized aesthetic experience as immediate, individualized, and consummatory or final. Religious experience for him is an especially intense aesthetic one. As we shall see his discussion of *consummatory* experience is crucial to his project of integrating facts and values.

Thought and Action:

Like the other pragmatists, Dewey emphasizes the relationship between thought and action. He preferred to term his pragmatism an "**instrumentalism**" (or "**experimentalism**") however. In his "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," *The Quest for Certainty,* and *Experience and Nature*, Dewey emphasizes how the pragmatic philosophy differs from the classical philosophical orientations. In the former article he argues that we can seek knowledge either in something transcendent or in the mutual interaction of things. The change from the traditional orientation (which sought knowledge in the transcendent) to the orientation which Dewey recommends (which seeks knowledge in the mutual interaction of things) is a change which moves from "purpose" to "significance" (signs) and it is exemplified by the change in the science of biology from the teleological orientation of Aristotle to Darwinistic significance considerations. Dewey believed that the new (practical or instrumental) procedures of thought should not be merely confined to our scientific or epistemological thinking. He maintained that they should characterize our moral, political, and educational thinking also.

In his *Philosophy and Civilization* Dewey maintains that a central differentiation between instrumentalism or pragmatism, on the one hand, and traditional empiricism, on the other, is that the former is forward-looking (looking at "consequent" phenomena) rather than backward-looking (looking at "antecedent" phenomena).[15] He goes on to maintain that this shows that pragmatism or instrumentalism has metaphysical implications:

> pragmatism thus has a metaphysical implication. The doctrine of the value of consequences leads us to take the future into consideration. And this taking into consideration of the future takes us to the conception of a universe whose evolution is not finished, of a universe which is still, in James' term, "in the making," "in the process of becoming," of a universe up to a certain point still plastic.[16]

Given that he believes that the traditional philosophical orientations asked bad questions, Dewey holds that the "reconstruction of philosophy" which he recommends leads to the disappearance" or "evaporation" of the old questions.[17]

Dewey and Realism:

Dewey's instrumentalism and his conception of reality as plastic diverges significantly from the sort of German Idealism which he adhered to early in his philosophical career (as he, of course, makes quite clear in his "From Absolutism to Experimentalism"). In his "The Realism of Pragmatism" [1905] Dewey claims that:

> instrumentalism is thus thoroughly realistic as to the objective of fulfilling conditions of knowledge. States of consciousness, sensations and ideas as cognitive, exist as tools, bridges, cues, functions...to affect a realistic presentation of things in which there are no intervening states of consciousness as veils or representatives. Known things, as known, are direct presentations in the most diaphanous medium conceivable. And if getting knowledge, as distinct from having it, involves representatives, pragmatism carries with it a reinterpretation, and a realistic interpretation, of 'states of consciousness' as representations. They are practically or effectively, not transcendentally representative. They represent in the sense in which a signature, for legal purposes, represents a real person....They are symbols, in short, and are known and used as such.[18]

According to Ernest Nagel, "naive realism" (the view that the world is made up of sheep, clouds, rainbows, and trees), is undercut by "scientific realism" (the view that reality is made up of atoms, fields, and forces), but this appears to create a "paradox":

> ...naive realism leads to physics, but if physics is true then naive realism is false. On this analysis, therefore, one is left with the choice of either accepting natural science but rejecting as basically illusory the things that constitute men's most familiar and valued experience, or accepting the objective character of common-sense views of things but denying the validity and relevance of modern science for matters of prime human concern."[19]

According to Nagel, Dewey resolves this "paradox:"

> ...the adequacy or validity of ideas is not warranted by their supposed derivation from materials of sense, but rather by the consequences of their use….The central thesis of Dewey's theory of science is that it does not disclose realms of being antithetical to the familiar things of life, simply because scientific objects are formulations of complex relations of dependence between things in sense experience...the constructions of theoretical physics are viewed as intellectual means of organizing the discontinuous occurrences of directly experienced qualities, as ways of thinking about matters in gross experience in order to obtain some measure of control....[20]

Of course, if Dewey's experimentalism is committed to realism, it is not anti-metaphysical. As we look at his views in greater depth, we will have to look to see whether his experimentalism (or naturalism, or pragmatism) can consistently offer the sort of metaphysical theory which he advances.[21]

Dewey's Theory of Value:

To bring this overly long introduction to an end, I must briefly expand upon some earlier remarks about Dewey's theory of value. As I noted above, Dewey believes that some of our experiences have a "consummatory" (or aesthetic) character. Gail Kennedy maintains that after reading James, Dewey developed a pragmatic (or naturalistic) theory which argued that:

> ...values and purposes are created by man in his efforts to "adapt" himself to the world of nature and of society within which he lives and moves and has his being. What these values shall be is not predetermined by the appeal to some antecedent reality or cosmic purpose. They *occur* as effects or products of the conflicts that arise and the choices which are made in the particular situations of daily life....With man intelligence has reached a level where he may, within the limits of the forces at his disposal, control the future. But this is always a piecemeal control and the ends-in-view of limited human beings must always vary with the changing situation. Values are altered as knowledge develops.
>
> A philosophy which accepts this evolutionary definition of intelligence thus "forswears enquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them." If this is the role of philosophy, then method, the method of intelligence is supreme. Philosophy must "become a method of locating and interpreting the more serious of the conflicts that occur in life and a method of projecting ways for dealing with them: a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis.[22]

In short, for Dewey, **values** are to be subjected to the same sort of future-oriented experimental and instrumentalistic analysis as are **facts**. Of course, given his view of inquiry, and his "plastic" conception of reality, he is also committed to the existence of meaningful freedom. To come to understand Dewey's theory of value and his view of democracy, however, we must turn to our readings.

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I greatly appreciate comments and corrections--typos and infelicities are all too common and the curse of "auto-correct" plagues me!

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File revised on 09/28/25

[1] Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 24.

[2] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989), p. 86. West is among those who would have liked to see a more socially activist Dewey.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 84.

[4] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 360-361.

[5] John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* [1929], reprinted as v. 4 of *John Dewey: The Later Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), p. 204. A standard way of referring to Dewey's works is by citing the volume and page in the collections *John Dewey: The Early Works; John Dewey: The Middle Works;* or *John Dewey: The Later Works* (EW, MW, LW) all edited by Boydston—here, then: LW 5: 204. I will often do citations directly to the original publications however.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" in *Contemporary American Philosophy* v. 2, Adams and Montague (eds.) (London: Unwin, 1903), pp. 13-27, p. 20.

[8] Dewey says that it was this which led him to his instrumentalism.

[9] Dewey maintains that there is an underlying conflict between James' critique of earlier psychologies, his retention of a subjectivism, and an "objective" strain in James' thought: "I may cite as an illustration the substitution of the "stream of consciousness" for discrete elementary states: the advance made was enormous. Nevertheless the point of view remained that of a realm of consciousness set off by itself. The other strain is objective, having its roots in the return to the earlier biological conception of the *psyche*, but a return possessed of a new force and value due to the immense progress made by biology since the time of Aristotle" (John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," *op. cit*., p. 24).

[10] Gail Kennedy, "Introduction" to the Dewey chapter, in *Classic American Philosophers*, ed. Max Fisch (New York: Appleton, 1951), pp. 327-335, pp. 329-330.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 331.

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1931). The passage is in a reprint entitled: "The Development of American Pragmatism," in *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, ed. H.S. Thayer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), pp. 35-36.

[14] Ryan maintains that a decisive step in Dewey's philosophical development from absolutistic German idealism to instrumentalistic experimentalism was his publication in 1896 of "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (*cf*., Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, *op. cit*., pp. 124-127.

[15] John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization*, *op. cit*., pp. 32-33.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 33.

[17] *Cf*., John Dewey, "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," in *Classic American Philosophers*, ed. Max Fisch, op. cit., pp. 336-344, p. 344. *Cf*., also, John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon, 1957 [originally published in 1920]).

[18] John Dewey, "The Realism of Pragmatism," *The Journal of Philosophy* (1905), pp. 324-327, p. 325.

[19] Ernest Nagel, "Dewey's Theory of Natural Science," in *John Dewey: Philosopher of Science and Freedom*, ed. Sidney Hook (York: Dial, 1950), pp. 233-234.

[20] *Ibid.,* p. 236.

[21] In his "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics" (*The Journal of Philosophy* v. 22 (1905), pp. 673-688), George Santayana maintains that Dewey's "metaphysics" is inconsistent with his "naturalism." Richard Rorty offers a similar argument in his "Dewey's Metaphysics" (in *New Studies in the Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Hanover: University of Vermont, 1977), pp. 45-69).

[22] Gail Kennedy, "Introduction" to the Dewey chapter, in *Classic American Philosophers*, ed. Max Fisch, *op. cit*., p. 333. Kennedy cites Dewey's "The Influence of Darwin On Philosophy," *op. cit., p. 341.*