



John Dewey (1859-1952) **George Nakhnikian**

The great triumvirate of American Pragmatism consists of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Dewey, the youngest of the three, was born in Burlington, Vermont. He studied at the University of Vermont and at Johns Hopkins where he did his graduate work. At that time Peirce was an instructor in Philosophy at Hopkins. Dewey's teaching career was divided among three institutions: the University of Michigan, the University of Chicago, and Columbia University. For a professor, Dewey was unusually active in the social and political events of his time. He went to China by invitation, and there he made a profound impression on some intellectuals who were restive under the old ways of looking at things. In Dewey's instrumentalism they saw a living alternative method for tackling the immense social and political problems of China. Had there been enough of these younger Chinese and had the conditions in China made it possible for them to gain political control, China might have found a democratic alternative to the Kuomintang and Mao. Dewey also visited Russia; he wanted to see for himself. He did not like what he saw, and he did not hesitate to publish his opinions. The Soviets have never forgiven him. During the notorious Bertrand Russell case at City College, Dewey at once came to Russell's defense and continued to support him throughout the whole sordid affair.¹

Among the general public Dewey's fame rests perhaps on his overwhelming and decisive influence on American education. The theory of education in vogue in American teacher training institutions has been what the professors of education think is Dewey's theory. The people so trained have come to play a dominant role in secondary education in the United States. As a result the teaching in practice is directly conditioned by Dewey's influence on American pedagogues. There are those who are not sure that were Dewey alive, he would condone the theory and practice of education defended in his name. The debate over the merits of progressive education is one of the vital practical issues of the current American scene. But it is not here that we can locate Dewey's distinctive claim to a place of importance among twentieth-century philosophers.

From a technical point of view, Dewey's distinctive contribution to philosophy is in his conception of inquiry, his esthetics, his metaphysics, and his theory of value. They are all of one piece. They reflect a consistent although not a clearly and completely worked out scientific naturalism. Dewey did not begin as a scientific naturalist. He was a Hegelian idealist until about 1895. This orientation may be attributed to three factors. Dewey came from Calvinistic stock. The intellectual atmosphere in the United States during Dewey's student days was predominantly religious and theological. The teacher who influenced Dewey most was George Sylvester Morris, a Hegelian. Morris continued to influence Dewey when the two were colleagues at the University of Michigan.

But there were other influences that overpowered the earlier ones and led Dewey to develop the position for which he is famous. Concomitant with economic expansion, science and technology gradually displaced theology as the dominant intellectual outlook. Under the dominance of the theological outlook, philosophy had been the apologist of religion. Now philosophy became allied to science. This period in the nineteenth century

saw the rise of Darwinism, experimental physiology, experimental psychology, physical and cultural anthropology, social psychology, sociology, Marxism, and two very important developments in physics, the kinetic theory of gases and the laws of thermodynamics.

The nineteenth-century developments in the biological, social, and physical sciences opened the way to a new philosophy of science. The post-Kantian idealists, following Hegel, had made a sharp distinction between the *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural sciences) and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the study of the spirit, human or the Absolute). Each of these domains was thought to have its own distinctive method. The new physics, the new biology, and the new social sciences all seemed to have a common logic — the logic of statistics and probability. There seemed to be no methodological apartheid between the physical on the one hand, and the biological, psychological, and social on the other hand. Peirce undertook a detailed investigation of the logic of science. He not only worked out a formal logic of statistics and probability but also set forth a conception of *meaning*, a conception of truth, and a conception of belief which together determined the general character of Pragmatism. James and Dewey agreed with the general outline of Peirce's conceptions, but each of them developed and applied the three central concepts in their own individual ways.

In *Popular Science Monthly* Peirce published his now famous article "How to Make Our Ideas Clear."² The meaning in the sense of the *intellectual purport* of an idea is to be explicated as follows: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." What, for example, do we mean when we say that something is hard? "Evidently that it will not be scratched by many other substances." This conception of meaning is essentially one with operationalism and the positivistic verifiability theory of "cognitive" (intellectual) meaning (see the introduction to Logical Positivism, pp. 385-386). In *Collected Papers*³ Peirce defines truth as that upon which the community of investigators would agree in the long run. Dewey says that this is "the best definition of truth from the logical standpoint which is known to me."⁴ This definition of truth accords with two influences that worked on Peirce. The first is J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* in which Mill bases the case for freedom of inquiry on the proposition that in no other way than free and public inquiry can human intelligence ever hope to gain truth and avoid error. The second is Darwinism's idea of the survival of the fittest. The true is that which is fittest to believe and the fittest is that which survives the long-run investigations of the community of inquirers. This definition of truth rules out in principle the Cartesian method of inquiry according to which the ultimate certainties on which the whole of knowledge is to be based are discerned by the private intellectual intuition of the inquiring mind. Here, in capsule form, is Peirce's theory of belief. To be disposed to act in certain ways is not just the test or criterion of having a certain belief. It is identical with having that belief. This conception originated with Alexander Bain, the Scottish philosopher.⁵ No one, to my knowledge, has succeeded in showing in detail how to reduce beliefs to dispositions to act. The idea is that to believe, for example, that Route 1 leads from here to Boston is to be disposed to follow Route 1 from here if I want to go to Boston by car. But to this it has been objected that I am at best disposed to follow what I believe is Route 1; and thus belief has, after all, not been got rid of in the analysis.

These three conceptions — central to pragmatism, meaning, truth, and belief — were developed under the impact of science and were justified insofar as they seemed to be faithful to the nature of science. Modern science has been described as "an interconnected series of concepts and conceptual schemes that have developed as a result of experimentation and observation and are fruitful of further experimentation and observations."⁶ This dynamic conception of science makes of it an activity involving intelligent guesswork and testing

of the guesses (hypotheses) by controlled experimentation to see if the predictions of the hypotheses are borne out; the activities yield well-substantiated statements that in turn become instruments of further inquiry. Scientific knowledge becomes identical with the results of scientific inquiry and this by its very nature is thought of as a never-ending activity carried on by the community of inquirers. All of these ingredients may be found in Dewey's philosophy.

Darwinism influenced the metaphysics of pragmatism as well as its theory of method. One of the radical novelties of Darwin's theory of evolution was the idea of the continuity of man and other forms of life. The human mind could now be conceived as an emergent capacity in principle understandable in purely naturalistic terms. Knowledge, as product, was warranted belief; warranted belief was the product of inquiry; to inquire was to act in certain ways in certain situations, and to believe was to be disposed to act in certain ways in certain situations. There were no mysterious inner goings on to be a basis for contrasting mentality with lack of it. There was no dualism of mind and matter; no dualism of nature and supernature; and no dualism of method.

Dewey's theory of inquiry is central in his philosophy. He is describing what he takes to be the common and peculiar features of inquiry in the generic sense. "Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole." What Dewey means by "situation" is not precisely clear. This much seems to be involved in a situation: (a) an experiencing organism and (b) an experienced whole of which "an object or event is always a special part, phase or aspect." A situation is indeterminate if it is confused (its outcome cannot be anticipated) or obscure (when its course of movement permits of final consequences that cannot be clearly made out) or conflicting (when it tends to evoke discordant responses).

To transform an indeterminate situation into a determinate one we need two kinds of procedures. One is reasoning. Roughly, we start from a hunch, suggested by the indeterminate situation; the hunch is formulated as a proposition; its consequences are drawn out until we reach some consequences that can be put to the test. The other procedure is distinguishable but not separable from reasoning. It consists of gathering the relevant facts by observing. These facts serve to clarify the nature of the problem in the indeterminate situation and they also serve as evidence for or against the effectiveness of the operations prescribed by our hunches. The propositions become settled judgments (settled but not incorrigible) if their consequences are supported by the evidence. Settled judgment alone can constitute knowledge. Hence it is a mistake to talk of knowledge by acquaintance or immediate knowledge, be it the immediacy of sense or that of mystic experience. The immediately presented is no more an item of knowledge than the immediately enjoyed is a genuine good.

At this point, let us recall that brief characterization given above of Peirce's conception of the "intellectual purport" or meaning of an "idea." To some extent in Peirce and more so in James there is a tendency to soften the requirement that the only "intellectually meaningful ideas" are those that can be directly or indirectly checked by sense-experience. The "practical bearings" that are said to determine the content of "ideas" are made to include more than perceptual items. There is none of this softness in Dewey. In this he is closer to logical positivism and operationalism than either Peirce or James.

In James's case it is easy to see why he had a softer version of "practical bearings" alongside the positivistic one. James had a tenderness for religion and old-fashioned metaphysics neither of which, as the positivists and Dewey saw, could have "intellectual content" if "practical bearings" were restricted to sense perception. Dewey, on the other hand, has no use for religion and old-fashioned metaphysics.

The differences with respect to “practical bearings” have further consequences. In 1896 James published “The Will to Believe,” an essay defending religious belief not, however, on the grounds that religious belief is the product of inquiry in Dewey’s sense. Indeed, James assumes that religious beliefs are unverifiable. James’s grounds are that by willfully believing some people in some carefully specified circumstances would stand to gain certain “vital goods even in this life” while they would stand to lose nothing even if what they believed was false. James includes such “vital goods” (as courage, optimism, hope, energy for work, and enjoyment) among the “practical bearings” investing ideas with meaning, except that as exemplified in the case of religious beliefs, beliefs may be meaningful without being verifiable in principle. If this is a correct between-the-lines reading of James, then there are obvious defects in the view. Is the meaning of the religious proposition that “the eternal things are the better” exhausted in such a conjunction as: “If I say my prayers with conviction, I will gain courage; and if I worship in a community of believers, I will find myself more energetically facing the challenge of everyday tasks, etc.”? The religious statement is about eternal things. The components of the conjunction are statements about myself on condition that I do this or that. The two do not seem to be about the same thing at all. Besides, the conditionals are in principle verifiable while by hypothesis the religious propositions are not. Surely a statement verifiable in principle cannot be equivalent in meaning to one that is not.

Dewey will have none of this *apologia* for beliefs that are uncontrolled by inquiry. He reviewed James’s *Pragmatism* (1907) in the article “What Pragmatism Means by Practical.”⁷ Toward the end of the article Dewey criticizes James for leaving “the impression that the fact of the inevitable involution of the personal factor in every belief gives some special sanction to some special beliefs. Mr. James says that his essay on the right to believe was unluckily entitled the ‘*Will to Believe*’. Well, even the term ‘right’ is unfortunate, if the personal or belief factor is inevitable — unfortunate because it seems to indicate a privilege which might be exercised in special cases, in religion, for example, though not in science; or because it suggests to some minds that the fact of the personal complicity involved in belief is a warrant for this or that special personal attitude, instead of being a warning to locate and define it so as to accept responsibility for it. If we mean by ‘will’ not something deliberate and consciously intentional (much less something insincere), but an active personal participation, then belief as will, rather than either the right or the will to believe, seems to phrase the matter correctly.” The contrast between James and Dewey is sharp. James thinks that we are morally and intellectually not guilty if under carefully specified conditions we believe (and remember that for pragmatism to believe is the same thing as to be disposed to act) without the benefit of inquiry in Dewey’s sense. In contrast, if there is any one persistent theme in Dewey, it is this: that belief uncontrolled by inquiry is a disposition to act blindly, and that as such it is at the root of man’s individual and social ills. It is, therefore, morally and intellectually inexcusable.

Dewey’s theory of inquiry presupposes, and is supported by, a metaphysics of experience and nature. According to Dewey’s theory of inquiry, no judgment is warranted unless it is the product of inquiry. In line with this, metaphysical judgments — judgments about “the generic traits manifested by existence of all kinds without regard to their differentiation into physical and mental”⁸ must be products of inquiry. This rules out both transcendental and Kantian (critical) metaphysics. “To see the organism in nature, the nervous system in the organism, the brain in the nervous system, the cortex in the brain is the answer to the problems which haunt philosophy. And when thus seen they will be seen to be in, not as marbles in a box but as events in a history, in a moving, growing, never-finished process” (*Experience and Nature*, p. 259). For classical empiricism experience is the way to know in contrast to classical rationalism’s claim that to know is to apprehend realities underlying

experienced appearances. Kant tried to adjudicate the dispute by attributing to mind a certain fixed and inherent structure that determines the manner in which the experienced appearances are destined to be organized into a world of things and events. Dewey has a radically new conception of experience. "Experience" is a collective name for all the transactions going on between the organism and its environment. "Experience" appears to be synonymous with "situation." Experience is the occasion for inquiry, supplies the raw material of inquiry and the evidence for judgment. Experience is in and of nature. The reader must keep in mind this conception of experience if he is to understand Dewey at all.

Experience "contains in a fused union somewhat experienced and some processes of experiencing."⁹ But there is more to experience than an organism in a process of experiencing something. Experience is also conative and affective. Experience is shot through with felt needs, urges, drives, and with enjoyments and frustrations or sufferings. The conative and affective elements provide the occasion and material for evaluation and moral choice and the aesthetic.

Chapter 10 of *The Quest for Certainty*, entitled "The Construction of Good," is reprinted below. This is one of the numerous places where Dewey is trying to state a naturalistic theory of value.

"Judgments about values" writes Dewey, *"are judgments about the conditions and results of experienced objects; judgments about that which should regulate the formation of our desires, affections and enjoyments."*

The first half of the quotation makes of evaluations a species of judgment; and this at once puts evaluations within the domain of inquiry. Dewey means to provide an alternative, on the one hand, to transcendental absolutism, according to which values exist independently of experience and, on the other hand, to views construing evaluation to be just a matter of psychological response uncontrolled by knowledge of the nature of the things valued. The second half of the quotation says that value judgments, as distinct from scientific judgments, are about what things are worth desiring (going after).

Dewey distinguishes objects that are valued (liked, enjoyed, prized) from objects that have value (are fit to be enjoyed, liked, prized). As all naturalists did before him, Dewey holds that nothing can have value unless it is capable of being valued. But it is commonplace among writers on ethics that not everything capable of being valued has value. With this in mind, Dewey "constructs" good by identifying the goodness of value of things with their capacity to be desired (actively pursued) by those who understand their nature. This means that value judgments depend upon scientific judgments. Scientific judgments describe the way things are — what dispositional and nondispositional properties they have. Dewey construes value in such a way as to make the value of an object a function of a correct apprehension of its nature as revealed in inquiry; hence, no experienced object — and nothing else is in question — can have value unless it is, in addition to being experienced, rationally understood as well, and no one is ever in a position to judge correctly that a thing has value unless he knows what inquiry has revealed as to the nature of the thing in question.

Moreover, objects that have value naturally must yield consummatory satisfactions to those who come in immediate commerce with them intelligently. This follows from Dewey's conception of what it means for a thing to have value together with the psychological generalization that desires (dispositions to pursue actively) are reinforced when the objects obtained satisfy and inhibited when the objects frustrate. An object can (as a matter of natural fact) have no value, that is, no capacity to sustain intelligent desire, if it hurts, frustrates, arouses aversion when we are in immediate commerce with it. I suggest, but only as a possibly interesting aside, that Dewey's way of tying together value, desire, and enjoyment is reminiscent of Aristotle.

Dewey justifies his theory of value on the grounds that if we all adopted it, we would be in a position to deal with the practical problems of men intelligently. He thinks that the central task of philosophy is to provide an experimental theory (a theory that allows the use of intelligence) concerning the relation between “beliefs about the nature of things due to natural science, and beliefs about values — using the word [“value”] to designate whatever has rightful authority in the direction of conduct”.

Pregnant and liberating though it be, Dewey’s theory of value is not a model of precision and clarity. He wants to draw, and correctly, a distinction between scientific and value judgments. At the same time, and again correctly, he wants to preserve an intimate connection between them. But neither the distinction nor the connection is clearly made out. So that Dewey has been accused on the one hand of having reduced value judgments to scientific ones. Stevenson, for instance, charges Dewey with having done this by absorbing the “emotive” aspects of ethical terms “into an elaborate conjunction of predictive ones.”¹⁰ On the other hand, Dewey has been accused of having made the converse error; namely, of having reduced the scientific to the evaluative and ethical.¹¹ I happen to believe that Dewey can be read in such a way as to free him of both charges, but this is not the place to argue the case.

Stevenson’s criticism is a special case of a charge made against naturalism in G. E. Moore’s discussions of “the naturalistic fallacy” in *Principia Ethica*. Chapter 1 of the book is reprinted below, and the introduction to the Moore selections has something to say about “the naturalistic fallacy”. Moore is full of good insights, but like Dewey, it is not easy to be sure what he means. There are two descriptions in Moore as to what the naturalistic fallacy is. One description says that it is the attempt to define “good” at all. The other says that it is the misidentification of goodness, which is not a “natural” object, with any “natural” object whatever. Neither Moore nor anyone else in the familiar literature has proved that “good” is indefinable. The other formulation of “the naturalistic fallacy” has a point, but the point is lost in the obscurity of the notion of “natural” and “nonnatural” objects and properties. Moore’s point is, I think, that “good” cannot be defined in terms of the very properties we would invoke if someone wanted to know the reasons why something is good. This is the merest first approximation of what Moore is trying to say. Its full and adequate elaboration is an important task for moral philosophy. To do what Moore warns us not to do would be a mistake indeed. But I believe that Dewey does not make it.

The student of ethics would do well to study Moore and Dewey with great care and respect. It would not be surprising if the mistakes of the one were best corrected by the true insights of the other. It would not be surprising at all if the resulting synthesis turned out to be the best account yet of the nature of value and obligation.

In the list of Dewey’s important contributions to technical philosophy I included his theory of inquiry, his metaphysics, his theory of value and his aesthetics. Of these we have selections from only the first and the third. This is because of strict limitations of space. Accordingly, I have confined the remarks in the present introduction to Dewey’s theory of inquiry and theory of value.

References

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3. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols., C. Hartshorne and

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4. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1938, p. 345.

5. For more detail see Max Fisch, "General Introduction," in *Classic American Philosophers*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1951.

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9. John Dewey, *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, P. A. Schilpp (ed.) ("The Library of Living Philosophers"), Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 2nd ed., 1951, p. 544.

10. Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1944, pp. 254-258.

11. See M. G. White, "Value and Obligation in Lewis and Dewey," *Philosophical Review*, 58 (1949).

12. George Nakhnikian, "On the Naturalistic Fallacy," in George Nakhnikian and H. N. Castaneda (eds.), *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1963.

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