

## John Dewey (1859-1952)

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### Biography

The philosophy of John Dewey is original and comprehensive. His extensive writings contend systematically with problems in metaphysics, epistemology, logic, aesthetics, ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy and education, and philosophical anthropology. Although his work is widely read, it is not widely understood.

Dewey had a distinctive conception of philosophy, and the key to understanding and benefiting from his work is to keep this conception in mind. A worthwhile philosophy, he urged, must be practical. Philosophic inquiry, that is, ought to take its point of departure from the aspirations and problems characteristic of the various sorts of human activity, and an effective philosophy would develop ideas responsive to those conditions. Any system of ideas that has the effect of making common experience less intelligible than we find it to be is on that account a failure. Dewey's theory of inquiry, for example, does not entertain a conception of knowledge that makes it problematic whether we can know anything at all. Inasmuch as scientists have made extraordinary advances in knowledge, it behoves the philosopher to find out exactly what scientists do, rather than to question whether they do anything of real consequence.

Moral philosophy, likewise, should not address the consternations of philosophers as such, but the characteristic urgencies and aspirations of common life; and it should attempt to identify the resources and limitations of human nature and the environment with which it interacts. Human beings might then contend effectively with the typical perplexities and promises of mortal existence. To this end, Dewey formulated an exceptionally innovative and far-reaching philosophy of morality and democracy.

The subject matter of philosophy is not philosophy, Dewey liked to say, but 'problems of men'. All too often, he found, the theories of philosophers made the primary subject matter more obscure rather than less so. The tendency of thinkers is to become bewitched by inherited philosophic puzzles, when the persistence of the puzzle is a consequence of failing to consider the assumptions that created it. Dewey was gifted in discerning and discarding the philosophic premises that create needless mysteries. Rather than fret, for instance, about the question of how immaterial mental substance can possibly interact with material substance, he went to the root of the problem by challenging the notion of substance itself.

Indeed, Dewey's dissatisfaction with the so-called classic tradition in philosophy, stemming at least from Plato if not from Parmenides, led him to reconstruct the entire inheritance of the Western tradition in philosophy. The result is one of the most seminal and fruitful philosophies of the twentieth century.

### 1. Life

Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont in 1859. He earned his BA degree at the University of Vermont, where he was particularly drawn to Scottish common-sense realism. He took his Ph.D. at the Johns Hopkins University, writing his dissertation on the psychology of Kant. At Hopkins he was much influenced by the experimental psychology of G. Stanley Hall, but he was taken above all by the philosophy of Hegel, taught by George Sylvester Morris. Hegel's philosophy, Dewey later said, answered his craving for a unified vision of reality, as distinguished from dualistic and reductive philosophies and those that were content with providing isolated analyses of particular phenomena.

After holding appointments at the University of Michigan and the University of Minnesota, he moved to the University of Chicago in 1894, where he was head of the Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Pedagogy. There he founded the University Elementary School (better known as the Laboratory School or the Dewey School), where he introduced experimental educational practices that both stemmed from and modified his philosophy of education. During this period Dewey began a decided shift away from Hegelian idealism in the direction of his naturalistic experimentalism. In 1904 he moved to Columbia University in New York City, where he developed his mature philosophy. He retired in 1930 but continued to teach as Professor Emeritus at Columbia until 1939. Thereafter he continued to be active, mostly in New York City, until his death in 1952.

Dewey's production of philosophic works was prodigious: forty books and more than 700 articles. After the death of William James in 1910, he was without peer in philosophy in the USA and became a figure of exceptional national and international prominence. He was frequently invited to lecture abroad; he did so in Mexico, China, Japan, Turkey, France, Scotland and the USSR. He was called to several major lectureships, including the Carus Lectures in 1922, the Gifford Lectures in 1929, the William James Lecture in 1930 and the Terry Lectures in 1934. He received honorary degrees from several major universities world-wide and was a founder and the first President of the American Association of University Professors and President of the American Philosophical Association.

Inasmuch as he took seriously the notion of philosophy as a guide to conduct, it was fitting that he devoted much of his time to practical causes. He took a leading role in numerous associations devoted to political and educational reforms, and at the same time contributed frequently to public discourse in such journals of opinion as *The New Republic*, *Commentary*, *The Nation* and *Christian Century*. In 1937, at the age of 78, he accepted the chairmanship of the Commission of Inquiry to investigate the charges of Josef Stalin against Leon Trotsky. The question of Trotsky's guilt or innocence was secondary to the question of whether Stalin was the leader of a great democratic and economic revolution or the perpetrator of massive and brutal oppression. Dewey and the Commission found Trotsky not guilty and Stalin guilty, for which he was viciously criticized by a host of intellectuals sympathetic to Stalin.

## **2. Philosophical anthropology**

Dewey's thinking about human nature is profoundly indebted to the theory of biological evolution as well as to James' *Principles of Psychology* (1890), which itself owed much to the

Darwinian view. The classical idea of species implies changeless essence. It was also taken to imply that there is a perfectly definite end and station in life that each human being ought to achieve in order to fulfil their nature. Darwin's theory that species come into existence and undergo change was, therefore, truly revolutionary: the potentialities of human nature are not fixed, and there is no predetermined outcome or definite social role towards which each and every person ought to aim (see Darwin, C.R. §§2–3; James, W. §2).

According to the Darwinian conception, the human being is not understood primarily as a spectator of nature, but as a participant in it. Like any living organism, we are caught up in processes of change whose tendencies are fateful for our weal and woe. All human practices and aims are conceived with this assumption foremost in mind. Any form of human endeavour – including moral, cognitive and artistic activity – is elucidated as a mode of practice in which the individual acts with multiple agencies of the surrounding environment. Any experience is a conjoint effect of the organism and environment acting together, rather than a passive registration of external stimuli.

Dewey's notion of habit is fundamental to his analysis of human nature. A habit is not the private possession of an individual. It is the product of interactions inclusive of organism and environment, in which the resultant habit is determined as much by particular features of the environment as by the impulses of the organism. The habits appropriate to agricultural practice, for example, could not arise in the individual in isolation from the conditions in which farming occurs. The soil, the seasons and the elements dictate forms of action as much as the physiological and intellectual capacities of the farmer. The habits of farming are a collaborative result of organism and environment.

An impulse by itself does not constitute a form of action. It is plastic, and a formed habit of thought or action can only result from interaction. Dewey believed that a person's nature can take a plurality of possible forms, depending on environmental conditions. While he acknowledged that there are native differences in human beings, Dewey regarded such variations as highly malleable and subject to change as a consequence of learning. For everyone, then, there are multiple opportunities and possible directions for growth. Growth implies that our basic dispositions, our virtues, intelligence, talents and traits of personality are subject to the formations of home, school, church and every manner of human association. It is no surprise, then, that Dewey devoted so much study and experiment to the practice of education.

There is no mind or self antecedent to the formation of habit. The self, according to Dewey, is a dynamic complex of habits. It is an outcome, not an original existence. Mind consists of habits. Every idea is a habit of action; it is an anticipation of definite ways of behaving. The idea of a table, for example, consists of all the ways one can act with the object so designated. To have an idea of a table is not necessarily to have an image, nor is it to envisage the inherent essence of tablehood. It is to be prepared to act with such objects in ways to bring about predictable outcomes. Such outcomes are originally learned by means of active participation with objects, hence mind is derivative of behaviour. But the meanings which constitute mind are mostly (perhaps exclusively, Dewey sometimes seems to say) provided by language. Language, too, is derivative of conduct, but it is necessarily social conduct. The public meanings conveyed by

language could not arise except in shared activity with shared features of an environment. According to Dewey's thinking, consequently, mind can arise only within a social condition. Actual thinking is a function of acquired habits and the promptings of a specific situation.

In accordance with these conceptions, Dewey distinguished a form of conduct that could be common to all human activities. This form he called, generically, art. It is a deliberate practice with the environment, by means of which an individual transforms conditions that are initially disordered and troubling into a situation that is unified and directed. The individual must identify the nature of the problematic conditions, formulate possible plans of action that would utilize the instrumentalities of the particular situation, and execute the plan that seems to hold most promise for success. In conduct as art, individuals move from an initial condition of alienation from the environment to one in which they have effectively engaged their powers with those of their surroundings and have brought the two to consummation. Dewey thought that conduct of this sort characterizes all forms of effective activity. This type of conduct is natural to a living being striving to cope with processes of change, and it provides a consummation of effort that human beings find intrinsically fulfilling (see Pragmatism §1; Anthropology, philosophy of).

### **3. Metaphysics**

Dewey did not think of metaphysics as a foundational discipline, conjuring up principles to certify value judgments and cognitive claims. On the contrary, he was very critical of metaphysics which had such pretensions; such endeavours were part of the obnoxious heritage of the classic tradition.

The classic tradition originating in ancient Greek philosophy is above all characterized by the assumption of disparate realms of being, Dewey contended. These realms are conceived in notably different ways, but they have in common the belief that there is a world of 'true' being, the most real being: that of changeless perfection, which is juxtaposed to a world of becoming, where all things come into existence, undergo change and pass away. The classic notion of being is not only false but pernicious, for it provides the rationale for moral absolutes, whose actual effect is to demand a conformity that is injurious to human flourishing (see Plato §10).

A universal assumption of the reigning tradition, Dewey observed, was that true being is conceived as the object of rational knowledge as such. That alone is the really real. Prior philosophies accordingly had been typically reductive, declaring with the idealists, for example, that reality *per se* is nothing but a rational order of ideas, or with the materialists that nature is nothing but matter in motion, possessing none of the other traits commonly experienced: such fateful events as immediate quality, disorder and ends. With these reductive assumptions, philosophers attributed to subjective mind within itself the plural and varying properties that would otherwise be predicated of nature (see Idealism §1; Materialism §3).

Dewey's metaphysical thought is an attempt to restore to the world the integrity of which philosophers had divested it. He provides a characterization of the most prominent features of the natural world in their continuities with human experience. This is a world of becoming, in the classic vernacular; there is no changeless being. Such phenomena as experience, human nature, mind, knowledge, art and value are conceived as natural functions of the biological organism

interacting with an environment marked by change, order and disorder, obstacles, instrumentalities and episodic fulfilments.

The restoration of integrity of vision is consequent upon the continuity of experience and nature. We experience real events in their relations to ourselves and to each other. We accept our experience as disclosing real traits of the world. The varying qualities of events are natural functions. Not only are sensations of colours and sounds the outcomes of natural processes, but also the full panoply of characteristics that we refer to with such predicates as 'lovely', 'hateful', 'wicked' and 'admirable'. Genuine potentialities of nature are thus exhibited. The potentiality is neither in the organism alone nor in the object alone, but in the situation inclusive of both.

With such assumptions, Dewey insists, for example, on the reality of what he calls the precarious: events that are threatening, disordered, baffling and the like, which were formerly excluded from the really real. We experience such things as terrorist attacks, avalanches, lost keys, droughts and stubbed toes. These are not simply mental occurrences, unrelated to nature. They are public phenomena, and if we cannot accord them appropriate ontological status, philosophy can offer no clue as to how we can contend with them.

Qualitative change, likewise, is as real as anything else and it is one of the traits of nature that Dewey discerned and analysed with telling effect. He calls these changes 'histories'. Phenomena that had been regarded in the classic tradition as original entities or substances are treated by Dewey as the outcomes of histories. Mind, intelligence, knowledge, human nature and moral and aesthetic values are such outcomes. Dewey frequently analysed them in detail, believing that to possess knowledge of such change is invaluable in contending deliberately and effectively with the processes in which we are mortally implicated.

A further significant trait is what Dewey calls 'the stable'. This expression refers not only to conditions that are relatively constant and enduring, but, fundamentally, to the correlations between processes of change. So-called laws of nature are not self-subsistent beings; they are the correlations between one process of change and another, as are those involving pressure and temperature in an enclosed volume of gas, for example. Both pressure and temperature undergo change, and the change in one is correlated in a measurable and predictable way with change in the other. As such correlations are determined, it becomes possible to introduce deliberate variations in natural events for the sake of directing them to predictable outcomes. Knowledge, then, is neither a direct grasp of essences nor a summary of antecedently received sensations. It is an instrument for directing processes of change.

The purpose of Dewey's metaphysics is practical. Its main intent, he declared, is to exhibit the nature and function of intelligence. Contrast the classic model with Dewey's: if the nature of the world is thought to be morally and cognitively determined by a pattern of changeless perfection, then the role of intelligence is to attain a direct grasp of such principles. Subsequently, events in the world of becoming are classified as conforming or not conforming to the antecedent pattern. This is a classificatory and deductive logic, formalized by Aristotle. According to such a logic, moral action consists of the attempt to constrain processes of change to conform to the antecedent absolute. If, however, the object of knowledge is the correlation between processes of

change, and if the constituents of these processes can be varied, then it becomes possible to direct such processes towards welcome fulfilments. This procedure Dewey calls 'experimental logic'. These are distinctly different procedures of practical action, and if the assumptions of the classic tradition are false, then conduct is pointlessly straitjacketed. When Dewey says it is the task of philosophy to characterize the nature of things in a way that illuminates possible harmonies between our ambitions and aspirations and the realities of the world, he has in mind the substitution of an experimental logic for the stultifying anachronisms of the classic tradition (see Processes §4; Whitehead, A.N. §4).

#### **4. Theory of inquiry**

The heart of Dewey's pragmatism – or 'instrumentalism', as he preferred – is his theory of inquiry. It is most significant that the explicit guiding assumption of this theory is that logical distinctions and methods of inquiry develop out of the process of problem-solving activities. The logic of inquiry is not a set of norms existing independently of and prior to our cognitive efforts. Rather, procedures and logical distinctions introduced by inquirers prove themselves in their successes in resolving cognitively problematic situations. 'Successful' is not to be defined by philosophers, but by the aims of modern science itself, which Dewey took to be the prediction and control of natural phenomena. Ultimately at stake in disputes about the nature and possibility of knowledge is the capacity of human beings to act in concert with ongoing events. Such action is dependent upon the determination of how changes in one process are correlated with changes in another.

Science, then, does not get its credentials from philosophy. Instead, the philosopher studies science for a number of worthy purposes: to understand the nature of effective inquiry, the nature of the valid object of knowledge and the possible extensions of scientific methods to domains of problem-solving that are not exclusively scientific. Dewey also appropriates scientific results as indispensable constituents in his particular analyses of human nature, social processes and methods of education. (This is not to say that scientists themselves do not sometimes misunderstand the nature of their own activity, as Dewey on occasion points out.)

According to any philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century, all experience is exclusively subjective: it takes place within the mind, rather than being a consciousness of events external to the sentient being. Traditional dualistic epistemology, then, treats experience as a private, self-enclosed domain that is only problematically (if at all) related to anything beyond itself. Epistemologists laboured to conceive how a purely subjective mental event might possibly correspond to something external to it. If experience is continuous with nature, however, the real problem is of an entirely different sort: to determine how variations in one natural and public event (or set of events) are related to variations in other such events.

This is a problem not for philosophers, but scientists, and scientists have proved very successful in reaching such determinations. They perform experiments and make observations in accordance with a hypothesis. The hypothesis states that if specified changes are introduced under controlled conditions, predictable effects will ensue. If the inquiry is conducted as the hypothesis prescribes, and if the effects occur as predicted, then the hypothesis is tentatively

confirmed. Dewey always insisted that warrant for the putative knowledge is dependent upon confirmation from the community of relevant inquirers. Such warrant is always a matter of degree and it is always fallible.

Inquiry involves the deliberate manipulation of the conditions within which it occurs. The very subject matter of the investigation might be controlled, as in laboratory work; or the conditions of observation might be controlled, as in astronomy. In any case, the inquirer introduces deliberate change in the cognitive situation in order to produce the object of knowledge.

The object of knowledge as such is the outcome of a process; it does not exist antecedently to inquiry. Natural events, with their own potentialities, powers and limitations, exist prior to inquiry, of course, but they do not in that condition constitute an object of knowledge. When such an object is produced, its character is dependent upon the specific conditions of inquiry that have been introduced, including the subject matter under scrutiny. The investigator has responded to a specific problematic situation, has contrived an inquiry of a particular sort, and makes observations and measurements in terms of concepts that are largely characteristic of the existing state of the science. Inquiry is inevitably theory-laden – or, in Dewey's parlance, meaning-laden. Inquiry constitutes, in identifiable and specifiable ways, a transformation of antecedent subject matter.

Inasmuch as Dewey regards the object of knowledge as a deliberate construction, some readers have concluded that he is an antirealist. This conclusion is mistaken. Dewey repudiated the archaic idea that knowledge is a correspondence between an object and a mental image, but that does not make him an antirealist. Indeed, whatever 'realism' is taken to mean, Dewey's study of inquiry concludes that our ideas are determined by the nature of real events to a far greater extent than was recognized in any pre-pragmatic philosophy. The meaning of any object consists of the conception of all that object can do in relation to other objects. In other words, we know how objects function as constituents of processes of change; and in that form alone can we utilize them for practical purposes. Mere images cannot do so; nor can Platonic forms or Cartesian essences. Our conceptual systems, moreover, have arisen from the very processes of effective inquiry. Although our concepts are subject to revision, it can hardly be said that they are arbitrary impositions on nature. While it must be insisted that the successes of science are always open to refinement and revision, it is unmistakable that our ability to function with formerly inscrutable and overwhelming natural powers has undergone astounding advancement. Dewey calls this shift a revolution from arts of acceptance to arts of control (see Scientific realism and antirealism §4).

## **5. Moral philosophy: the construction of good**

The classic tradition has supposed the existence of something essentially changeless and perfect in the nature of things, ranging from Platonic forms to natural law, and from Kantian reason to the nature of the Absolute. Even utilitarianism shares in that tradition in supposing a single criterion of good, as does Marxism in holding that there is but a single pattern that describes all historical change. Many philosophers have thought that they espy a moral absolute; and many have believed that such an absolute is of supreme value in human conduct. Many others would like to agree, but they have despaired of discerning such a rationally incontrovertible standard.

The classic tradition assumes a changeless principle or goal for all moral action, yet the real world is marked by change. It presents the continuing occurrence of unique situations, each of which can yield a variety of possible outcomes. There is likewise an indefinite plurality of human possibilities. Adherence to the classic tradition, then, constitutes a demand for unyielding conformity to prevailing cultural requirements, which are given a specious authority by religious or philosophic speculations. The tradition enforces conditions in which human possibilities are denied for the sake of maintaining precedent, custom or arbitrary authority. Historically, the feudal system has been the most prominent example. The contemporary demand that women and men should not be confined to their traditional roles is, in effect, a repudiation of the classic tradition.

As Dewey conceived it, the moral life is suffused with innumerable possibilities of enjoyment and happiness, as well as of disaster. Ordinary life revolves around familiar attachments, ambitions and fears. The philosophic task, Dewey believed, is to place at the disposal of human beings the assumptions and methods that would facilitate the efforts in which they will be engaged in any case. It is a project of enabling and liberating. Each situation might be approached to identify its unique opportunities for fulfilment. The precarious values of the situation might be clarified and united into more inclusive wholes and made more secure against obstacles and threats.

This procedure Dewey calls the ‘construction’ of good. No phrase encapsulates so well both his opposition to the classical tradition and his alternative to it. Rather than conform to an antecedently given pattern of right conduct, one actively constructs a new situation, intending to discriminate its particular tendencies and to contrive a consummation of the energies of the organism and environment – the practice referred to in §3 as ‘conduct as art’. Dewey can be eloquent in characterizing such experience as one of deeply enriched qualities and cherished meanings. It is a cumulative experience, enhancing human powers. The continuation of this process over time Dewey denominates ‘growth’.

There is no absolute consummation in life, nor any exact station determined a priori by one’s nature. Rather, one may treasure the very process of conduct as art. Dewey says that growth itself is the only moral end, and he identifies it primarily as a social process. Our behaviour is characteristically interpersonal; as such, it is the source of most of our learning, and our participation with others is the source of our most profound satisfactions. As a constituent of growth, ‘shared experience is the greatest of human goods’. The construction of good is typically a shared activity, greatly facilitated by deliberate cooperation.

The activity requires appropriate habits of thought and conduct, including those of communication and cooperation. Above all, Dewey believes, it requires the habits of experimental inquiry. The situations to be transformed are often of a complex and comprehensive nature, such as, for example, the reconstruction of educational institutions; so we must possess reliable knowledge of how such practices actually work. We must also possess the imaginative habits of the experimenter to formulate hypotheses about how such conditions might be reconstructed. We might hypothesize that certain innovations in practice would eventuate, say, in more alert, reflective and well-motivated students. The hypothesis guides conduct by

prescribing the changes that would effect such results: the introduction of specified procedures would transform educational activity in such a way as to produce the desired outcomes. This is the manner in which scientific hypotheses guide conduct, not – by contrast – in deducing a prescription for action from an alleged moral absolute. That would be a reversion to the logic of the classical tradition (see Pragmatism in ethics §3).

## **6. Moral philosophy: the democratic way of life**

Dewey was convinced that modern society is swamped in the modes of thought inherited from the classic tradition. Instead of using experimental logic, we depend on putative moral absolutes. Our conduct is governed, in effect, by precedent, which largely represents, according to Dewey, the entrenched prerogatives of privileged groups. The most beneficent change that could be introduced into society, consequently, would be the teaching and widespread adoption of experimental habits of thought (see Education, history of philosophy of §9). We would not just address our several problematic situations with greater promise of success, but we would re-evaluate our economic and political behaviour with a view to what that behaviour really does and to what any alternatives to it might do.

Dewey sometimes called deliberation and action of this sort ‘social intelligence’ and sometimes ‘democracy as a way of life’. Democracy as a way of life, he said, could be a norm for all forms of human association. Surprisingly, Dewey never provided a systematic exposition of the norms of this life, but its constituents can be extracted from his writings. It consists of several habits or virtues, foremost among them experimental habits of inquiry. These include fallibilism, rather than dogmatism, and an insistence that we follow the evidence of inquiry wherever it leads, rather than cling to preconceived ideas. Experimentalism implies both a willingness to entertain novel hypotheses and the personal flexibility to try out unaccustomed modes of action. The dissemination of the results of inquiry as widely as possible is also indispensable to the democratic ethos.

Democratic life, as Dewey conceives it, also implies respect for persons. Respect of this sort does not entail policy prescriptions, but it means that every person has a right to participate in the formation of goods. It implies that individuals should be seriously receptive to each other’s concerns, taking them into account – at least initially – as deserving an honest hearing. It also implies that persons communicate with each other freely and honestly to convey their concerns and to propose their tentatively preferred plans of action. Out of such virtue and discourse, leavened with scientific knowledge, shared proposals for action would emerge and would be honoured. It should go without saying that democratic virtue excludes deliberately antisocial behaviour.

On a small scale, these procedures are familiar. In our personal relations – friendships, marriages and voluntary associations of all kinds – we do not presume to enforce our views on other participants in a unilateral way. We assume that there will be differences of opinion, great and small, and we typically assume that we will talk these problems over in a civil manner and try to arrive at some more or less amicable agreement about what to do. We do not always succeed in doing so, but when we fail, we do not generally bolt the association. Our common activities are

usually too precious for anything so shortsighted. Our treasured relationships do not survive such intransigence. Dewey believed that the virtues exhibited in such relations might be extended to incorporate much wider groups.

No philosopher before Dewey had conceived moral discourse as essentially communicative. The democratic virtues, after all, are impertinent to the various incarnations of the classic tradition. If the good and the right are known absolutely, the discourse of social intelligence is superfluous. One must concede that such discourse does not guarantee that consensus will always occur. Conflict and frustration are inevitable; but Dewey believed that they would be substantially less than they are when immovable oppositions are generated by moral absolutes.

The disciplines of the democratic way of life are demanding, and they can easily be corrupted. Dewey urged that schooling of all kinds incorporate the procedures of cooperative intelligence as a matter of routine. Indeed, all forms of association might be conducted in a manner to make democratic values habitual. Were such favourable conditions to exist, he thought, this way of life could be reasonably approximated.

It is a way of life that can be criticized for providing insufficient finality to moral judgment. It is true: the democratic/scientific virtues do not ensure the unanimity craved by adherents to the classic tradition. On the other hand, their exercise precludes the source of most of our torments: deliberately hurtful conduct. And it promises a release of human possibilities from needless subservience to moral absolutes. In fact, the verdict on Dewey's moral philosophy might be that it makes excessive demands of human flesh, not that it is too permissive. In any case, if the classic tradition is indeed a relic, then perhaps Dewey's thought points the way to a more pertinent philosophy than any other currently offered to our candid judgment (see Social democracy §2).

### **List of works**

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