

# *William James and John Dewey: A Common Vision*

by John R. Shook

**Note:** Some material for this paper is drawn from introductions written for the volumes of *The Chicago School of Functionalism* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2001). A second paper, "William James and John Dewey: A Contentious Partnership," is forthcoming in *Streams of William James*.

Philosophy in the 1880s and 1890s was energized by erupting controversies that would presently be characterized as issues in "philosophy of mind" or "philosophical psychology." Responsibility for such an explosion of intense creativity and debate rests primarily on two profound developments: the rising acceptance of Darwinian evolution and the expanding interest in psychological experimentation. They encouraged the revolutionary notion that human beings must be studied as physical organisms operating to survive in a natural environment. William James of Harvard University and the University of Chicago functionalists, led by John Dewey, were philosophers and psychologists who explored the emerging frontiers of philosophy of mind. They established a novel approach to the understanding of human cognition and behavior. This approach was broadly naturalistic, in sharp contrast to the many flourishing idealisms of that time.

## **The Origins of Functionalism**

Functionalism is primarily defined by its thesis that psychology is the study of mental life as an adaptive organic process. James and Dewey adopted a naturalistic attitude towards the human being and its abilities. Materialism itself was hardly a new philosophy. However, materialism up to that time had little to say about the human intellectual abilities, after reducing them to workings of a bodily machine or relegating them to epiphenomenal by-products of the brain's activity. The largest contribution of materialism to modern philosophy of mind rested on its mechanistic theory of the origin of ideas. Materialism usually supported sensationalistic empiricism by locating the source of information about the world exclusively in the mechanical activities of the sense organs, stimulated in turn by the transmission of motion from forceful contact with physical bodies in nature. Information about the surrounding environment is generated by the correct kind of interaction between the natural world and the natural workings of the brain. Aside from possessing a properly working nervous system, the perceptive observer is treated as a passive receptacle of this information for

which the observer deserves no responsibility or credit. Sensationalistic empiricism permits the rational manipulation of information into more complex combinations of association. But aside from the use of standard logical tools, any deviant manipulation or creation of ideas can only result in the serious risk of deception, illusion, and error.

Materialism and sensationalism prevailed over German idealisms and lingering dualisms, standing victorious across Europe from Scotland to Austria during the middle decades of the 19th Century. But despite the obvious affinities between materialism, evolution, and psychological experimentation, their combination in the 1870s slowly eroded sensationalism's dominance. This erosion was accelerated by suddenly reascent post-Kantian idealisms which exposed the many inconsistencies and paradoxes of any empiricism which claims that knowledge of the natural world of physical objects and their lawful behavior is "built up" solely out of raw sensory materials possessing neither coherence nor meaning. Sensationalism's denial that the mind's knowing faculties help to construct the basic experiential information was opposed by idealism's counter-claim that without such constructive assistance no genuine experience of the world could occur. Evolution's perspective on the physiological role of the nervous system, and psychological experimentation on actual mental processes, decisively tipped the scales against sensationalism. Together they established that the human observer selected, filtered, and shaped experiences of the world.

This revolution replaced the passivism required by sensationalism with the activism taught by what can be termed "voluntarism." Voluntarism emphasized the role of the will in directing all human experience and activity. Voluntary actions should even encompass the acquisition of information about the environment. This goes well beyond the trivial idea that organisms must orient themselves to sources of sensations, by claiming that the very content and meaning of any experience is partially dependent on the goal-directed activity pursued by an organism. Voluntarism was compatible with idealism to the extent that they agreed that the on-going mental activities of a human being were largely responsible for the significance and meaning of one's experience. Voluntarism and idealism were unified by many philosophers in "organicism." Organicism, inspired by the German Romantic idealisms of Schelling and Hegel, rejected the mechanistic world-view in favor of the metaphor of the living organism. Its defense of teleological explanations of both human behavior and the natural world enjoyed a renaissance in the late 19th Century.

Philosophers at the forefront of physiological and experimental psychology in Germany were typically aligned with idealism, voluntarism, and organicism. Primary examples include Gustav Fechner, Hermann Helmholtz, Hermann Lotze, and Wilhelm Wundt. In Darwin's own land, English universities were slow to recon-

cile the native empiricism of John Locke and John Stuart Mill with the on-going psychological revolutions. Experimental laboratories were discouraged and psychology departments failed to gain independence until well into the 20th Century. Revealingly, the task of challenging sensationalism and associationism fell to those few idealists, especially James Ward and G. F. Stout, whose disdain for the excesses of both Hegelian absolutism and materialism permitted their appreciation for the “new” advanced psychology fermenting across the Channel. The Americans who were most completely aligned with voluntaristic organicism were William James and the Chicago functionalists. They explicitly applied biological/physiological terms and principles to their experimental study of the mind’s processes. While the application of “function” to mental activity dated back to early 19th Century phrenology, James and Dewey imbedded the term in a sophisticated philosophy of mind.

### **Functionalism, Genetic Psychology, and Structuralism**

In America the struggle between sensationalism and the new psychology became a strange spectacle, as former students of Wundt competed for supremacy. The most senior American psychologist, William James, brought Wundt’s experimental methodology and voluntaristic philosophy to Harvard, setting up the first psychological laboratory in America in 1875. James also published *The Principles of Psychology* in 1890, which was the first book to present the new psychology to the English-speaking world. G. Stanley Hall studied with both Wundt and James in the 1870s. He was then brought to Johns Hopkins University in 1882 where he found Charles S. Peirce already conducting psychological experiments with Joseph Jastrow. The initial dominance of Wundtian voluntarism in America was sustained by the next generation. Hall’s students taught the new psychology and set up their own laboratories. Jastrow, Dewey, James McKeen Cattell (who received his Ph.D. from Wundt), and E. C. Sanford were all giving instruction in experimental psychology by 1890.

Dewey gradually integrated Hegelian organicism with Wundtian voluntarism, as evident in his “The New Psychology,” to form a recognizably functionalist psychology as early as 1886. Dewey explicitly credits James’s *Principles of Psychology* for providing the naturalistic standpoint from which to elaborate the details of his functionalism. James Angell was a graduate student of both Dewey at Michigan and William James at Harvard; he then joined the Michigan faculty and followed Dewey on to Chicago in 1894. George Mead, also a student of James, was hired by Dewey at Michigan and also followed him to Chicago.

Other Wundtian-inspired psychologists permeated

American universities. George T. Ladd at Yale, one of the first to absorb Wundtian principles, hired Wundt’s student Edward Scripture. James brought another of Wundt’s students, Hugo Munsterberg, to Harvard in 1892 to conduct the psychological investigations. Another prominent psychologist, James Mark Baldwin, studied with Wundt in 1884 and subsequently inaugurated experimental psychology at Princeton, Toronto, and Johns Hopkins. One of Wundt’s most successful students was Edward Titchener, who received his Ph.D. in 1892 and inaugurated psychology at Cornell.

By the mid-1890s three distinct camps emerged in American philosophy/psychology. Each was led by psychologists who were also full-fledged philosophers with metaphysical and epistemology standpoints, capable of pursuing their disagreements across the psychology and philosophy journals. The James-Dewey functionalism remained closest to its Wundtian origins in organicism and voluntarism. Baldwin’s genetic psychology recoiled from their idealistic-leaning empiricism and imbedded his Wundtian voluntarism in a realistic metaphysics. Titchener’s structuralism read into Wundt an associationism aligned with the British empiricist tradition.

However, by 1910 the structuralist-functionalist contest was over, Baldwin was forgotten in France, and functionalism (with its offspring, behaviorism) dominated American psychology for another generation. Two decades later, after Harvey Carr succeeded Angell as the leader of the Chicago School, functionalism’s standpoint on empirical psychology was still highly influential. While the “school” of functionalism was no longer a prominent feature of academia by 1950, its principles and not those of structuralism had been permanently incorporated into the entire discipline.

### **Dewey’s Debt to James**

The 1903 *Studies in Logical Theory* presented the Chicago functionalists’ work on various aspects of logic, including inference, judgment, belief, and knowledge. Their choice of topic was hardly unusual for the philosophical climate of their day or the present, but the standpoint taken on these central matters was revolutionary. In Dewey’s preface, the philosophical stance of the *Studies in Logical Theory* is as follows:

All agree, the editor takes the liberty of saying, that judgment is the central function of knowing, and hence affords the central problem of logic; that since the act of knowing is intimately and indissolubly connected with the like yet diverse functions of affection, appreciation, and practice, it only distorts results reached to treat knowing as a self-enclosed and self-explanatory whole—hence the intimate connections of logical theory with functional psychology; that since knowledge appears as a function within experience, and yet passes

## William James and John Dewey: A Common Vision by John R. Shook

judgment upon both the processes and contents of other functions, its work and aim must be distinctively reconstructive or transformatory; that since Reality must be defined in terms of experience, judgment appears accordingly as the medium through which the consciously effected evolution of Reality goes on; that there is no reasonable standard of truth (or of success of the knowing function) in general, except upon the postulate that Reality is thus dynamic or self-evolving, and, in particular, except through reference to the specific offices which knowing is called upon to perform in readjusting and expanding the means and ends of life. And all agree that this conception gives the only promising basis upon which the working methods of science, and the proper demands of the moral life, may cooperate.<sup>1</sup>

The contributors, aware of their controversial stance, stood together with the rest of the department as a group to stand or fall together. After outlining the general approach taken by the contributors for analyzing logical theory, Dewey particularly thanked his colleagues who did not contribute to the *Studies* (these were George H. Mead, James H. Tufts, James R. Angell, and Edward S. Ames). Finally, speaking for all, Dewey singled out William James as the chief inspiration for their common standpoint and method.

The connection between the general approach to logic taken by the *Studies* and William James would not have been easily grasped by a contemporary reader of this new book. But this expression of appreciation was no insincere or timid attempt to place some responsibility on the broader shoulders of a more prominent philosopher. First, William James's reputation at that time primarily rested on his earlier work in psychology, although by 1903 his appointment was in philosophy. Only those who had closely studied James's 1890 *Principles of Psychology* or followed James's few philosophical publications from 1897 to 1903 had a chance to surmise the real nature of the Chicago philosophers' genuine debt to James. James published his own completed theory of consciousness and knowledge later on, in a series of articles from 1904-1906 and the 1907 *Pragmatism*. Even James himself didn't quite see the full scope of his influence, but he was very pleased to welcome these new converts to his ever-expanding corps of pragmatists.

Chicago has a School of Thought!—a school of thought which, it is safe to predict, will figure in literature as the School of Chicago for twenty-five years to come. Some universities have plenty of thought to show, but no school; others plenty of school, but no thought. The University of Chicago, by its Decennial Publications, shows real thought and a real school. Professor John Dewey, and at least ten of his disciples, have collectively put

into the world a statement, homogeneous in spite of so many cooperating minds, of a view of the world, both theoretical and practical, which is so simple, massive, and positive that, in spite of the fact that many parts of it yet need to be worked out, it deserves the title of a new system of philosophy. If it be as true as it is original, its publication must be reckoned an important event. The present reviewer, for one, strongly suspects it of being true.<sup>2</sup>

James approvingly outlined the basic tenets of the *Studies*: its evolutionary and empirical foundations, the functionalist theory of thought as a process of reconstructing failed activity, and the notion that knowledge and truth is forever in the making as human experience grows and adjusts. The attentive reader would have heard James's own emerging philosophical views in these few tenets. James concludes by pointing out the remarkable convergence of the Chicago school with the movement of "pragmatism" led by James himself, and with the "humanism" of F. C. S. Schiller at Oxford.

The Chicago philosophers rarely referred to themselves as pragmatists, although they warmly acknowledged the welcoming arms of the pragmatic philosophers who had preceded them into the bright spotlight of philosophical attention. When labeling themselves, the preferred term was usually "instrumentalist." Instrumentalism is essentially the philosophical application of the work done by functional psychology. As seen in his quotation above, Dewey stressed that the understanding of human knowledge requires an adequate logical theory, and that logical theory should use the methods of functional psychology. The background empirical assumption is that philosophy strays into sterile transcendentalism unless its discourse is concerned solely with reality and truth as manifested in human experience and knowledge. This empiricism, together with the functional approach to knowledge, implies that philosophy must use the methods of functional psychology to make any progress. It was precisely this revolutionary conclusion that excited James, for he found that the Chicago school had arrived at the foundations of his own position, displayed in his *Principles of Psychology*.

—John R. Shook = [jshook@pragmatism.org](mailto:jshook@pragmatism.org)  
John is WebMaster for the William James Society  
([www.pragmatism.org/societies/william\\_james.htm](http://www.pragmatism.org/societies/william_james.htm))  
as well as [www.pragmatism.org](http://www.pragmatism.org)

1. John Dewey et al., *Studies in Logical Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), p. x.

2. William James, "The Chicago School," *Psychological Bulletin* 1.1 (15 Jan. 1904): 1.