

WJ and John Dewey: A Contentious Partnership

by John R. Shook

The philosophical partnership of William James with John Dewey solidified in the first years of the 1900s after many years of mutually admiring correspondence. Dewey, together with former students at the University of Chicago, published *Studies in Logical Theory* in 1903. The book's preface identified James as the group's primary source of inspiration and James responded in 1904 with a book review heralding the work as a new voice of pragmatism.¹ Following James's announcement of the principles of radical empiricism in 1904, Dewey chimed in with his own similar version, agreeing that "a thing is what it is experienced to be."² Ironically, these events were to be the most harmonious period of their partnership. Already by 1905 the partnership was strained by disagreements on the nature of experience, the self, and knowledge. These problems only grew over the few remaining years of James's life. By 1908, two years before James's death, Dewey publicly called for the dissolution of pragmatism as a philosophical movement.

The evidence of their contentious professional relationship (their private admiration for each other never dimmed) is contained in publications and private letters. One fundamental issue, and the earliest to surface, was the question of how philosophical debate should be conducted. Dewey was not pleased by James's unrestrained enthusiasm for applying the label of "pragmatism" to philosophies having but a remote relationship with its core principle: that ideas must guide activity to have any intellectual content. Critics were thus content to attack only the more general and vague formulations of pragmatism, and they mostly ignored the detailed analyses of specific philosophical problems, to both James's and Dewey's frustration. In 1905 Dewey admonished his former student at Chicago, Addison W. Moore, for unreservedly accepting the label of pragmatism as standing for the work of the entire Chicago school.

I have never known a myth grow so rapidly as that of "pragmatism". To read its critics one would think it was a positive system set forth for centuries in hundreds of volumes, & that its critics were the ones engaged in a tentative development of new & undogmatic ideas. But I object root and branch to the term 'pragmatism' (except in its origin limited sense) & would take objection to your article in so far as it seems to admit the label.

Any name can only be onesided, and so it seems a pity to have any. Radical empiricism begs as few as

any, tho I should prefer the term experimentalism to empiricism. Philosophy is Functionalism in the sense that it treats only of functions of experience (not of facts, nor of states, ideas, &); it is Geneticism is a mode of analyzing & identifying these functions; it is Instrumentalism as a theory of the significance of the Knowledge-function; it is Experimentalism as a theory of the test of worth of all functions. If I were a German I could stick all these words together and announce a new system. Doubtless. Meanwhile I think there is nothing to do but to peg away at the analyses of particular problems....³

From our vantage point it does appear ironic that James, who represented a more individualistic strain of pragmatism, took great comfort in having as many allies (in name at least, if not also in action) as possible. But one of the dangers of collecting allies in this way is that genuine mutual understanding may not get established. James only partly grasped the details of the Chicago school's philosophy and he easily admitted it.⁴ Often his would-be associates confounded James, and they likewise had objections to James's views. It is indeed striking that few philosophers whole-heartedly embraced "pragmatism." Charles Peirce notoriously renamed his philosophy "pragmaticism" in protest. Even F. C. S. Schiller at Oxford, one of James's closet allies, refused to permit "pragmatism" to label his philosophy, using "humanism" instead. Dewey rarely used the term pragmatism to apply to his own views, preferring "experimentalism" or "instrumentalism." But as the occasion demanded, and especially as the years passed after James's death, Dewey seemed happy to use the term.

One of the most important specific philosophical issues causing tension between James and Dewey was the proper definition of truth. Dewey came to believe that James often confused the notion that the satisfactoriness of experience brought about by an idea constitutes its truth with the quite different notion that the satisfactions brought by the consequences of the belief in an idea are signals of its truth. In the first notion ideas are means created, and thus truths are created, for the purpose of improving experience. In the second notion, ideas have a prior existence and a prior validity before the consequences are tested to learn their truth. Dewey argued in 1908 ("What Does Pragmatism Means by Practical") that he can agree only with the first notion while the second gives aid and comfort to rationalists and intellectualists who are content to find in pragmatism just a psychological account of how humans discover eternal truths.⁵ At the conclusion of this article, written on the occasion of the publication of James's 1907 book *Pragmatism*, Dewey does a most un-Jamesian thing: he declares that the time has arrived to take down the banner of "pragmatism" and

disband the movement. He points out that the different aspects of pragmatism have been “uniquely” united by James, and suggests further progress lies in “more analytic clearing up and development of these independent elements.” Dewey concludes that “pragmatism’ as a holding company for allied, yet separate interests and problems, might be dissolved and revert to its original constituents.”⁶

In a letter written to James soon after this article was composed, Dewey explains that

I have not attempted a review of the book, but rather of the pragmatic movement with reference to what present controversy seems to me to indicate as the points which require more explicit statement & development. Among other things I have become conscious of some points of possible divergence between Schiller yourself & myself—taken two by two all the way around; and I am not sure but that some misunderstandings among our critics might not be cleared away, if our points of respective agreement & possible disagreement were brought out. For example, the antecedents of humanism, *via* personal idealism, were distinctly an idealistic metaphysics. My own views are most much more naturalistic and a reaction against not merely intellectualistic & monistic idealism but against all idealisms—except of course in the sense of ethical ideals. Now, I seem to myself to be nearer you than I am to Schiller on this point, yet I am not sure. On the other hand, Schiller in his latter writings seem to emphasize that the good consequence which is the test of an idea is *good* not so much in its own nature as in meeting the claims of the idea, whatever the idea is. And here I seem to be nearer to him than to you; and yet again I am not sure. If there are real differences, and our critics are inclined to make combinations of our respective doctrines which no one of us alone would stand for, this may occasion account for some of the unsatisfactory misunderstandings in the present state of controversy.⁷

Dewey was especially concerned that the definition of truth must be approached naturalistically as well as empirically. James connected his empiricism with his pragmatic theory of truth in a 1905 article, claiming that “the ‘truth’ of our mental operations must always be an intra-experiential affair. A conception is reckoned true by common sense when it can be made to lead to a sensation.”⁸ James concludes his article with a pronouncement of his confidence that Dewey would agree with this theory of truth. Dewey’s quick response in an article titled “The Realism of Pragmatism” gives his “heartily assent” to what James has said about truth, but then expresses “the hope that he [James] also conceives the matter in some such way as I have suggested” in a prior paragraph. In this preced-

ing paragraph of Dewey’s article he states that the regenerated empiricism of pragmatism must, in order to completely eliminate “consciousness” as an entity, depict all mental states such as sensations as biological events carrying significance and not as ghostly inner copies of actual real things. “Psychical things are thus themselves realistically conceived; they can be described and identified in biological and physiological terms.”⁹

Dewey’s demand that empiricism must be naturalistic and social did not receive the same emphasis from James. James’s pragmatism placed a great deal of emphasis upon the question of the satisfactoriness of an idea for the individual using that idea and hence often offered a definition of truth that reduced it to a personal level. James rarely treated truth as a matter of social or universal satisfaction, in sharp contrast to both Peirce and Dewey’s view that truth is always a social achievement made by people solving group problems.

James’s dedication to individuality characterizes his entire philosophy, and this precipitated another dispute concerning the nature of the self. Dewey was convinced that individuality or personal selfhood was not any sort of given in experience or consciousness. In the chapter of *Principles of Psychology* on the stream of consciousness, James defines the stream as personal and individualized. This interpretation of the stream of consciousness (or “experience” as James came to abandon “consciousness”) was completely foreign to Dewey. In a letter to A. W. Moore, Dewey describes his reaction.

I... read James ch on the stream of cons. recently, and was impressed as never before with the inconsistencies.... James ‘stream of con’. seems to oscillate between three things: (1) a literal reproduction in the psychical sphere of everything in the cognized or objective sphere... (2) that same objective content but differently viewed (as by a psychologist?)--that is to say the course of experience (not of thot or cons) viewed from the standpoint of the actual individual, John Smith, instead of from its own standpoint i.e. in abstraction from John Smith; (3) as a stream which is formally empty, but which grabs and manipulates its objects.... So far as I can (2) is the only possible interpretation & the only one consistent with ‘non-existence of consciousness’.¹⁰

Dewey offered a rival theory of individuality, which depicts selfhood as a cognitive achievement of mental development nurtured through social relations. For Dewey, experience per se is not personal or private or individualized. In Dewey’s 1908 article “What Does Pragmatism Mean By Practical” he points out their disagreement.

[A] synthetic pragmatism such as Mr. James has ventured upon will take a very different form according as the point of view of what he calls the “Chicago School” or that of humanism is taken as a basis for interpreting the nature of the personal. According to the latter view, the personal appears to be ultimate and unanalyzable, the metaphysically real. Associations with idealism, moreover, give it an idealistic turn, a translation, in effect, of monistic intellectualistic idealism into pluralistic, voluntaristic idealism. But, according to the former, the personal is not ultimate, but is to be analyzed and defined biologically on its genetic side, ethically on its prospective and functioning side.¹¹

James could not have been pleased to read how Dewey classified his views with idealism, since James was determined to refute idealism using his stream of consciousness (or experience) theory. A rejuvenated empiricism that recognizes relations in experience could, in James’s view, eliminate any need for idealism’s notion of the Absolute Mind holding together fragmented human experience. However, James combined the discovery of experienced relations (which Dewey applauded) with an assertion that experience can provide direct knowledge of reality.

James’s membership in the long tradition of empiricism is exemplified in this insistence that experience can provide direct knowledge of objects without that knowledge constituting the object. Idealism notoriously claims that knowledge must constitute any object, and hence all reality is necessarily dependent on mind for its existence. James rejected idealism by arguing that knowledge is a matter of external and contingent relations between a mind and an object, and therefore knowing is not necessary to the existence of the object known. This epistemology of immediate knowledge inspired many of his students, for example Ralph B. Perry, to develop a realism grounded on the assertion that objects have an independent existence apart from their entering into the relation with that kind of consciousness called knowledge.

Dewey believed that there is a potential contradiction between James’s theory of immediate knowledge and radical empiricism. Radical empiricism, especially as developed in James’s *The Meaning of Truth*, is admirably designed to explain why truth is a matter of experienced relations between two distinct experiences, the earlier experience indicating and leading towards the second. What need is there for any other sort of “immediate” knowledge that requires only one experience? Dewey’s empiricism was also dependent on the notion of immediate empiricism, but he could not agree that any sort of knowing was provided by immediacy in itself.

I must say that the immediacy of things appeals to me more and more as the ignored factor in philosophy. This quality has been insisted upon in the past by the Scotch school and by the German feeling school—in opposition to Hegel, e.g. Schleiermarcker [sic] etc. but they have interpreted it as a particular sort or kind of knowledge (or at least of acquaintance) which delivers special varieties of goods on its own account. Schiller and even James are not free from this fallacy.¹²

Dewey consistently held that the known object cannot be independent of the knowledge of it, because knowledge is established through problem-solving which, if successful, is partially responsible for creating the known object. Dewey’s instrumentalism finds that knowledge is an active process of creating the known object, while James’s epistemology was expressly designed to reject such a position. Naturally, many critics found Dewey’s instrumentalism to be idealistic, because they were unable to see how Dewey construed all the processes of knowing naturalistically. Even James was wary of Dewey’s insistence on interpreting all factors of knowledge and truth as phases and products of problem-solving. James explicitly denied Dewey’s position in a letter to Schiller, saying that there is truth and knowledge apart from solving problems.¹³ Dewey’s theory of knowledge was designed expressly to prove that such a separation is impossible.

The distance between James and Dewey over the nature of truth can easily be exaggerated. If James’s views on the nature of truth expressed in “The Will to Believe” are considered by themselves, the deep similarities with Dewey’s approach are undeniable. The will-to-believe approach suggests that it is always necessary for any belief to create the conditions required for testing and (hopefully) confirming that belief’s truth. Dewey also held that the proper function role of belief is to establish successful activity, thus creating knowledge and truth. However, James’s essay is notoriously vague; he also appears to say that the will-to-believe approach is only legitimate with respect to those beliefs that science cannot confirm, such as religious beliefs. Such irregularities and inconsistencies in James’s definitions of truth, found in many of his writings, seemed at times to be caused by an interest in finding a way to justify religious beliefs independently of scientific method. If scientific method could not justify morality, or religion, James offered a separate pragmatic methodology to justify belief in free will or God. Dewey could not agree with this application of pragmatism, because for Dewey’s broad understanding of science, there was no justification apart from scientific pragmatic justification. Morality, for example, should be the scientific inquiry into solutions for moral prob-

lems. If there was no genuine role in this scientific inquiry for “free will,” then the libertarian notion of free will should be abandoned.

In his reminiscences about James’s impact, Dewey consistently credited James’s *Principles of Psychology* (1890) alone, and not any of James’s other writings. In Dewey’s biography, written by his daughter with Dewey’s assistance, we read that

James’s influence on Dewey’s theory of knowledge was exercised not by the *Pragmatism*, which appeared after Dewey’s theory had been formed, but by chapters in the *Principles of Psychology* dealing with conception, discrimination and comparison, and reasoning. Dewey has frequently recommended these chapters to students as a better introduction to the essentials of a pragmatic theory of knowledge than the *Pragmatism*.¹⁴

Dewey had no difficulty distinguishing the portions of James’s philosophy that were congenial to his own views from the portions that caused antagonism. The specific philosophical disagreements between James and Dewey outlined here are sufficient to refute simplistic accounts of the history of pragmatism that see little difference between them. Yet they shared the same overall philosophical spirit and standpoint, and there is good reason to place Dewey next to James in the roll-call of those thinkers who herald the triumph of democratic individuality. In an address composed in 1942 to celebrate the centenary of James’s birth, Dewey easily identified, and sympathized with, the heart of James’s attitude towards individuality.

I find the actual position of James to be well represented in a remark he quotes from a carpenter of his acquaintance: “There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, is *very important*.” It is this element which is precious because it is that which nobody and nothing else can contribute, and which is the source of all creativity.¹⁵

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Notes

1. The deep connections between James’s thought and the Chicago school of pragmatism are explored in Shook, “William James and John Dewey: A Common Vision,” *Streams of William James* 2.3 (Fall 2000): 5-7.
2. William James, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” *Journal of Philosophy* 1 (1904): 477-491, and “A World of Pure Experience,” *Journal of Philosophy* 1 (1904): 533-543. Dewey, “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1905): 393-399.
3. John Dewey to Addison W. Moore, 2 January 1905, in *The Correspondence of John Dewey, vol. 1: 1871-1918*, ed. Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville: Intelelex Corporation, 1999), #01827. This volume of Dewey’s correspondence is hereafter indicated by *CJD1*.
4. For a sampling of James’s and Schiller’s expressions of frustration with Dewey’s philosophical writing, alongside their confessed admiration for Dewey, see the following letters. William James to D. S. Miller, 6 December 1905, in *CJD1*, #019514; William James to F. C. S. Schiller, 3 August 1906, in *CJD1*, #09375; F. C. S. Schiller to William James, 27 May 1907, in *CJD1*, #04568.
5. Dewey carefully watched the evolution of James’s thinking on the issue of truth. Upon hearing from James in early 1909 that he was gathering some essays together for a book titled *The Meaning of Truth*, Dewey offered several suggestions for carefully defining truth and truthfulness. See these letters from Dewey to James: 24 February 1909 in *CJD1* #04580; 15 March 1909 in *CJD1* #04581; and 21 March 1909 in *CJD1* #04583.
6. John Dewey, “What Does Pragmatism Mean By Practical?” *Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1908): 99.
7. John Dewey to William James, 28 November 1907, in *CJD1*, #04579.
8. William James, “The Essence of Humanism,” *Mind* 13 (1904): 118.
9. John Dewey, “The Realism of Pragmatism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1905): 325-326.
10. John Dewey to Addison W. Moore, 29 April 1908, in *CJD1*, #03271.
11. John Dewey, “What Does Pragmatism Means By Practical,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1977), p. 113.
12. John Dewey to Addison W. Moore, 29 March 1905, in *CJD1*, #01828.
13. See William James to F. C. S. Schiller, 15 July 1907, in *CJD1*, #09378. James was writing to Schiller primarily about Dewey’s “The Experimental Theory of Knowledge,” published in *Mind* in July 1907.
14. Jane Dewey, “Biography of John Dewey,” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, 3rd ed., edited by Paul A. Schilpp (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), p. 23.
15. John Dewey, “William James and the World Today,” *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 15, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1989), p. 5. Dewey is quoting from William James’s essay, “The Importance of Individuals,” which appeared in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, 1897, pp. 256-7) to further articulate James’s earlier view in the “Great Men and Their Environment” essay.

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