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# THE INFLUENCE OF WILLIAM JAMES ON JOHN DEWEY'S EARLY WORK

By Michael Buxton

William James has generally been regarded as the source of John Dewey's rejection of neo-Hegelian absolute idealism in favor of a naturalist position. The intellectual relationship between the two men during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is an important aspect of the history of American philosophy and psychology. Their early association occurred when Dewey was developing his philosophy of education. Yet until recently, Dewey's early work between the years 1882-1899 has been relatively ignored. This has led to the general acceptance of the myth of James's central influence over Dewey particularly between the years 1890-96. Recent textual examination of Dewey's early work has been made under the influence of, and has perpetuated, this myth.

The conventional view of James's influence has been accepted for over fifty years. Wayne Leys writing in 1970 effectively illustrates it. He claims that James "obviously" forced Dewey to reconsider the German theories of the self; that the James-Lange theory of emotion changed Dewey's conception of activity; that even in *The Study of Ethics* (1894) he was still an idealist, resisting relativity; and that in 1893 he was still under the influence of an idealist logic. It is safe to say, Leys argued, that Dewey put ethics and all other specialized studies into a larger picture as a result of his reflections upon James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890). Finally Leys also claims that Dewey failed to proceed "in one jump" to an ethical naturalism and that in 1894 "Dewey was in the process of rejecting the Idealist doctrine of an absolute self as the end of 'the tortuous path', but he was not abandoning the idea of the tortuous path."[1] The evidence supports none of these claims.

Before 1890, Dewey's views were clearly dominated by absolute idealist philosophy; after this date his familiar functionalist ideas became more clearly recognizable. The central difficulty is how to account for this change and adequately describe his views during the transition years 1890-94. The most attractive explanation has been the appeal to a single extraneous source. This argument relies on the similarity between James's and Dewey's beliefs, the possibility of influence, and Dewey's autobiographical comments as evidence of a causal connection. Dewey's biography states that "William James's *Principles of Psychology* was much the greatest single influence in changing the direction of Dewey's phil-

[1] Jo Ann Boyston *et al.*, (eds.), *John Dewey. The Early Works 1887-1898* (Carbondale, 1969-1972), 4. Introduction by Wayne Leys, *passim.*

osophical thinking." In referring to the *Principles* Dewey specifically excludes James's *The Will to Believe,* his *Pluralistic Universe* or his *Pragmatism.* Similarly, Dewey states in his autobiography that James's influence was the "one specifiable philosophic factor which entered into my thinking so as to give it a new direction and quality."[3]

A second approach to these years analyzes Dewey's idealist and instrumentalist thought as a continuum demonstrating an intrinsic relationship between each phase. Morton White has most noticeably argued this position but does not mention James.[4] I shall reassess the intellectual relationship between James and Dewey and argue that Dewey's movement from an absolute idealist to a functionalist orientation occurred when he independently reinterpreted his previous work by applying an early interest in the concept of biological function to his idealist concerns of the late 1880s. James and others later reinforced part of this process. Dewey's own reassessment was affected by the interaction of many people and events including James's writings in the late 1880s and in his *Principles.* The change in Dewey's thought was sudden and took place without the extent of difficulty usually suggested. It was well under way by the time Dewey appointed George Herbert Mead to Michigan University in 1891 and began to assess James's work critically. By then Dewey had abandoned absolute idealism and had begun to formulate the basis of his functionalism. The argument will be supported by an examination of Dewey's early writings and of James's comments on Dewey's importance, and by assessing the reliability of Dewey's comments on the question of influence.

*Early Influences on Dewey.*—Dewey said that the chapters in James's *Principles* which influenced him most were those dealing with conception, discrimination and comparison, and reasoning.[5] For both James and Dewey, an analysis of the process of conception was basic to their view of mind as functionally active, to their attack on the insufficiency of disparate isolated sensations, and to their attempts to derive interactionist theories of knowledge. Dewey's views on the relationship between concepts and percepts provide the key to understanding the process of his change from absolute idealism to functionalism. His idealist writings during the 1880s show that he developed his views on this issue from experimental, psychological, and Kantian idealist and absolute idealist sources. His early functionalist work between 1890 and 1894 arose through his reexamination of the relationship he drew between conception and perception as an absolute idealist, particularly in 1887-88. The in-

[2] "Biography of John Dewey," in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago, 1939), 23.

[3] John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in Richard Bernstein (ed.), *John Dewey, On Experience, Nature and Freedom* (Indianapolis, 1960), 15-16.

[4] Morton White, *The Origins of Dewey's Instrumentalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1943)

[5] Schilpp, *op.cit.;* Dewey, *op.cit.*

teractionist theory of mind Dewey adopted after 1890 differed markedly from that of James.

Dewey's views on conception and related subjects were published three years before the publication of James's book, in his *Psychology,* "Knowledge as Idealization," and in "Illusory Psychology" (1887). In "Knowledge as Idealization" for example, Dewey anticipates James's comments in the *Principles* not only on the importance of the mind's interpretive activity in the process of conception but also on the abilities to discriminate, identify, relate, associate, attend and compare, and on the presentation of mind as a teleological and mediating factor. The mind construct its own reality, Dewey argued; meaning is mediate and our view of reality is a function of our ideas. There is no perceptual world apart from conceptual order: a perception is a judgment based on an inference and sensations are meaningful only by being discriminated and mediated through concepts.[6]

Dewey's 1887 views on conception had three sources. First, he was influenced by idealists as diverse as Berkeley, Kant, and Bradley. Kant's account of mind actively interpreting sensations through the categories of selfconsciousness particularly impressed Dewey. Secondly, Dewey agreed with Herbert Spencer's argument that sensations are nothing until discriminated, and with Lewes' emphasis on the importance of mental activity in organizing phenomena. Earlier, Dewey had strongly criticized the evolutionary theory of Spencer and "other materialists" in such articles as "Soul and Body"[7] (1886). Thirdly he was influenced by psychological experimentation, particularly Wundt's experimental school at Leipzig. Although Dewey rejected Wundt's empiricist philosophical assumptions, he attempted to combine the results of the Leipzig experiments (on mental content and the introspective experimental method) with the absolute idealists' concentration on mental phenomena. The result he hoped would be a psychology of interpreted or mediated experience in place of an "externally given . . . fixed conception of reality."[8] Dewey also refers to early experiments on reaction time in relation to astronomical measurement and, like James three years later, to Hermann von Helmholtz's famous work on tone, to illustrate the phenomenon of selective attention and the use of a conceptual structure to interpret sensations.[9]

[6] *Early Works,* I, 179-187. First published in *Mind,* **12** (July 1887), 382-96.

[7] *Early Works,* I, 93-115. First published in *Bibliotheca Sacra,* **43** (April 1886), 239-63.

[8] "Knowledge as Idealization," *Early Works,* I, 192-93.

[9] *Ibid.,* 180-81. James refers to Helmholtz in *The Principles of Psychology* (New York, 1890), I, 284-89, and *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York, 1897), 85. Dewey and James were referring to Helmholtz's *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music,* translated by Alexander J. Ellis (London, 1875).

Like Dewey, James argued that perception does not take place independently of the processes of interpretation and selection. "No one ever had a simple sensation by itself," James argued in his *Principles;* consciousness "from our natal day, is of a teeming multiplicity of objects and relations, and what we call simple sensations are results of discriminative attention". The Law, he argued, "is that all things fuse that *can* fuse, and nothing separates but what must"; a baby "feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion". The notion that psychology should begin with sensations as the simplest mental facts is an assumption which wreaks havoc.[10]

As early as 1878, James argued that Spencer's theory made mind too mechanical and reduced it to a passive faculty which must adjust to a fixed environment. In contrast an organism is active in its reactions with an environment, striving for the ends presented by its interest, for the knower has an active mind that makes truth in transforming the world. It has a vote in the game and is not a mere looker-on.[11] James repeated this view in his *Principles of Psychology* where he argued that purposive action distinguished an intelligent from a mechanical performance.[12] In 1879 and 1882, in essays later reprinted as "The Sentiment of Rationality" in *The Will to Believe* (1897), James also discussed concepts in terms of the subjective interests of the interpreter. "No abstract concept can be a valid substitute for a concrete reality except with reference to a particular interest in the conceiver."[13] James consistently maintained this position. "Nothing," he said again in 1912, "shall be admitted as fact . . . except what can be experienced at some definite time by some experiment . . . Everything real must be experienced somewhere and every kind of thing experienced must be something real."[14] James's 1878, 1879, and 1882 statements were published respectively in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Mind,* and the *Princeton Review.* These journals were read by Dewey and James's comments would have been known to him.[15] Yet recollecting over forty-five years after the publication of James's *Principles,* Dewey specifically rejects them as influences.

Dewey and James were influenced by similar psychological and to a lesser extent philosophical sources. They quote the same physiological and psychological experiments and other sources independently of each

[10] *The Principles of Psychology,* I, 224, 448.

[11] "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy,* **12** (1878), 18.

[12] *The Principles of Psychology,* I, 8.

[13] *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York and London, 1897), 70. Parts of the Chapter "The Sentiment of Rationality" were first published in *Mind,* **4** (1879), 317-46, and the *Princeton Review,* **2** (1882), 58-96.

[14] *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York and London, 1912), 160.

[15] See Lewis S. Feuer, "John Dewey's Reading at College," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* **19** (1958), 415-21.

other. This was not unusual. The rapid growth of an American interest in German physiological and psychological experimentation and German philosophy affected thousands of young Americans in the 1880s. Both men rejected the then standard British empiricist view of consciousness, viz., that the basic elements of mind are atomic sensations produced either by external objects or impressions of internal mental events, and that our ideas are formed by a combination of these discrete perceptions. James's and Dewey's rejection of elementarism and atomism led them away from structuralist and associationist psychologies. They rejected specifically the elementarism and psychological parallelism of Wilhelm Wundt's physiological psychology then dominant in Europe. Wundt's separation of body and mind had no appeal for Dewey.[16]

As an idealist between 1884 and 1890, Dewey emphasized the same teleological, active, mediating, and anti-mechanistic features in his account of mind as James had in 1890. James's work provided a reconciliation between teleology and materialism, two concepts which Dewey as an idealist had regarded as irreconcilable. However, by 1890 Dewey had already begun to reinterpret his own idealist views on conception and perception in a functionalist manner.

Dewey's Writings 1890-94 — Three aspects of Dewey's thought between 1890 and 1894 show the quite sudden development of his functionalist views and their derivation from his early idealist account of conception. These are his views on logic, ethics, and psychology.

(1) *Logic.* Four articles[17] written between January 1890 and October 1891 take up the criticism of formal logic made in "The New Psychology" (1984) in "Psychology as Philosophic Method" (1886) and in *Leibniz's New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding* (1888). He argues for a "transcendental logic" and still shows the absolute idealist influence of George S. Morris who initiated him into a study of Hegel's logic.

Yet Dewey's continued interest in the question of how perception

[16] Dewey showed an extensive knowledge of nineteenth-century experimental psychology and its origins in "Knowledge as Idealization," "The New Psychology," *Andover Review,* **2** (Sept. 1884), 278-89, *Psychology* (New York, 1887), and his review of George T. Ladd's *Elements of Physiological Psychology* in *New Englander and Yale Review,* **46** (June 1887), 528-37. Among the hundreds of authors cited in these works (236 in *Psychology* alone) he shows a familiarity with the work of Weber, Muller, Lange, Fechner, Helmholtz, Lotze, Wundt, Ebbinghaus, Ward, Ladd, Hall, and James McKeen Cattell. He studied sources such as Wundt's Journal *Philosophische Studien* since at the time there was no good history of psychology in English or French (*Psychology, Early Works,* 2, 17). James possessed a similarly thorough knowledge and in 1875 offered a graduate course on "The Relations between Physiology and Psychology" and began the first psychological laboratory in the United States of America at Harvard.

[17] "On Some Current Conceptions of the term 'Self'," *Mind,* **15** (Jan. 1890), 58-74. "Is Logic a Dualistic Science?," *Open Court,* **3** (Jan. 1890), 2040-43, "The Logic of Verification," *Open Court,* **4** (April, 1890), 2225-28. "The Present Position of Logical Theory," *Monist,* **2** (October 1891), 1-17.

and observation are logically related to thinking, led him to enlarge on the analysis found in his *Psychology* and "Knowledge as Idealization". In his articles published in January and April 1890 and written before James's *Principles* was published, he argues that the mind isolates relations from facts, forms a hypothesis and compares it with other facts. Both idea and "facts" are flexible, and verification is the process of mutual adjustment, of organic interaction. This reciprocal action is exemplified by the theory of evolution. Theory and data are not fixed or unchangeable either in amount or quality: theory may be pliable so that it "fits the facts"; data may also be transformed, "elastic to the touch of the theory." His conclusion is that "there is no other test of a theory than this, its ability to *work,* to organize "facts" into itself as specifications of its own nature . . . on the other side,the particulars attacked by the universal do not remain indifferent; through it they are placed in a new light, and as facts gain a new quality."[18]

Dewey here conveys much that is characteristic of his later instrumentalism. The interactionist relationship between "theory" and "fact" and his emphasis on future results i.e. on a theory which "works" was an early statement of his later view that concepts and theories are instrumental towards the production of future facts, and that a hypothesis is a step towards solving a felt problem by means of concepts translated into action. His explanation of the role of concepts is an important step in showing the mediating role of intelligence, for his logical theory of concepts and inferences which formed the bases of his instrumentalism. His attack on fixed and final logical categories became an essential part of his later thought. The examples he gives also show the changing tendency in his thought: he not only now refers to Darwin's evolutionary theory approvingly, but later in October 1891, in the context of justifying Hegel's dialectic, Dewey uses a functional analysis; just as a human organism sustains any one organ, so the organ "in turn, contributes to and thus helps constitute the organism."[19]

Dewey accepted transcendental logic at that time, because he believed it made knowledge of reality depend upon forms and categories which the mind imposed rigorously on all interpretation; but he showed that the emphasis in idealist logic upon the reciprocal dependence of mind and matter could be restated in an essentially functionalist view of the relationship between theory and fact.

(2) *Ethics.* Between 1891 and 1893, Dewey in his writings on ethics decisively and rapidly rejected absolute idealism and its associated metaphysical positions such as those developed by T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley. His rapid acceptance of a functionalist position was illustrated at first not by reference to James but by his reassessment of the work of

[18] *Early Works,* **3,** 87-88.
[19] *Ibid.,* 138.

the British absolute idealist philosopher, T.H. Green. In April 1889 and January 1890, Dewey had continued the unqualified praise of Green which had characterized his thought from 1884,[20] but in March 1890, he criticized Green for the first time[21] and continued this reassessment in three further articles published between 1891 and November 1893.[22]

Dewey there developed his idealist views on the concept-percept, or general-particular relation by stressing the concrete and the particular in preference to what he calls the remote and abstract ethical categories of metaphysicians such as Green. Thus he continued his rejection of fixed and abstract categories of thought which he had first adopted as an idealist in his "Knowledge as Idealization" (1887).

He now talks of practice in discussing the relation between fact and theory. A theory, he says, is a generalization of facts. The active process and practice of enquiry inevitably leads to theory formulation; practice therefore is theory in action. Metaphysical moral theories are abstract and remote from engagement with action, for their ideas cannot be used. Moral conduct results from an individual's perception of practical, concrete relationships; "it is what and where and how to the last inch." Moral rules are therefore working tools of analysis. They are no different in kind from those we use to measure goods, sell wheat or invent the telephone.[23]

Dewey also reexamined and rejected the absolute idealists' concepts of self-realization and activity and again used Green as his main target. In "On Some Current Conceptions of the Term 'Self' " (1886) and "Psychology as Philosophic Method"[24] (1886), Dewey accepted the absolute idealist belief that an individual self must be actively realized in absolute self-consciousness. In "Self Realization as the Moral Ideal" (1893) he argued that this metaphysical definition makes moral experience a process of gradually attaining a fixed, remote, and empty ideal. In its place, we should substitute a working definition of the self, the notion of a working or practical self. To realize our capacity we must act concretely and see knowledge only in relation to action.[25] Similarly, to concentrate on activity only in terms of the active union of the individual in the absolute, as Green did, is to ignore the fact that all action is

[20] "The Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green," *Andover Review,* **11** (April 1889), 337-55. "On Some Current Conceptions of the term 'Self'."

[21] Review of Edward Caird, *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Andover Review,* **13** (March 1890), 325-27.

[22] "Moral Theory and Practice," *International Journal of Ethics,* **1** (Jan. 1891), 186-203. "Green's Theory of the Moral Motive," *Philosophical Review,* **1** (Nov. 1892), 593-612. "Self Realization as the Moral Ideal," *Philosophical Review,* **2** (Nov. 1893), 652-64.

[23] *Early Works,* 3, 95, 98.

[24] "Psychology as Philosophic Method," *Mind,* **11** (April 1886), 153-73.

[25] *Ibid.,* 4, 53-54; *ibid.,* 43, 50, 53.

concrete and individualized. Ethical theory then should also be concrete and particular in its rules of "action stated in its more general terms."[26]

As early as January 1891, in "Moral Theory and Practice" Dewey understood that these sentiments meant he had moved from a metaphysical to a naturalistic ethics, by attacking the distinction between 'ought' and 'is' statements. In determining what we ought to do, we consider only the existing practical situation, and our concrete relations to others. The " 'ought' always rises from and falls back into the 'is' and . . . the 'ought' is itself an 'is'—the 'is' of action."[27]

(3) *Psychology.* Dewey's functionalist analysis of the concept-percept relationship also redirected his psychological thought. During the 1880s Dewey had attempted a psychological analysis of experience from an absolute idealist perspective, but in "How Do Concepts Arise From Percepts?"[28] (November 1891), his new functionalist beliefs are as clearly applied to psychology as to logic and ethics at that time.

He rejected the early structuralist model of independent, isolated conceptual elements and adopted a functionalist view of parts which operate as members of an interconnected unity and which "go together and work together" and actively serve a general purpose. A functionalist approach emphasizes "the *work* done by that thing and its value for the organism." This model leads him to his functionalist explanation of the meaning of a concept according to which a whole is viewed in relation to its working parts. A concept does not denote a passive mental state or isolated existence but has an intellectual function or active role. The notion of activity is inseparably related to its function just as that of function is inseparable from the characteristic meaning of a concept to "be grasped only in and through the activity which constitutes it."[29]

In "The Superstition of Necessity"[30] (April 1893) Dewey again showed that his re-examination of the concept-percept relationship redirected his thought from idealism to instrumentalism. Those who accept the relativity of knowledge agree that "objects, *as known,* are not independent of the process of knowing, but are the content of our judgments . . . that the 'object' (anyway as known) is a form of judgment. . . ." If so, then objects as they are known change with the development of our judgments. Dewey then made two claims from this argument which became central to his later instrumentalist position. First, is such change occurs then truth "must attach to late rather than to early judgments."[31] This suggests something of the pragmatic conception of truth as developed later by Dewey and James whereby truth is not

[26] "Green's Theory of the Moral Motive," *ibid.,* III, 156-59, 163.
[27] *Ibid.,* 105-09.
[28] *Public School Journal,* **11** (Nov. 1891) 128-30.
[29] *Early Works,* III, 142.
[30] *Monist,* **3** (April 1893), 362-79.
[31] *Early Works,* IV, 21-23.

static but grows, and an idea "becomes true" if it "successfully leads" from one part of our experience to another.[32] For James in his *Pragmatism* (1907) the test of ethical truth is in grasping the consequences of an idea in action. The basis of this important pragmatist principle is evident in Dewey's writings years before James systematized and more broadly publicized his own views on the matter late in the 1890s and restated them in more extended form in 1907.

Second, in speaking of the importance of judgment in conception Dewey states that the distinction between two interpretations apparently of the same object, is "not simply a superimposition of new qualities upon an old object, that old object remaining the same; it is not getting new objects; it is a continual qualitative reconstruction of the object itself . . . the first judgments do not make the object once for all, but . . . the continued process of judging is a continued process of 'producing' the object."[33]

This statement further elaborates the argument on truth, and introduces the notion of reconstruction which was to be such a central aspect of his later philosophy. To illustrate this argument Dewey used Venn's *Empirical Logic,* rather than the work of William James.

Dewey's work on ethics at this time was derived from the same psychological account of experience which characterized his early idealist and functionalist writings.[34] This psychological account was derived from German idealism and stressed the active interactionist role of mind in concept formation. It opposed the passive atomic and dualist account identified with British empiricism and its derivative structuralist and associationist psychologies. Dewey's two books on ethics during this transition period, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891) and *The Study of Ethics. A Syllabus* (1894), show a process of change similar to what appeared in his articles.

His *Outlines* contains details of his undergraduate ethics course at Michigan University; Dewey's description of that course shows how he applied his "critical theory."[35] This book is usually taken to be the work of an idealist, and the functionalist sentiments of *The study of Ethics* as evidence of James's influence; however, the *Outlines* is far from the work of an uncompromising idealist. The book speaks initially of an absolute which was not rigid but could be applied as a method of action to concrete cases.[36] It also uses the word 'ideal' in a functionalist manner. By 1892-93 Dewey had rejected all theories of an absolute ideal whether these were concerned with a fixed absolute or one which could adjust and

[32] William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York, 1907), 201.

[33] *Early Works,* IV, 23.

[34] See *The Study of Ethics,* Prefatory note; and Schilpp (ed.), *op. cit.,* 23.

[35] "The Ethical Record," **2** (Oct. 1889), 145-48.

[36] *Early Works,* III, 325.

change. In 1894, in his *Study of Ethics,* he enlarged on this rejection. There in the section on "Theories of Abstract Ideals" he wrote that the absolute as "ideal" was a fixed, remote, unattainable, idealistic metaphysical concept. Absolute ideas cannot be translated "into items of a concrete, individual act—and every *act* is concrete and individual." They do not and cannot become a working principle for what has to be done. We need working hypotheses of action.[37]

Dewey himself called attention to the *Outlines'* "analysis of individuality into function including capacity and environment."[38] In particular, the *Outlines* emphasized the two functionalist uses of "mind" as the means of adapting an individual to and reconstructing the environment. "Even a plant must do something more than adjust itself *to* a fixed environment; it must assert itself *against* its surroundings, subordinating them and transforming them into material and nutriment." Thus, the transformation of existing circumstances rather than the mere reproduction of them describes moral action. The *Outlines'* application of this argument to learning anticipated one of the central stances of *Democracy and Education* (1916): in learning we may not only appropriate the general intellectual environment already in existence, but may also actively increase or even reconstruct the prior environment.[39] Individuality means not separation from, but a defined position in, a whole.

Part II of the *Outlines,* in particular, shows clearly the beginning of the change the Dewey's philosophy through its emphasis on function, the practical, the inseparability of "ought" and "is", and the definition of a rule as a tool of analysis. The similarity between the functionalist ideas and language used in Dewey's article "Moral Theory and Practice" (Jan. 1891) and part of the final section of his *Outlines* in striking. The *Outlines* shows Dewey reexamining his own idealist position and rapidly incorporating new functionalist ideas into the argument of the book. Similarly, much of *The Study of Ethics* was the result of Dewey's incorporation of articles on ethics published after the *Outlines,* into a revision of the 1891 book.

Dewey's and James's Comments—Dewey later claimed that he was influenced by two "unreconciled strains" in James's *Principles of Psychology.*[40] First, the book restated the traditional view of psychology as a theory of consciousness; however I have shown above that Dewey had adopted this tradition as an idealist, as his concentration on the role of concepts in the mental construction of reality shows. From 1980, he then reinterpreted and stated this view in a functionalist form, while retaining its emphasis on mental activity, teleology, and interactionism.

[37] *Ibid.,* 4, 286-62.
[38] *Ibid.,* 3, 239; see also Schilpp (ed.), *op. cit.,* 22.
[39] *Early Works,* III, 325, 304, 376, 313-14.
[40] Schilpp (ed.), *op. cit.,* 23.

The second and most important influence of James's *Principles* on his thought, Dewey stated, was "the objective psychology theory . . . founded on biology" which he discovered in James's book. James's application of the idea of biological function, arising from physiological experimentation, to a theory of mind was what Dewey believed "worked its way more and more into all my ideas and acted as a ferment to transform old beliefs."[41] Is this assessment accurate?

Dewey was thoroughly familiar with the concept of function in physiology, biology, and psychology from his college years before 1882. By 1884, in "The New Psychology", he showed he was impressed by the implications of the biological concepts of organism and function for a theory of mind. He knew of James's early instrumentalist work, the details of Huxley's and Tyndall's writings, and the work of philosophers such as Herbert Spencer who attempted to explain mind in terms of his Lamarckian evolutionary theory. He then ignored their work for the rest of the decade and became a committed idealist influenced by Hegel, the American Hegelian George S. Morris, and British absolute idealists particularly T. H. Green and Edward Caird. Nevertheless these early evolutionist and functionalist writings became a key element in his reinterpretation of his views after 1890 when he applied his early interest in function to his idealist account of conception. Dewey's self-assessment thus ignores his extensive knowledge of evolutionary biology and function applied to a theory of mind prior to 1890 and James's earlier work on this subject between 1878 and 1882. It also neglects the contribution to his own thinking by others such as George Herbert Mead and Alfred Henry Lloyd at the University of Michigan after 1891, and Mead and the functional psychologist James R. Angell at the University of Chicago after 1894. Most of all it ignores the process of change well under way by 1890. Dewey's recollections forty-five years after the event did not benefit from hindsight

Dewey played the central role in the formulation of an account of instrumental intelligence during the 1890s and early twentieth century. His educational views arose and were inseparable from this philosophical and psychological account. He was an originator influenced by a wide variety of people and ideas. This central role was recognized by James. On March 11, 1903 James wrote to Dewey that having just read A. W. Moore's *Existence, Meaning and Reality* he saw "an entirely new 'school of thought' forming, and, I believe, a true one." Soon after, James added: "It humiliates me that I had to wait till I read Moore's article before finding how much on my own lines you were working. Of course I had welcomed you as one coming nearer and nearer, but I had missed the central root of the whole business, and shall now re-read you . . . . I fancy that much depends on that place one starts from. You have all

[41] "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," 16.

come from Hegel and your terminology *s'en ressent,* I from empiricism, and though we reach much the same goal it superficially looks different from the opposite sides."[42]

James's repeated references in letters between March and November 1903 to Dewey's new Chicago school of functionalist thought were an indication of his enthusiasm for his discovery. He first publicized the name "Chicago School" in January 1904 in his review of Dewey's *Studies in Logical Theory,* announcing: "Professor John Dewey, and at least ten of his disciples, have collectively put into the world a statement, homogeneous in spite of so many co-operating 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."[43] By 1907 he was referring to the central importance of "the instrumental view of truth taught so successfully at Chicago" adding that "our contemporary pragmatists especially Messrs. Schiller and Dewey, have given the only tenable account of this subject."[44]

James's own assessment of Dewey's importance in the context of a school of thought and the times is the correct analysis. To it can be added Edwin Boring's view that James was only a symptom of what was about to happen: ". . . all this excitement getting the new psychology under way in America in the 1880s and 1900s is not to be accounted for by any personal act of James." America was ready for what the times had for it and created something unique from the "efforts of many men."[45] Dewey's own recollections are therefore not quite supported by his own writings or by a review of other's; relevant evidence.

## *Experimental Idealism*

Finally, Dewey is commonly supposed to have attempted to combine his idealism and a developing biologically based functionalism during these years of transition. Morton White, for example, in an influential argument, could not accept the alleged simultaneous adherence by such an anti-dualist as Dewey during these transition years, to the seemingly contradictory positions of instrumentalism and idealism. He therefore argues that during this period Dewey attempted to combine the two

[42] R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James.* Briefer edition. (New York, 1954), 306-07.

[43] William James, "The Chicago School," *The Psychological Bulletin,* **1** (Jan., 1904) 1. See also Perry *op. cit.,* 308; and *The Letters of William James,* 2 vols (Boston, 1920), II, 201-02.

[44] *Pragmatism* . . . 49, 197.

[45] Edwin G. Boring, "The Influence of Evolutionary Theory Upon American Psychological Thought," in Stow Persons (ed.), *Evolutionary Thought in America* (New York, 1956), 272-23; see also Perry *op. cit.,* 304.

positions and became an "instrumental Hegelian". The organicism of each position is alleged to have provided a means by which they were reconciled.[46] This argument is now universally accepted. The evidence usually cited in its support is twofold. Firstly, there is Dewey's own description of his philosophy in *The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus* (1894) as "experimental idealism."[47] Secondly, Dewey also spoke in retrospect of his alleged attempt to combine both positions, saying: "There was a period extending into my earlier years at Chicago, when in connection with a seminar in Hegel's Logic, I tried reinterpreting his categories in terms of "readjustment" and "reconstruction". Gradually I came to realize that what the principles actually stood for could be better understood and stated when completely emancipated from Hegelian garb."[48]

Recent studies have also interpreted Dewey's early work from this position. George Dykhuizen, for example, accepts the "undeniably pragmatic slant" of Dewey's work after 1890 and produces no satisfactory examples to show that Dewey tried to combine both positions. But against all the evidence of Dewey's writings, and contemporary accounts such as James's, he then interprets these writings by the criteria White identified. Dykhuizen states that Dewey throughout the 1890s believed that an active dynamic individual adjusting to an environment can be best explained in relation to an absolute mind manifesting itself as a rationally structured universe. The first published indication of Dewey's break with "experimental idealism" and Hegelian logic and metaphysics was in 1900, Dykhuizen claims.[49] This ignores the direction of a decade of work, and places the change in Dewey's thought ten years too late.

There is no evidence of any attempt to reconcile both positions. Where both positions are included in the same work, as in his *Outlines,* Dewey expressed later functionalist thoughts in a work begun as an idealist. I have argued here that Dewey ceased to be an idealist in any meaningful sense in 1891 and from then on, rapidly adopted the basis of his later functionalism which he gradually systematized during the remaining years of the decade. He always saw philosophical absolute idealism and evolutionary biology as contradictory. During the early 1880s, he was impressed with biological holism, but after his 1884 article "The New Psychology" decisively rejected it along with all forms of materialism. After 1890-91, Dewey continued to see both positions as incompatible, but then rejected absolute idealism. The writings of his transition years of 1890-94 clearly show the absence of any attempted reconciliation.

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[46] *Op. cit.,* 79-113.

[47] *Early Works,* IV, 264.

[48] Schilpp (ed.), *op. cit.,* 8.

[49] George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale, Ill., 1973), 68-70, 82-83.