

John Dewey

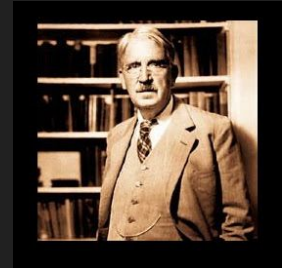
American Pragmatist

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Short Biography

America. Lived 1859-1952.

One of the fathers of **functional psychology** and one of the fathers of **Pragmatism**. Wrote extensively: 40 books and 700 articles.



Hugely influential in progressive education.

Strong advocate for liberal democracy, women's rights, organized labor, and an active and informed public.

Atheist and secular humanist. Holist. Georgist. Transactionalist.

Major influences: Charles S. Peirce, William James, Hegel

Born in Vermont. Died in New York. Attended U of Vermont, Johns Hopkins. Taught at Michigan, Minnesota, Chicago, and Columbia.

We'll emphasize functional psychology and Pragmatism on the following slides. For now, maybe mention that these were revolutionary ideas but he was also establishment. He was president of the American Psychological Association and the American Philosophical Association.

Education - most famous for this:

- Students should be actively involved in their education, not just passive recipients of knowledge.
- Teachers are a key part of society and important professionals.
- Learning isn't separate for life and just preparation for vocation. It is part of life and preparation for the rest of life.
- Extensive work in U of Chicago Laboratory Schools
- US rep for the International League for Academic Freedom with Einstein.
- Co-founded the New School.

Liberal democracy: We'd call him a democratic socialist today. Spoke against Marxism and Communism. Advocated for the collective good of society (the "public") throughout career. Involved in an early version of the NAACP.

Women's rights: Spoke in favor generally, especially in democracy and education. Fought for suffrage. Quote: "You think too much of women in terms of sex. Think of them

as human individuals for a while, dropping out the sex qualification, and you won't be so sure of some of your generalizations about what they should and shouldn't do"

Labor: President of League for Industrial Democracy, which taught college students about the labor movement.

Active and informed public: People should be actively involved in their democracy, not just represented. Press is key to that.

Holist: See quote.

Georgist: A progressive tax on property.

Transactionalist: All human exchanges are a set of transactions.

Not related to Melville Dewey, although they lived at roughly the same time.

Peirce was a philosopher and more. Signs. Came first.

James was a psychologist. Continued Peirce's work.

Dewey was next. Synthesized their work.

Hegel was an early influence. He was a neo-Hegelian in his early psychology career.

Functional Psychology

Also known as functionalism. A reaction to structural psychology, eventually led to behaviorism.

Emphasizes an **empirical approach**. Focuses on **practical applications**. Looks at behavior in **context of environment**.

William James is considered the founder. Dewey continued the work with colleagues at U of Chicago and Columbia.

Dewey's "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" (1896) was the landmark paper. Argued that **stimulus and response weren't separable events, but one coordinated action** as shown in physiology.

Empirical approach: Let's make psychology more scientific.

Practical approach: Let's look at real people in real situations and figure out how to make their lives better and life better for society as a whole.

Reflex arc: Think knee jerk. Psychologists were studying this as a stimulus (hit your knee) and a response (you kick). Dewey argued that physiology said that this was one coordinated action. You couldn't have one without the other. This led to a rethinking of psychology. More science-based and empirical. And more of a full-system approach.

This approach is very much in line with Pragmatism (we'll see James there too!) and influenced Dewey's approach to education too.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism was arguably America's biggest contribution to philosophy, and was the **dominant epistemology** of the first quarter of the 20th century.

Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey were the **fathers of Pragmatism**.

Dewey came last of the three fathers, but wrote most extensively and applied the philosophy in psychology, education, and elsewhere. Dewey preferred the term **Instrumentalism**.

Pragmatism and Neo-pragmatism are **still active**, although not as dominant as they were in Dewey's time.

More about Instrumentalism: Popper was also called an Instrumentalist. They mostly agreed on instrumentalism:

- Agree on theories are instruments: "the interpretation of scientific theories as practical instruments or tools for such purposes as the prediction of impending events." - Dewey
- Agree on theories predict: "The verification of a theory ... is carried on by the observation of particular facts." - Dewey
- Disagree on induction: An empirical philosopher must "... first find particular cases from which he then generalizes." - Dewey
"... an opponent of the widely accepted dogma of inductivism—of the view that science starts from observation and proceeds, by induction, to generalizations, and ultimately to theories." - Popper
- Disagree on whether a "true" reality exists beyond what we can experience: "It is therefore in submitting conceptions to the control of experience ... that one finds examples of what is called truth." - Dewey
"A representation of instrumentalism can be obtained ... by omitting ... the universe of the realities behind the various appearances."

Pragmatism

Values the **practical application of ideas**. Scientifically test your ideas in human experiences and judge them based on their practical use.

Does not espouse an unchanging universe of objective truth like Realists. The **universe changes** when scientific findings change. Direct this inevitable change toward social benefit.

Says that **thought is an instrument for predicting and problem solving**, not a means of describing reality. "Truth" is what works and can be verified.

Rejects fixed principles and a priori knowledge. **Emphasis is on experience and empirical study**.

- Practical application and human experience supports social science well, but it doesn't reject natural science. You can still do natural science, but you should focus on its human application and consider it in the context of human experience.
- Not one unchanging truth. I'm a little unsure about the part about directing toward social good. Does that introduce bias?
- Use of instrument here comes from Dewey (see instrumentalism). Bias toward being able to take action, not just know reality.
- Rejection of a priori knowledge isn't particularly new. Pragmatism grows out of empiricism. Focus on experience and observation.

On Pragmatism

“Pragmatism, thus, presents itself as an extension of historical empiricism, but with this fundamental difference, that it does not insist upon antecedent phenomena but upon consequent phenomena; not upon the precedents but upon the possibilities of action. And this change in point of view is almost revolutionary in its consequences. An empiricism which is content with repeating facts already past has no place for possibility and for liberty. It cannot find room for general conceptions or ideas, at least no more than to consider them as summaries or records. But when we take the point of view of pragmatism we see that general ideas have a very different role to play than that of reporting and registering past experiences. They are the bases for organizing future observations and experiences.”

Note about Dewey quotes:

- You can get his top 25 pithy quotes from the internet. These are mostly short and inspirational.
- Because he wrote so extensively and because his arguments tend to require significant development, there doesn't seem to be a consensus set of important Dewey quotes. I did my best to choose some that relate to our class discussions.

- Dewey seems to be saying that pragmatism is more forward-looking than empiricism. Is empiricism really “content with repeating facts already past”?
- Is Dewey suggesting that pragmatism is better at making predictions?
- What does Dewey mean when he says “general conceptions or ideas”? Are these theories? How do you think Dewey sees theory-development working for empiricists?

On scientific inquiry and experience

“These preconceptions are the assumption that knowledge has a uniquely privileged position as a mode of access to reality in comparison with other modes of experience, and that as such it is superior to practical activity. Both of these ideas were formulated in a period when knowing was regarded as something which could be effected exclusively by means of the rational powers of mind. The development of scientific inquiry with its complete dependence upon experimentation has proved the profound error of the latter position. Is it not time to revise the philosophical conception which are founded on a belief now proved to be false? ...It is possible for experience, in becoming genuinely experimental, to develop its own regulative ideas and standards. Not only this, but in addition the progress of knowledge of nature has become steady and secure only because of this transformation.”

- What or who is Dewey alluding to when he says “the assumption that knowledge has a uniquely privileged position as a mode of access to reality” and “knowing was regarded as something which could be effected exclusively by means of the rational powers of mind”?
- What do you think Dewey means by experiment and experience? How are they different here?
- Is this statement specifically Pragmatist? Or is it Empiricist?

On natural and social sciences

"A third significant change that would issue from carrying over experimental method from physics to man concerns the import of standards, principles, rules. With the transfer, these, and all tenets and creeds about good and goods, would be recognized to be hypotheses. Instead of being rigidly fixed, they would be treated as intellectual instruments to be tested and confirmed---and altered---through consequences effected by acting upon them. They would lose all pretense of finality---the ulterior source of dogmatism."

- What does Dewey see as the difference between "standard, principles, rules" and "hypotheses"?
- What other epistemologies and ideas that we've discussed have something to say about "They would lose all pretense of finality"? Positivists? Scientific Revolution? Falsifiability?
- Is Dewey suggesting that natural science and social sciences should operate under the same approach?
- How do you think Dewey's liberal politics and atheism inform this quote?

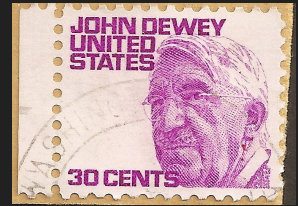
On formal logic

“Some purely logical operations are better than others, even as purely logical, for they have greater scope and fertility, but none are truer or more correct than others. Purely formal errors are impossible, so-called formal fallacies to the contrary notwithstanding. No one ever actually reasoned that since horses are quadrupeds and cows are quadrupeds, horses are cows. If in some cases, it is made to appear that formal reasoning falls into such fallacies, the reason is that material causes are brought in and their operation is overlooked.”

- What do you think of this quote after walking through epistemologies based on formal logic in this class? What does he mean by “material causes”?
- Is the horse-cow-quadruped example fair? Or is it trivial enough to not make his point?
- What would make a logical operation “have greater scope and fertility”?

Summary

John Dewey was **amazing**. He developed major schools of thought in psychology and philosophy, had a huge influence on progressive education, fought for democracy and women's rights, and did a whole bunch more.



Functionalism made psychology more empirical, more practical, and more useful.

Pragmatism made science and philosophy more empirical, more practical, and more useful.

Pragmatism and Neo-pragmatism are still a major influence on science and philosophy.

American hero. Let's make him more famous and influential.

Criticisms of Dewey:

- He wrote too much and lots of it is hard to follow, especially without reading more of his stuff.
- Conservatives don't like his politics or his influence on the American education system. They think he moved us too far away from rote schooling.
- At least one historian faults him for adding to the rift between science and religion.