

## A CONSTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS OF JOHN DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM

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**Abstract**

Pragmatism is popularly known to be a theory of action and John Dewey is one of its leading proponents. It is a view that rejected the dualistic epistemology and metaphysics of modern philosophy in favor of a naturalistic approach that viewed knowledge as arising from an active adaptation of the human organism to its environment. For the pragmatists (C.S. Peirce, W. James and J. Dewey) our beliefs are nothing except they inspire action. Generally, the pragmatists rejected the idea that there is such a thing as fixed, absolute truth. Instead, they held that truth is relative to time, place and purpose; also it is ever-changing in the light of new data; however, each of these pragmatists expressed different aspects or dimensions of pragmatism. This paper attempts an analysis of John Dewey's pragmatism, with particular reference to his theory of education looking at it from a constructive view point. The aim of this piece is to ascertain that his approach to education is a better option for edification.

**Keywords:** Pragmatism, Constructivism, Truth, Instrumentalism, Experience, Education, Value

**Introduction**

The term 'pragmatism' is derived from the Greek word 'pragma', and it means action or practice (practical). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this movement emerged as the most original contribution of American thought to the enterprise of philosophy. Pragmatism was first introduced into philosophy and given its initial theoretical formulation by C. S. Peirce in 1878. His counterpart, William James gave the movement a wide and popular circulation through his brilliant and lucid essays, while John Dewey methodically implemented it into the daily affairs of American institutions<sup>1</sup>. This movement was made popular by these three pioneering members but our interest is on John Dewey.

**Dewey's Background**

John Dewey, an American pragmatist, lived between 1859 and 1952. He was born in Burlington, Vermont and educated at the University of Vermont and Johns Hopkins University, where he obtained a PhD in philosophy, in 1884. Subsequently, he taught at the University of Michigan, Minnesota, Chicago and Columbia. Long after his retirement from Columbia in 1930, he developed a broad body of work encompassing virtually all of the main areas of philosophical concern in his day, especially on social issues. He began

as a Hegelian but later abandoned the Hegelian orientation and was later influenced by Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory<sup>2</sup>. He looked upon humanity as a biological organism that can be understood in relation to his environment and like any biological organism, a human being struggle for survival. For him, humanity is enmeshed in a dialectic process, in the material and natural environment.

### **Dewey's Philosophical Doctrine**

Dewey's philosophy is one of change<sup>3</sup>. The traditional question that he addressed in a series of his essays was that of the meaning of truth. According to him, a statement or a hypothesis is true or false in so far as it leads us to or away from the end which we have in view. In other words, 'the hypothesis that works is the *true* one'. In his opinion this view of truth follows as a matter of course from the pragmatist concept of meaning. He disagrees with James' view of truth as that which satisfies the condition of knowledge because it suggests a private emotive satisfaction. He is sharply opposed to the idea of philosophy as being concerned with a sphere of unchanging timeless being and truth<sup>4</sup>. He considered the pragmatic theory of truth as central to the pragmatic school of thought, and vigorously defended its viability. He substituted 'inquiry' for 'truth' because in his view, truth as conceived by most professional philosophies is static and final, perfect and eternal, like the multiplication table, which is precise and free from all temporal dross. Since Pythagoras, and still more since Plato, mathematics has been linked with theology, and has profoundly influenced the theory of knowledge of most professional philosophers; in religious terminology, it may be identified with God's thought and with those thoughts which as rational beings, we share with God. His interests are biological rather than mathematical, and he conceives thought as an evolutionary process<sup>5</sup>. His work lies in his criticism of the traditional notion of truth, which is embodied in his famous thesis on 'instrumentalism'.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

There are certain notions that are relevant to this paper which we shall attempt to clarify in order to effectively grapple with the issues that are of interest to this paper. These concepts include instrumentalism, experience and the idea of value in a world of fact. This clarification is necessary because it will help us have good understanding of the main ideas emphasized by Dewey. It is through some of the notions mentioned that he was able to radicalize philosophy and express his thoughts which he felt was going to transform both man and the society in which man lives.

### **His Notion of Instrumentalism**

This is his brand of pragmatism; in an essay on the development of American pragmatism, Dewey defines instrumentalism as 'an attempt to constitute a precise logical theory of concepts, judgments and inferences in their various forms, by considering primarily how thought functions in the experimental determinations of future consequences: That is, how the forms of human activity including thought (thinking), are used by people as instruments to solve practical problems. Dewey's pragmatic or instrumental view of the mind and knowledge begins by rejecting all three approaches to knowledge: rationalism, empiricism and the Kantian account<sup>6</sup>. For him, thinking is an activity aimed at solving individual and social problems, a means by which humans strive

to achieve a satisfactory relationship with their environment; and not a quest for the “truth”, as though the truth were a static and eternal quality in things. This approach is popularly considered to be a living way of doing philosophy. In this regard, thinking or active intelligence arises in “problem situations”; intelligence is the power possess by man to cope with his environment. Thinking and doing are closely related<sup>7</sup>.

Dewey’s instrumentalism as an epistemological theory is in line with evolutionary naturalism whereby knowledge is determined in line with evolutionary principles. He puts it thus: “what measures [knowledge’s] value, its correctness and truth, is the degree of its availability for conducting to a successful issue the activities of living beings (MW4:180)”<sup>8</sup>. Simply put, ‘instrumentalism’ holds that reflective thought is always involved in transforming a practical situation and it has a significant difference from empiricism and rationalism that separate thinking and doing.

### **On The Concept of Experience**

This was his grand concept which he employed for the purpose of connecting humanity as a dynamic biological entity with its precarious environment. For him, “every experience both takes up something from those (experiences) which have gone before and modifies in some ways the quality of those (experience) which come after.” He equated nature with experience arguing that ‘the idea of environment is a necessity to the idea of organism’<sup>9</sup>. By this, he means that objects are not fixed substances but individual things (existence or events) that are filled with meanings. For him, the mind or intelligence is not a fixed substance, it functions as a mediator between humanity and organism and its environment; and knowledge is not a set of static concepts<sup>10</sup>. He rejects the idea that individuals passively receives stimulus and then become active responders. Rather, the nature of organisms is to interact continuously with their environment in a way that is cumulatively and mutually modifying<sup>11</sup>. Hence, he posits that there are no fixed, immutable substances or things. He propounded the spectator theory of knowledge, the doctrine that “independent” objects exist “out there” outside the mind (realism).

### **His Idea of Spectator Theory of Knowledge**

He argued that earlier philosophy confused the true nature and function of knowledge, as if knowledge is molded after what is supposed to happen when we look at something in reality i.e., the idea that the objects of knowledge are passively absorbed or taken in as mental representations of a fixed outer reality; for example, the empiricist assume that thinking refers to fixed things in nature-that for each idea there is a corresponding object in reality. Also, for the rationalist, to have a clear idea is to guarantee that the object of thought exists in reality<sup>12</sup>. For him, the mind is taken as an instrument for considering what is fixed and certain in nature. Nature is one, the mind is another and knowing is relatively the simple activity of looking as a spectator does. The question of how humanity or society discovers its ends or the foundations of its value and the problem of relating facts to value, led him to fashion a new theory to the problem of relating facts to value.

### **Value in a World of Fact**

Dewey criticizes the Western conception of morality as an experience which is external to or radically distinct from everyday experiences of domestic and industrial relations.

For him, moral concerns permeate much of experience<sup>13</sup>. He sees value as the satisfactory solution of the problem reflected by desire. "Dewey conceived the moral life as suffused with innumerable possibilities of enjoyment and happiness, as well as of disaster. Ordinary life revolves around familiar attachments, ambitions and fears. He argues that the philosophic task 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".<sup>14</sup> According to him, the mind discovers values like it discovered facts in experience. Every person experiences the problem of choosing between two or more possibility, the question of value arises where choices have to be made and intelligence can discover the best solution when the problem is analyzed in its specific practical context. Also, he was convinced that science could provide the standard for value judgments; in other words, judgment of value, like a scientific hypothesis, is predictive, and it is thus empirically or experimentally verifiable.

Dewey's approach was a rejection of any theory of value which holds that the standard of any value is to be found either in the "essences" of things or in some form of transcendent eternal truth<sup>15</sup>. His theory appears to rest on the assumption that experience gives a person or society the ends toward which life and behavior should move. From his perspective, metaphysics, like religious rites and cults, has been a means of "escape from the vicissitudes of existence". Instead of facing the uncertainties of a constantly changing world, metaphysicians have sought security by searching for fixed, universal and immutable truth. Given this metaphysical perspective, from which abstract speculation about eternal truth is mere escapism, it is easy to understand why he was primarily interested in practical problems and actively participated in movements of social, political and educational reform.

### **Dewey's Theory of Education: a Constructive Analysis**

He is viewed as the main proponent for what is variously termed an activity-based or learning-by-doing approach to teaching and learning. He believed that many of the problems with prevailing educational practices grew out of their foundations in a faulty dualistic epistemology. On the progressive education movement, he went out of his way to emphasize that teachers must attend to the educative value of the experiences they create for youngsters. He argued for a view of teaching and learning that was social constructivist in orientation<sup>16</sup>. Unlike the traditional approaches in the theory of knowledge, which saw thought as a subjective primitive set out of which knowledge was composed, his theory of knowledge emphasized the 'necessity of testing thought by action if thought was to pass over into knowledge'. He adopts the theory of knowledge, which identifies the object of knowledge with the term of the process of inquiry, in order to get rid of what he calls 'the spectator theory of knowledge'. This represents an ideological shift in the way the acquisition of knowledge was previously considered in philosophy.

His approach understood thought genetically, as the product of the interaction between organism and environment, and knowledge as having practical instrumentality in the guidance and control of that interaction. A concept in Dewey's philosophy of education and to this day perhaps the most controversial is his concept of growth. These are explanations which place the significance of human effort in the distant future<sup>17</sup>. His method called upon teachers to execute the enormously hard task of 'reinstating into

experience' the subject-matter of the curriculum. This subject matter like all human knowledge was the product of man's efforts to solve the problems that confronted him in experience, but as a formal body of knowledge, it had been abstracted from the problematic situations where it had originally developed.

Traditionalists argued that this knowledge should simply be imposed on the child in a sequence of steps determined by the logic of this abstracted body of truth. The way a child's character is shaped, the moral and political agenda of schooling, is sometimes termed the 'hidden curriculum'. The school should rather be viewed as an extension of civil society and the student, encouraged to cooperate as a member of a community, actively pursuing interests in cooperation with others. It is by a process of self-directed learning, guided by the cultural resources provided by teachers that Dewey believed a child is best prepared for the demands of responsible membership within the democratic community<sup>18</sup>. He argues that individuals achieve self-realization by utilizing their peculiar talents to contribute to the well-being of their community, and hence the critical task of education in a democratic society was to help children develop the character, habits and virtues, that would enable them to achieve self-realization.

Pragmatism and Constructivism are allies in many contemporary philosophical debates; the term 'construction' is indeed a recurrent and continuous motif in his writings. This contextuality of the Deweyan experience as a continuum of 'doing' and 'undergoing' implies that construction is always a transactional affair in-formed by the socio-cultural interactions in which we participate<sup>19</sup>. It is this kind of complementing and combination that breeds social progress and development within the society. For contemporary constructivists as well as for contemporary pragmatists his claim still holds true that democracy is a creative task before us that challenges our imaginative and symbolical capacities to envision and accomplish viable ways of 'the good life' that we and others wish to live.

### **Conclusion**

The pragmatic theory of truth exempts logical truth and so, met with strong opposition among its critics perhaps most notably from the British logician and philosopher Bertrand Russell, who dissented from the theory because Dewey substituted 'inquiry' for 'truth' as the fundamental concept of logic and theory of knowledge. But then, Dewey only meant that no truth is absolutely sacrosanct, but some truths possess in practice a constant functional value.

This theory that there are no sacrosanct eternal truths, but that all statements which we believe to be true are revisable in principle or from the purely logical point of view, obviously has important implications in the fields of morals and politics.

One may be tempted to think that Dewey's idea of thinking as an instrument for solving practical problems, takes it for granted that human thought processes will always be a pointer to change or move in the positive- constructive dimension, even though it is not always the case in reality as we know that people have also used thought and great intellectual ideas for destructive purposes. For instance, Albert Einstein's theory of relativity which began purely as a scientific hypothesis was converted by the Nazi's to make nuclear weapon of mass destruction; and also in politics, people use propaganda as a deceptive agenda to make a scandal out of their opponent. But then, the making of

weapons of mass destruction is not necessarily for destructive purposes but for territorial protection of sovereignty i.e. to protect a state or country against external aggression or forces. Again, the idea of propaganda is not necessarily for destructive aims, but also as publicize information to promote an idea, policy or cause by a government or an organization.

More so, if Dewey's approach to education is fully utilized in Nigeria, for instance, where we can see the high value for education dwindling because of the difficulty in convincing the upcoming generation that education is important for their success when they are surrounded by rich illiterates and poor graduates; it will go to a large extent, to foster new vistas in our education and economic sectors as it will encourage more people to venture into entrepreneurship which will further create more jobs and boost the nation's economy as well as encourage more producers and employers of labour to spring forth. Our technical, vocational and agricultural education will be properly utilized to produce professionals; an agriculturist will be able to collect and cultivate certain seedlings that can be exported. The importation of goods together with the idea that to eat foreign produce and to be completely engaged in white collar jobs are more prestigious will be reduced.

In sum, notwithstanding the possible shortcomings, he was an effective proponent of progressive education that was opposed to formal, authoritarian methods of instruction. He also favoured having students learn by performing tasks that are related to their own interests and today, educational practices throughout the United States and in many areas across the world generally follows the fundamental postulates of his educational philosophy.

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