

Dewey

A Beginner's Guide

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O N E W O R L D
O X F O R D

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Introduction

Philosophy is criticism; criticism of the influential beliefs that underlie culture; a criticism which traces the beliefs to their generating conditions as far as may be, which tracks them to their results, which considers the mutual compatibility of the elements of the total structure of beliefs. Such an examination terminates, whether so intended or not, in a projection of them into a new perspective which leads to new surveys of possibilities.

(LW6:19)

In many ways, John Dewey epitomizes what an intellectual life can be. An enormously productive scholar, teacher, family man, and prominent public intellectual, Dewey's ideas were keenly attended by both academic and lay audiences over the course of three generations. As a public figure, he lectured extensively at home and abroad, including travel to China, Turkey, Mexico, and the Soviet Union. While he did engage in the specialized dialectic of philosophers, Dewey also spoke to ordinary people about issues of broad moral significance such as economic alienation, war and peace, human freedom, race relations, women's suffrage, and educational goals and methods. Frequently, he did more than write or lecture; Dewey was founder and first president of the American Association of University Professors, first president of the League for Independent Political Action, and president of the American Psychological Association; he helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and was deeply involved in the teachers' union movement in New York City.

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As a scholar and writer, Dewey's oeuvre is extraordinary: forty books and approximately seven hundred articles in over one hundred and forty journals. Many of his most renowned works were published after he was sixty years old. He had an eminent career as a professional philosopher, and is universally considered (along with William James and Charles S. Peirce) as a primary founder of American pragmatism. Dewey also served as an early president of the American Philosophical Association and was invited to speak in philosophy's most prestigious lecture series.¹

Dewey's biography is complex, but several facts are worth mentioning. Born in 1859, he grew up in a merchant-class family in New England, strongly influenced by a devoutly religious mother. After college, Dewey taught high school before taking up graduate studies at Johns Hopkins with Charles S. Peirce, George Sylvester Morris, and G.S. Hall – a pragmatist, Hegelian, and experimental psychologist, respectively. (Dewey's dissertation critiqued Kant's psychology and earned him a Ph.D. in 1884.) In retrospect, Dewey credited his graduate study of Hegelianism with liberating him from both personal and philosophical difficulties.² This early liberation initiated Dewey's lifelong enterprise of treating various experiences (bodily, psychical, imaginative, practical) as capable of integration into dynamic wholes. Though Dewey's work became increasingly less Hegelian, the basic intent (of framing phenomena in a synthetically organized way) remained influential throughout his career.

Dewey's family and his reputation as a philosopher and psychologist grew while he taught at various universities, including the University of Michigan.³ In 1894 he landed two major positions at the University of Chicago, chairing departments in Philosophy (including psychology) and Pedagogy (including the directorship of the Laboratory School). In Chicago, Dewey became active in social and political causes, including Jane

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Addams' Hull House. Dewey resigned his Chicago positions in 1904, over conflicts related to the Laboratory School, and soon accepted a position at Columbia University in New York City. Dewey spent the rest of his teaching career (1905 to 1930) at Columbia (including Teacher's College). Almost two decades after his wife died, Dewey married Roberta Lowitz Grant. John Dewey died of pneumonia in his home in New York City on 1 June 1952.

Dewey's popularity has surged over the past couple of decades. While some of this may be due to the rediscovery of his particular genius, several other contributing reasons seem likely.⁴ One reason is that Dewey appeals to people as a thinker who is both intelligent *and* engaged. By keeping his scholarly work connected to practical affairs beyond the academy, Dewey ensured wider interest in, and test of, his ideas. Such public intellectuals are rare today, and renewed interest in Dewey may indicate a general yearning for more responsible and informed discussion of contemporary moral and political issues. Another explanation of Dewey's resurgence may derive from some important historical parallels. Dewey's early twentieth-century America was searching for guidance on many problems which concern people today: problems of unemployment, homelessness, and the lack of medical services for the poor; the indifference of the wealthy toward the poor and working poor; the balkanization of pluralistic societies into economically and culturally stratified suburbs; the isolation brought about by consumerism and hyper-individualism. As such problems have captured the attention of philosophers and political scientists, there has been increased interest in 'communitarian' moral and political philosophy. Insofar as Dewey is regarded as a philosopher deeply concerned with democracy, 'the public', and 'the Great Community', contemporary scholars are looking back to his work for insight.

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Two keys to understanding Dewey

The chapters that follow will thoroughly acquaint readers with Dewey's philosophical ideas and methods. Here, I outline two beliefs fundamental to Dewey which will aid readers in their understanding of the occasionally complicated terrain that lies ahead.

Practical Starting Point: the first guiding belief concerns one's approach or stance toward the activity of philosophy.⁵ For too long, philosophy has been largely concerned with logical demonstration based on certain premises – it has approached issues with a 'top down' rather than 'bottom up' method. The top-down method may be said to use a 'theoretical starting point' because it *already* assumes much about what *must* be discovered *prior* to any actual philosophical inquiry. For example, investigations into the nature of perception that start out with fairly definite presumptions about, say, 'subjects' and the 'objects' they are perceiving; or, investigations into moral questions that presume that, whatever particular answers are found, morality consists in one overarching and universal principle.

Why, Dewey asks, should each successive generation of philosophers accept these theoretical assumptions? Why should it be *assumed* that there is, for example, a single overarching principle of morality – or a dualism between subject and object in perception? Such predeterminations are unfounded; moreover, Dewey argues, they lead philosophical inquiry into insoluble problems and dead ends. They divert philosophical talent away from addressing practical problems.

Instead, Dewey urges a practical starting point, a bottom-up approach to philosophical inquiry. Drawing strongly upon William James's 'radical empiricism', Dewey proposes that philosophers avoid prejudicial frameworks and assumptions and accept experience as it is lived. Such an approach is self-consciously empirical, fallible, and social; employing it,

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Dewey writes, can ‘open the eyes and ears of the mind . . . [with sensitivity] to all the varied phases of life and history’ (LW1:373). By recommending a more humble and mindful respect for experience, Dewey is not suggesting a surrender to irrationality; after all, it is *in* experience that one finds patterns of inquiry and logic useful for ordering and directing future events. Rather, he is suggesting that philosophy seek greater coherence with life as experienced *throughout* the day. Thus, this practical starting point is more than a strategy for doing philosophy; it is the profound and consequential acknowledgment that philosophy’s inquiries are similar to many others: done by particular people, with particular perspectives, at a definite time and place, with consequences that must be considered. In other words, philosophy must be done as if it actually *matters*.

Melioristic Motive: the second guiding belief is the view that philosophical questions about knowledge and truth can never be completely walled off from efforts to create and preserve value. Dewey is an inveterate arguer whose works frequently begin with devastating critiques of traditional positions. But however diverse the subject matter, these critiques are frequently unified by Dewey’s meliorism. Meliorism is the belief that *this* life is neither perfectly good nor bad; it can be improved only through human effort. Philosophy’s motive for existing, then, is to make life better.

This is no blind faith, tossed off sentimentally by Dewey; it is a working hypothesis, drawn from experience. To accept the challenge implied by the melioristic hypothesis is to admit that the proper purpose of intellectual inquiry is to search for ways (ideas, practices) to improve *this* life rather than to look for absolute value or reality *per se*. If philosophy is more than intellectual recreation, it must somehow engage with ‘the problems of men’. This is Dewey’s touchstone.

Dewey’s entreaties – that philosophy start from lived experience (practically), motivated by moral ends (meliorism) – are

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prescriptive but necessarily vague. They pose a challenge to professionalized philosophers, who tend to respond by demanding specifics. *Which* cherished philosophical problems should be abandoned – and *when*? *Where* should philosophical investigations be focused instead? *What happens* to the identity of philosophy once it abandons traditional problems? Dewey's general retort to such responses is 'look around'. Philosophy can discover new problems in the crucible of common life if its practitioners have the courage and emotional intelligence to trade certain answers for questions which aim to make life better.

Plan of the book

Chapter 1, 'Experience', takes up areas fundamental to Dewey's naturalism – what it means for things to exist in modes which might be labeled *physical*, *psychical*, and *semantic* (or meaningful). Issues covered here include Dewey's 'psychology' as well as his special account of how organism–environment transactions produce 'experience'. *Chapter 2*, 'Inquiry', explores Dewey's naturalistic reconstruction of epistemology (with its traditional components of knowledge, justification, and truth). Inquiry is a central feature of Dewey's instrumentalist philosophy, and plays a significant role in every other chapter in this book because each of them (morality, politics, education, art, and religion) constitutes a special inquiry of their own. *Chapter 3*, 'Morality', explains how Dewey uses transactional experience and experimental inquiry to revamp moral theory. The result, 'moral science', is presented as a way to address practical problems without becoming insensitive to the complexities and nuances of moral life. *Chapter 4*, 'Politics', focuses on Dewey's critique of liberalism and its account of the individual's relation to society. Dewey's emphasis on community-based, participatory

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democracy is also explored, along with its necessary, interdependent relation to liberal education. *Chapter 5*, 'Education', covers the area for which Dewey was most widely known. Here I explain why Dewey rejected many of his era's conventional restrictions on children, teachers, and curriculum and why he believes that fostering children's self-sustaining habits of creativity and cooperative inquiry should be the primary mission of a humane (and democratic) education. *Chapter 6*, 'Aesthetics', explores how Dewey's metaphysical views about experience apply to art objects, artistic production and appreciation, and communication in general. For Dewey, aesthetic experience describes a phase characteristic of *any* deeply meaningful experience – regardless of whether an artwork is involved. In this regard, aesthetics promises important clues for how ordinary life could be made more fulfilling. *Chapter 7*, 'Religion', looks at religious experience, concepts, and institutions through the eyes of a devoted naturalist and pragmatist. Dewey rejects transcendentalism in religion, and argues that life's tribulations are more effectively addressed by instrumental intelligence. Because religions have forged many communal bonds helpful to the social and moral good, Dewey argues that rather than renouncing religions wholesale it would be preferable to draw from religious experience those elements consistent with a secular, non-transcendental 'common faith' in intelligent inquiry. Finally, the *Conclusion*, 'Philosophy as Equipment for Living', argues that Dewey is worth reading today not only for his philosophical insights, but also for the uses his methods provide in a variety of fields outside philosophy. Three such fields (medicine, environmentalism, feminism) are sketched.

Each chapter is designed to stand on its own. While the book strives to offer a cumulative and integrated portrait of Dewey's thought, those interested in just a few specific topics (e.g., religion and art) can obtain informative and coherent content by selectively reading the pertinent chapters.

Notes

Introduction

1. Dewey was president of the Eastern Division of the APA in 1905; he gave the Carus Lectures, Gifford Lectures, William James Lectures, and Terry Lectures.
2. As a product of the culture of New England, Dewey writes that he felt 'an inward laceration' from its intellectual bequests; in particular the 'divisions by way of isolation of self from the world, of soul from body, of nature from God, brought [him] a painful oppression' (LW5:153). Study of Hegelianism with George Sylvester Morris afforded Dewey personal and intellectual healing.
3. While in Michigan, Dewey developed long-term professional relationships with James Hayden Tufts and George Herbert Mead. In 1886, he married Harriet Alice Chipman; they had six children and adopted another. Two of the boys died tragically young (at the ages of two and eight).
4. See the careful historical work by Ryan 1995 and Westbrook 1991.
5. 'There are', Dewey writes, 'two kinds of demonstration: that of logical reasoning from premises assumed to possess logical completeness, and that of showing, pointing, coming upon a thing' (LW1:372).

Chapter 1

1. Was Dewey a 'behaviorist'? I think not. While supportive of behaviorist criticisms of introspectionism, Dewey strenuously rejected behaviorist attempts to explain complex, situated actions in terms of simple elements such as stimuli. Such reductionistic explanations oversimplify behavior, isolating it from its more comprehensive cultural, linguistic, and pragmatic contexts. See MW11:13.