

Dewey

A Beginner's Guide

David L. Hildebrand



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

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Inquiry: knowledge, meaning, and action

Intelligence becomes ours in the degree in which we use it and accept responsibility for consequences. It is not ours originally or by production . . . Thoughts sprout and vegetate; ideas proliferate. They come from deep unconscious sources . . . Our active body of habits appropriates it. The suggestion then becomes an assertion. It no longer merely comes to us. It is accepted and uttered by us. We act upon it and thereby assume, by implication, its consequences. The stuff of belief and proposition is not originated by us. It comes to us from others, by education, tradition and the suggestion of the environment. Our intelligence is bound up, so far as its materials are concerned, with the community life of which we are a part. We know what it communicates to us, and know according to the habits it forms in us. Science is an affair of civilization not of individual intellect.

(MW14:216)

The quest for certainty is a quest for a peace which is assured, an object which is unqualified by risk and the shadow of fear which action casts.

(LW4:7)

Introduction

What is knowledge? What is truth? Can creatures in a world of sensation and appearance discover beliefs that are not just

opinion (temporary or mistaken) but real knowledge (permanent and certain)? Is knowledge even possible? Such questions are typical of 'epistemology' (the study of knowledge), and have long been identified by many with the aims of philosophy itself. As we will see, Dewey neither identifies philosophy with epistemology nor agrees with the deepest metaphysical assumptions that give life to traditional epistemology's 'big' questions.¹ Instead, he approaches issues of belief, knowledge, and truth from an evolutionary standpoint. Seen in this light, such concepts must be interpreted within the context of a dynamic, natural world where creatures struggle to adapt and thrive. To promote this dramatically different standpoint, Dewey finds himself obligated to critique traditional accounts of knowledge and truth, diagnose the reasons they came about, and then reconstruct them as his own proposal. His proposal for epistemology is called 'instrumentalism'.

This chapter, then, has three main parts: critique, diagnosis, and proposal. It starts by briefly examining Dewey's critique of three dominant epistemological schools: empiricism, rationalism, and Kantianism. Next it explains Dewey's diagnoses for the sources of those schools' errors. This chapter then explores Dewey's proposal for how knowing *emerges* as a kind of adaptive activity, along with several of knowing's most important patterns: doubt, belief, inquiry, and judgment. It concludes by summarizing the fate, in Dewey's hands, of two beloved and ancient concepts: knowledge and truth.

Critique and diagnosis: classical empiricism, rationalism, and Kant

Dewey's 'instrumentalism' (a name he abandoned toward the end of his career), responds to tensions between two historically dominant schools in epistemology (rationalism and classical

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empiricism), as well as to Immanuel Kant's attempt to supersede those approaches. To situate Dewey, here is a brief encapsulation of tensions between these approaches.

All sides agreed that we clearly *seem* to know things. Debates arose over the degree to which perceptions and/or concepts are responsible for knowledge. Classical empiricists stressed the role of sense experience. They worried that because the methods of their rival, rationalism, sought only to trace knowledge to thought itself – rather than relating it to particular sensory observations – it is unchecked (and *uncheckable*) by the evidence before our eyes. Such an approach ensures that epistemology remains cut off from actual experience – while at the same time preserving, uncritically, authoritative and dogmatic epistemologies of past philosophers. Part of empiricism's concern was for scientific progress. If science were to usefully advance, it needed to divorce itself from speculation and take perceptual encounters more seriously. Classical empiricist epistemology, then, insisted that knowledge originates only in sense experience; the mind starts out as a receptive, blank slate on which the physical world inscribes its replica, in the form of ideas. The association of ideas generates knowledge; with luck, mind becomes the mirror of nature.

Rationalism, for its part, refused to concede that sense experience could *ever* produce knowledge. Consider the character of sense experience: individual, fluid, and relative to a variety of externally produced circumstances. If philosophy is supposed to explain genuine knowledge – which is unchanging, self-evident, and certain – then clearly philosophy's methods must not draw upon a fluctuating, external world. It should rely on certain, inner concepts. Rationalist epistemology, then, argued that knowledge is abstract and deductively certain, an end in itself not tied to any practical purpose. Knowledge is produced by the mind, an immaterial entity with a capacity to reason and think that is innate and independent of its temporary housing, the material body.

In short, the views are at loggerheads. Empiricism maintains that an objective, external world writes its story elements in our minds; when we can express that story in an order that corresponds to the world, there is objective knowledge. Rationalism argues that knowledge is not an inner–outer correspondence but a coherence of inner concepts; this harmony is grasped not by the senses but by the introspective light of consciousness shining on its own conceptual landscape.

Into the chasm dividing empiricism and rationalism stepped Immanuel Kant. Kant argues that philosophy should rein in its ambition and stop pretending it can transcend the limits of experience. Philosophy's proper inquiry is to discover what can *possibly* be known in experience. Kant's account refuses to assign a predominant role to either perceptions or concepts; instead he argues that we have a permanent intellectual apparatus and set of categories that constrain how we can take up new sensory experiences. Speaking roughly, the mind does not make the world, nor does the world make the mind. There is freedom in how we think the world, but it is constrained and not absolute.

In Dewey's view, Kant fails to adequately address the problems of rationalism and empiricism. While Kant wisely criticizes the zealotry of the earlier schools' objectives, he unfortunately retains the schools' sharp distinction between intellect and nature by simply moving an absolute authority (of, say, Platonic Forms or God) into the universal structure of rational minds. He also retains the traditional assumption that knowledge must be *certain*, which results, Dewey argues, in a deeply inconsistent view of knowledge. Kant's empiricism states that one cannot appeal to things beyond possible experience as sources of knowledge and yet he also posits – without sufficient justification – an ideal realm of things-in-themselves that exists beyond possible experience. This 'noumenal' realm is central to Kant's project, for it makes possible free will, morality, and sensory appearances as well.

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Kant's solution was unacceptable to Dewey for one other important reason. On Kant's account, the sensations which are necessary ingredients of knowledge are, initially, *inherently* inchoate. This sensory flux is never observed because it must first be formatted by mental categories to be experienced at all. But by what argument, Dewey objects, can we assume that sensation is initially like this? Dewey finds no satisfactory support for this assumption; instead, like William James, he chooses to start from the standpoint of 'radical empiricism'. On this view, experience *as we have it* is comprehensible, at least in part. It is also inherently relational; we do not begin with atomized bits of experience and then subsequently stitch them together. The relatedness of things is as present to direct experience as the objects themselves.

For Dewey, then, Kant fails to push far enough toward a philosophical perspective that can merge concept and perception, reason and nature, theory and practice. While Kant's active mental model was a clear improvement over the two previous passive ones, he unfortunately maintains their conviction that the mark of knowledge resides in an idea's faithful mirroring of realities beyond experience. For Kant, as for the others, the significance of ideas' power to predict, control, or guide future experiences remains irrelevant to knowledge.

For these reasons, Dewey came to believe that only a whole-hearted naturalism – an ecological conception of experience – could improve upon rationalism, classical empiricism, *and* Kantianism. That naturalism, outlined in the previous chapter, makes experience central to living (as well as knowing) by enlarging and activating it. Experience includes 'adaptive courses of action, habits, active functions, [and] connections of doing and undergoing' (MW12:131–32).²

Thus, the pragmatic or instrumental view of mind and knowledge begins by rejecting all three approaches to knowledge. Intelligence is no longer just a product of evolution, but

stands now as an instrument or tool actively guiding evolutionary processes. As an epistemological theory, instrumentalism is completely at home within evolutionary naturalism; within this framework, the determination of knowledge is akin to how we judge the value of a hand or eye – by how well we are empowered to adapt and thrive in an environment: ‘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).

Dewey’s efforts at resituating epistemology within a natural framework were often met by the non-comprehension or incredulity of peers, whose tradition-bound approaches required that knowledge be related to something fixed and non-natural. Thus, Dewey knew that if he wished to convince others that human meaning and intelligence emerge from the struggles and satisfactions shared by most other natural organisms, he would first have to help diagnose why there was such fervent resistance.³

One important source of resistance, according to Dewey, was an entrenched view of ‘reality’ and its corresponding view of knowledge. Definitions of ‘knowledge’ vary greatly, of course, but running through most of them is the central tenet that ‘knowledge’ is the result of a reflective activity which gives corporeal residents (of a changing world) access to a realm of ideas (which never changes). In essence, this view of knowledge makes it magical. Since knowledge is the spell that can take us beyond the world of sense and illusion, it must be more than illusion itself. Knowledge conveys our minds to the really real, and so it too must be really real. ‘The commonest assumption of philosophies’, Dewey writes,

common even to philosophies very different from one another, is the assumption of the identity of objects of knowledge and ultimately real objects. The assumption is so deep that it is

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usually not expressed; it is taken for granted as something so fundamental that it does not need to be stated.

(LW1:26–7)

This assumption about knowledge is grounded on a very peculiar metaphysical picture: a two-tiered reality. One tier is familiar to everyone: the mundane and bodily world of change; growth and decay, sensation and movement, etc. The opposing tier is also familiar: the ‘divine’ and ideational world of permanence; this is the realm of fixity and eternity, pure intellect and spirit – the realm of God. The problems that develop for philosophy, and for what Dewey refers to as the ‘industry of epistemology’, stemmed from the fact that these two tiers are *so* different that it becomes necessary to explain not what knowledge is or how to get it, but *how knowledge in general is even possible*. How could beings in a realm of *change* have ideas which are actually native to an eternal and *permanent* one? Or, rephrasing the problem in more modern language, ‘How could a mind get beyond its own thoughts and feelings to know the objective world?’

So far we have seen that one’s assumption of a two-tiered model of reality leads to the belief that knowledge itself has a special and ultimate metaphysical status. However, there is a second consequence of assuming the two-tiered model, and this too helps explain why Dewey’s naturalist epistemology was resisted so vehemently.

Those who investigate the phenomenon of knowing with a deep-rooted belief in a two-tiered reality unconsciously start their inquiry from a standpoint that is deeply prejudiced toward what is permanent over what is changing. As they inquire, they are apt to commit what Dewey calls ‘the philosophic fallacy’, and it happens when one converts the discovery of an eventual function into an antecedent existence. For example, in examining how people think, one might notice that it is common for

people to infer a general pattern from similar instances. The philosophic fallacy would do more than record that there is this function; instead, it would convert the function into an antecedently existing mental power – for example, a ‘faculty’ of induction – as if it had *always* been part of the mind’s ultimate structure. I hope it is clear that characterizing discoveries in this way is, in effect, a subtle but unjustified imposition of one’s metaphysical prejudice toward permanence. To discover that ‘there is this activity of inference in such and such cases’ simply cannot license conclusions about some *ultimate* inductive faculty of the mind.

A philosopher’s habit of intellectual reflection, then, can remove her from the living and problematic situations that initially motivated inquiry. Over time, this habit of approaching inquiry from a purely theoretical starting point can become institutionalized; the result is a tradition of philosophers engaged in these practices and the construction – out of living processes of questioning – of ultimate metaphysical explanations of how things *really* are. The lamentable result, Dewey notes, ‘is invariably some desiccation and atomizing of the world in which we live or of ourselves’ (LW6:7).

Dewey proposed an alternative way of doing philosophy, which begins with a different approach to experience. Rather than starting out with intellectual or theoretical assumptions – and then committing the philosophic fallacy – Dewey adopts James’s radically empirical (or practical) starting point.⁴ Taking this fresh and unprejudiced attitude toward experience would free philosophy in several ways. For one, philosophy would finally be free to investigate, as natural phenomena, culture’s imaginative (as well as reflective) artifacts: its ‘magic, myth, politics, painting, and penitentiaries’ (LW1:28). Philosophy would also be freed from fruitless quests to solve illusionary problems, such as how knowledge *in general* is possible or whether we can ever know ‘the external world’ or ‘other minds’.

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Let us consider just one such issue, 'the problem of knowledge in general'. When traditional philosophy attempts to answer this problem, it first must *deny* the fact that there actually *have been* many past successes at knowing specific things. Because it denies that there have been past cases of knowledge, it also neglects to conduct any useful empirical surveys as to *why* those successes worked. In lieu of this approach, Dewey suggests we be radically empirical about knowledge. 'Why not', Dewey writes, 'take the best authenticated cases of faithful reports which are available, compare them with the sufficiently numerous cases of reports ascertained to be unfaithful and doubtful, and see what we find' (MW13:60). In other words, approaching knowing as an empirical and scientific process creates no 'general' problem of knowledge! We find that there are 'specific instances of success and failure in inquiry' and we find that studying them helps us identify better 'ways of going about the business of inquiry' (MW10:23). The project of collecting, organizing, and systematically stating these findings about the conditions of inquiry amounts to 'logic', which is redefined as a general and 'important aid in proper guidance of further attempts at knowing' (MW10:23).⁵

The point is that some of traditional epistemology's most important 'problems' are not problematic at all. They have consumed philosophers' time and energy because their foundational metaphysical assumptions have remained unquestioned. By criticizing these underlying assumptions, Dewey hopes to show that epistemology's genuine problems are methodological, not metaphysical. The difficulties we encounter while trying to know things, Dewey writes, 'imply a difference between knowledge and error consequent upon right and wrong *methods of inquiry and testing; not a difference between experience and the world*' (MW10:23; emphasis mine). On Dewey's naturalistic account, knowing is something that occurs as we live, amid a range of other activities. The human capacity to reflect does not point

beyond experience to something 'really real' but refers to 'the contextual situation in which thinking occurs' (LW1:61). The starting point of epistemology is not general wonder or the desire to penetrate illusion; the starting point 'is the actually *problematic*, and that the problematic phase resides in some actual and specifiable situation' (LW1:61).

Knowing as organic functioning

We come now to Dewey's proposal regarding how knowing arises in nature, and how we think. Dewey's epistemological naturalism starts from the fact that we are *in* and *of* this world, and that knowing is not a flash of divine insight but rather 'a connection of things which depend upon other and more primary connections between a self and things; [and] . . . which grows out of these more fundamental connections and . . . operates in their interests at specifiable crises' (MW6:119). Dewey's account of knowing must explain how it fits into a natural continuum (spanning brute physical existences, bodies, minds, and conscious experience) as well as how it operates. How, for example, do knowledge and intelligence *emerge* from the natural world?

Dewey's view explains the emergence of intelligence by describing how individual organisms behave in the two most basic contexts possible: stable and precarious environments. In the stable context, the individual is a contented member of its environment:

There is the individual that belongs in a continuous system of connected events which reinforce its activities and which form a world in which it is at home, consistently at one with its own preferences, satisfying its requirements. Such an individual is in its world as a member, extending as far as the moving equilibrium of which it is a part lends support.

(LW1:188)

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In the second, precarious context, the individual is in conflict with its environment:

Then there is the individual that finds a gap between its distinctive bias and the operations of the things through which alone its need can be satisfied; it is broken off, discrete, because it is at odds with its surroundings. It either surrenders, conforms, and for the sake of peace becomes a parasitical subordinate, indulges in egotistical solitude; or its activities set out to remake conditions in accord with desire.

(LW1:188)

Knowing (and intelligence) *emerge* as functions that allow organisms actively to reconstruct precarious situations in ways that suit their imperatives. In that process, Dewey writes, 'intelligence is born . . . mind as individualized, initiating, adventuring, experimenting, dissolving [is also born]' (LW1:188).

Knowing does not develop for every species. It is a specific, signifying response (or function) that only develops given the prior development of more basic abilities (such as inhibition, feeling or sentiency, and anticipation). When an organism has *both* the need to address precarious circumstances *and* the ability to suspend overt action in anticipation of future possibilities, then the conditions are in place for signifying acts. Such acts treat the stimulus differently; rather than reacting immediately in one way or another, the stimulus is treated as a sign of something else. (As we saw in the child-candle example, the flame-stimulus can become a sign of something dangerous.) In contrast to the tradition, the creation of 'signs' or 'concepts' is neither a miraculous nor a purely subjective transformation of physical events. Rather, a brute stimulus becomes a sign-function when an organism considers that stimulus *in connection with* new and future possibilities. The stimulus is recast as a sign – as a function that signifies.

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Signs are not transcendental but natural occurrences, without any essential nature.⁶ Whether some actual event *is* a sign depends on functional and pragmatic factors, such as whether it can be employed as such in a particular situation. Does a wisp of smoke ‘mean’ fire? Only if it reliably *functions as a sign of fire in cases of actual trial*. In other words, a sign requires testing to evaluate its helpfulness as a function. This account is distinctively ‘pragmatic’ insofar as ‘experiment or action enters to make the connection between the thing signifying and the thing signified so that inference may pass from hypothesis to knowledge’ (MW13:53). *As a sign* smoke must do more than merely ‘point’ to fire; as a sign it fulfills some specific function within a larger situation – it directs me to be cautious, or soak the area with water, or yell hello to my barbecuing buddies, etc.

Like signifying, knowing is a kind of function; in particular, knowing is a certain *use* of signs. Given an organism’s ability to take objective affairs (things and events) as signs, knowing is the ability to use signs as evidence for something (past or future), and then adjust its responses informed by these inferences. As beings gain expertise at using signs, they become better able to forecast the future, form reasonable expectations, and plan strategic responses (see MW10:15–16). Whether or not a being using signs should be called ‘knowledgeable’ ultimately depends on whether the uses bear practical fruit in future experience.

The foregoing paragraphs hopefully make clear how naturalism describes a framework in which knowing emerges functionally from organic environments. A naturalist framework provides an opportunity for epistemology to start examining *knowing* as a process that is practical and cooperative rather than explaining *knowledge* as the final (even divine) product of theoretical reflection.

Dewey’s examination of knowing as a process, and the reconstruction of epistemology’s central concepts and problems,

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has come to be called 'instrumentalism'. Its fundamental idea is that if knowing is a natural function, continuous with the rest of experience, then concepts and ideas are tools or instruments. This approach to knowing rejects traditional dualisms (action vs. thought, theory vs. practice), arguing that these dualisms are not *helpful*. The old theoretical division between action and thought should be replaced with practical distinction 'between blind, slavish, meaningless action and action that is free, significant, directed and responsible' (LW1:324). To understand how the function of knowing develops in a way that makes action 'free, significant, directed and responsible', we need to understand the way inquiry leads us, as C.S. Peirce might say, from doubt to belief.

Dewey's conviction that thinking has biological origins, moral significance, and real effects in the world comes directly from his pragmatist predecessors, in particular William James and Charles S. Peirce (with whom Dewey studied logic in graduate school).⁷ Peirce's influential 1877 article 'The Fixation of Belief' argued that reflective inquiry (a term more expansive than the traditional 'reasoning') is born from demands placed upon organisms. The experience of those demands we call 'doubt' and the resolution of those demands we call 'belief'. Peirce writes,

Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else . . . The irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief. I shall term this struggle inquiry, though it must be admitted that this is sometimes not a very apt designation.⁸

Thus, Peirce sets the drive to know – which he calls the 'fixation of belief' – into an explanatory framework that is natural and biological. *This*, he states forthrightly, is where epistemology

must start, not from the standpoints that radically doubt everything possible (Descartes) or that begin with distinct realms of ideas and substance (Locke). Philosophy must start with life as it finds it.

Still, while all feel the sting of doubt, there are, Peirce and Dewey realize, *many* ways people can (and do) deal with the anxiety of uncertainty and doubt. There are many ways to ‘fix belief’, and some are better than others. Some responses just avoid a problematic issue (change the subject) or obstinately cling to what they already believe. Others decide the issue by simple appeal to an authoritative text or figure. Still others invent fantastic means to deal with the problem – imagining logical or factual scenarios (like winning the lottery) that dissolve, at least temporarily, subjective feelings of anxiety. However, Peirce says, there is still one other method for allaying doubt and fixing belief. While it may be more arduous than the others, in the long run it leads more effectively to satisfactory solutions for both immediate and long-term problems. This method cannot promise guaranteed or perfect solutions. It cannot promise comfort. Its virtue rests in the fact that those who use it to confront problems do so by developing beliefs aligned with *facts* and not just with wishes. Peirce calls it the ‘method of science’, while Dewey calls it, among other things, ‘reflection’, ‘reflective thinking’, ‘method of inquiry’, or just ‘inquiry’.

The pattern of inquiry What does it mean to think reflectively? How is this useful method called inquiry supposed to work? An answer can begin by looking briefly at what Dewey called ‘the pattern of inquiry’. This pattern is composed of phases or stages observable in our experience.⁹ To keep the discussion simple, here is a five-phase breakdown.

Phase 1: *An indeterminate situation in which a difficulty is felt – ‘Something’s wrong . . .’* Inquiry that may become reflective typically does not begin that way; rather it begins by having a

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feeling that something is wrong (for example, a strange noise wakes me up in the middle of the night and I feel a vague doubt that something is amiss). We should not try to dismiss the doubtful quality as *just* a subjective feeling – it is the *entire situation* which is doubtful, unsettled, or disturbed. ‘We are doubtful’, Dewey writes, ‘because the situation is inherently doubtful’ (LW12:109). If this characterization sounds odd, please recall that Dewey is describing events in a transactional *system* involving both organism and environment. If such interrelational systems truly exist, then we should no longer follow older epistemologies by quarantining doubt exclusively in a subjective doubter.¹⁰

This first, felt phase is indispensable, and no inquiry could ever get going without it. The feeling of this phase is unique, it has a single pervasive quality: *this* doubtfulness. This quality is necessary for helping us decide how forcefully to respond to it, and once we are inquiring the quality helps regulate further thinking insofar as it forms the background of further inquiry. If we get lost during inquiry we can remind ourselves of how we felt initially.¹¹

Phase 2: *The institution of a problem; its location and definition* – ‘*The problem seems to be . . .*’ Beyond the initial feeling of a doubtful or uncertain situation, a problem must be described in definite terms. But problems do not preexist inquiry as an exam problem might await students who have not yet arrived at school. Rather, the indeterminate situation *becomes problematic* as we subject it to inquiry and judge that it is ‘a problem’ (see LW12:111). In addition to judging *that* it is a problem, we judge *how* it is – we define it. Whether we define the problem adequately is crucial to whether it can be resolved in a satisfactory manner. ‘The way in which the problem is conceived’, Dewey writes, ‘decides what specific suggestions are entertained and which are dismissed; what data are selected and which rejected; it is the criterion for relevancy and irrelevancy of hypotheses and conceptual structures’ (LW12:112).

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Revisiting this phase of inquiry is typical, even after further inquiry has taken place. This is because identifying the precise character of a problem is crucial and therefore requires a great deal of experimentation and ingenuity. Indeed, often what is first thought to be *the* problem changes and early characterizations are revised or amended. (Ironically, the character of a problem usually becomes fully definite only after a satisfactory solution is in sight.)

Phase 3: *Hypothesis of a possible solution* – ‘*Maybe what I should do is . . .*’ After provisionally defining the problem, inquiry proceeds by hypotheses that go beyond what is immediately felt and observed to something absent – a possible solution. Hypothesis utilizes both the perceptual facts and theoretical ideas making up the situation by putting them into conceptual play with one another. In this imaginative process, past facts are used to make forecasts about the consequences of executing various operations under observed conditions (see LW12:113).

Skilled hypothesizers pay unusual attention to detail and proceed cautiously; when more information is needed, a hypothesis is embraced only tentatively – as a ‘working’ hypothesis. Sometimes, creating a hypothesis adequate to the task requires revisiting earlier phases of inquiry to make more observations or reconsider the ideas defining the contours of the problem-so-far. This phase of inquiry is quite risky, without definite rules; patience, courage, and artistry are all very important virtues for creators of successful hypotheses. Like any other creative skill, though, it can be cultivated.

Phase 4: *Reasoning out the bearings of the suggestion* – ‘*Doing that would mean . . .*’ In the fourth phase of inquiry, which Dewey calls ‘reasoning’, the meanings of ideas central to the hypothesis are analyzed and an estimate of possible consequences is made. Since words can have multiple meanings (depending on audience, context, and practical implications), a phase which traces out possible meanings and their relations can help uncover

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meanings and consequences, perhaps undesirable ones, which are not immediately apparent. For example, imagine an inquiry about immigration which formulated its key hypothesis in language that described border crossings as 'invasions'. Here the phases of reasoning could help cast light on the meanings implied by 'invasions'. Illuminating those meanings, in turn, could reveal unforeseen consequences provoked by using these meanings – such as vigilantism. Thus, the connection between the way the hypothesis is worded and the possible events would demonstrate that the language of the initial hypothesis requires revision.

Meaning analysis, then, performs a quality check on hypotheses. Hypotheses which seem plausible may not survive, while others which seem implausible at first can gain new vigor on deeper inspection. (One can imagine how implausible the hypothesis of vaccination must have seemed at first!) Either way, this phase moves inquiry ahead because it can winnow the list of hypotheses down to those which stand the best chance of resolving the indeterminate or problematic situation.

Phase 5: *Active experimental or observational testing of the hypothesis – 'Let's try this and see what happens . . .'* The final phase of inquiry engages in the actual testing and evaluation of hypotheses not eliminated in earlier phases. Depending on the nature of the problem, confirmation of a hypothesis may come through simple observation; often, more complicated experimentation is needed. What is crucial to underline here is the Peircean point that only meanings *tested in action* (either observation or experiment) can justify a conclusion of inquiry.¹² Theory must be validated in practice. As a theory of meaning, this notion that ideas or concepts are made meaningful by action or test is 'pragmatism'.

This, then, is the five-phase pattern of inquiry. In sum, inquiry is an active method of responding to problems that involves feeling, abstract analysis, and practical experimentation.

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The measure of whether inquiry is successful is the creation of a determinate situation out of one which was indeterminate. Again, inquiry is not a purely logical process – feeling is a useful and orienting presence throughout each phase.

Three caveats about inquiry are worth mentioning. First, inquiry need not begin with unexpected problems; in fact, the growth of knowledge often requires that we stir up scenarios to help us hypothesize about future problems. Such acts of planned anticipation greatly improve the quality of eventual response.¹³ Second, the pattern of inquiry Dewey describes is a schematic model; most actual inquiries consist of patterns with less than discrete phases, and with an order that moves forward and back between, say, definition and hypothesis. Movement between phases is dynamic, and what happens at one phase can affect the overall pattern for that inquiry. Third, Dewey does not argue that this pattern of inquiry describes how people *always* think but how they *would* think if they imitated the most exemplary cases of inquiry, such as those of empirical science. Dewey wants to highlight for educators and others the real benefits made possible by science's experimental attitude and its forward-looking belief that 'ideas are statements not of what is or what has been but of acts to be performed' (LW4:112). By explicating the patterns of thought most effective in producing reliable scientific knowledge, Dewey hoped that more general lessons could be drawn from those methods and used by those looking to solve moral, political, and social problems.

No discussion of inquiry would be complete without a brief mention of judgment, for 'the heart of a good habit of thought lies in the power to pass judgments *pertinently* and *discriminatingly*' (LW8:211). While we typically think of judgment as the *final* phase of reflection – the 'verdict' that sums up the facts and orders that actions be taken – for Dewey judgment is a function involved in *every* phase of inquiry, with *both* facts and ideas.

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Judging is the act of selecting and weighing the bearing of facts and suggestions *as they present themselves*, as well as of deciding whether the alleged facts are really facts and whether the idea used is a sound idea or merely a fancy. . . . [A] person of sound judgment is one who . . . is a good judge of relative values; he can estimate, appraise, evaluate, with tact and discernment.

(LW8:210)

Judging is no mere act of synthesis, but operates at multiple points in inquiry, in both analytic and synthetic ways. Consider a cook with 'good judgment'. He monitors the occasion of the meal (*judging* the problematic situation) as he chooses ingredients and tools (*judging* facts) and orchestrates these to prepare the meal (*judging* methods or ideas). Were we to formalize this aspect of judgment, we could see three important 'judgment moments' in inquiry: (1) judgment about how to 'take' the initial problematic situation; (2) judgments about how to sift, define, and elaborate the facts and ideas proffered as relevant; and (3) judgment in its usual sense, the issuing of a final decision that satisfies the initial inquiry while also providing a rule or principle for future inquiries.

No judgment, Dewey says, is ever *absolutely* right or wrong, *per se*. This is because each judgment is situated within a specific inquiry and outcomes are always modified by the specific purposes, stakes, and personal perspectives in play. For example, my judgment to give away a loaf of bread to someone who is hungry is affected by whether I am giving it to a mendicant at my door or to someone with whom I am sharing a lifeboat on the open sea. Moreover, the judgment is made not from a completely neutral standpoint but by *me* – with my habits of understanding and whatever store of previous meanings and experiences I have had. Judgment is never perfectly final, neutral or mechanical; it is provisional, perspectival and organic.¹⁴

Knowledge and truth

At last we come to the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’. The reason they arrive so late in our discussion is that Dewey believed both were misleading terms whose importance had been vastly overinflated by philosophy. First, let us consider knowledge. If we accept Dewey’s account of the dynamic ways that our biological and cultural environments create and shape our inquiries, it becomes easy to see why the traditional emphasis on knowledge – i.e., an abstract possession of wise and skilled persons – must be dropped. ‘Knowledge, as an abstract term’, Dewey warns, ‘is a name for the product of competent inquiries. Apart from this relation, its meaning is so empty that any content or filling may be arbitrarily poured in’ (LW12:16). In short, if one wants to understand the *product*, knowledge, one must go to the *process*, inquiry. That is what we have done above.

The denial of the importance of knowledge is, ultimately, a denial of the picture in which mind is a substance separable from the rest of nature. It is an affirmation of a picture that describes the mind’s activities as strategic moves made by organisms to the pressures of living affairs. Contrary to some fears, Dewey’s redescription does not depreciate knowing. Indeed, Dewey is explicitly about the mediating role knowing can play at moments of individual and societal conflict. ‘The life of all thought’, Dewey writes, ‘is to effect a junction at some point of the new and the old, of deep-sunk customs and unconscious dispositions, that are brought to the light of attention by some conflict with newly emerging directions of activity’ (LW3:6).

The study of how we think and of inquiry has enormous value for human beings, whether it is called ‘epistemology’ or not. But the scope of what we must take into consideration as relevant to epistemology and logic must expand far beyond the semantic and symbolic, to the biological and cultural aspects of life.

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Logic is a social discipline . . . [E]very inquiry grows out of a background of culture and takes effect in greater or less modification of the conditions out of which it arises. Merely physical contacts with physical surroundings occur. But in every interaction that involves intelligent direction, the physical environment is part of a more inclusive social or cultural environment.

(LW12:27)

What of truth? Like knowledge, Dewey finds the term 'truth' a misleading term, one that smacks of finality, certainty, and correspondence with real reality. Thus, it is of little use for Dewey's inquiry into human inquiry and judgment. That being said, he does give accounts of truth. This should not be taken as proof he thought truth existed in a traditional sense. Given his rejection of 'a reality beyond ours', such efforts should be seen as dialectical; that is, Dewey defines 'truth' mainly because his interlocutors refused to consider his theory of inquiry sympathetically *until* they had heard his stand about the nature of truth. Here is one of Dewey's (reluctant) definitions of truth:

The 'truth' [of any present proposition] is, by the definition, subject to the outcome of continued inquiries; *its* 'truth', if the word must be used, is provisional; as *near* the truth as inquiry has *as yet* come, a matter determined *not* by a guess at some future belief but by the care and pains with which inquiry has been conducted up to the present time.

(LW14:56–7)

Notice how Dewey's definition directs attention back upon the *process* of inquiry, the *event* of truth-making. Truth is a label characterizing what *inquiry* has come up with – in *that* situation, for *those* purposes. But since new problems crop up all the time, we should never expect to be finally confident about the certainty of any belief inquiry has produced. 'The attainment of

settled beliefs', Dewey writes, 'is a progressive matter; there is no belief so settled as not to be exposed to further inquiry' (LW12:16). If we need to honor a statement by calling it 'true' or 'knowledge', let us follow science in thinking that we honor it because it is settled enough to be a *resource* for future inquiries. To say it is *true* that 'Fresh bread, when eaten, provides nourishment' is to announce that this belief can be used reliably as a conceptual ingredient in future inquiries. It is *not* a statement about the way the world *really* is.

There is a function to 'truth' that needs to be preserved; we need to identify which assertions have proved useful or reliable. For these reasons, Dewey begins to use 'warrant' or 'warranted assertibility' to capture the element in his theory closest to traditional truth (or 'knowledge' in its honorific sense of true-belief). Saying that a statement or proposition 'warrants assertion' is useful but not misleading, as it indicates that inquiries which rely on it can proceed with confidence.

Conclusion

For too long, philosophers have presented themselves as gatekeepers of knowledge, truth, and reality. Epistemology has become an industry of self-appointed experts solving puzzles they have produced themselves. These roles, Dewey believes, are priestly, undemocratic, and false. Paying attention to one's experience – indeed, one's everyday life and needs – reveals that knowing copes with a world neither completely within us nor without us. In this world – our *life* – we confront obstacles, formulate problems, devise solutions, and act experimentally. Knowing and living must be connected; Dewey does this first by explaining the natural roots of inquiry, and then by detailing how inquiry can work (over a diverse range of situations) to make life better.

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Dewey hopes that instrumentalism (and pragmatism) can benefit many areas of life. In 'What Pragmatism Means by Practical', he points out that 'it lies in the nature of pragmatism that it should be applied as widely as possible; and to things as diverse as controversies, beliefs, truths, ideas, and objects' (MW4:101). If pragmatism is to be an honest philosophy, it must live by its own rules and become, Dewey writes, 'not a contemplative survey of existence nor an analysis of what is past and done with, but an outlook upon future possibilities with reference to attaining the better and averting the worse. Philosophy must take, with good grace, its own medicine' (MW10:37–8). Philosophy and pragmatism 'take their own medicine' as long as they present themselves as keenly aware that their own concepts and conclusions are provisional, capable of revision or rejection. Whether Dewey exemplifies this attitude must be left, for now, to the reader.

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19. Here is one very cogent and important statement Dewey makes of the two kinds of experience: '[E]xperienced situations come about in two ways and are of two distinct types. Some take place with only a minimum of regulation, with little foresight, preparation and intent. Others occur because, in part, of the prior occurrence of intelligent action. Both kinds are had; they are undergone, enjoyed or suffered. The first are not known; they are not understood; they are dispensations of fortune or providence. The second have, as they are experienced, meanings that present the funded outcome of operations that substitute definite continuity for experienced discontinuity and for the fragmentary quality due to isolation' (LW4:194).
20. Dewey's continuity narrative uses the language of process: events, interaction, organization, function. This language helps explain the emergence of live feelings from dead events. For the differences between things which are inanimate, animate, and feeling, see LW1: 197.

Chapter 2

1. Such as the metaphysical assumption that epistemology's questions are rooted in two-tiered reality consisting of a realm of changing appearances and another of permanent, unchanging ideas. Though his shift away from traditional epistemology strikes at the heart of philosophy's sentimental appeal, Dewey argues that philosophy must relinquish the idea that knowledge springs from simple 'human wonder' and instead we should try to understand knowing as an activity that permits us to cope with those actual problems which stop us in our tracks.
2. See *Reconstruction in Philosophy*: 'When experience is aligned with the life-process and sensations are seen to be points of readjustment, the alleged atomism of sensations totally disappears. With this disappearance is abolished the need for a synthetic faculty of super-empirical reason to connect them'(MW12:131-2).
3. *The Quest for Certainty* (LW4) lays out Dewey's extensive account of how Western epistemologies grew out of Western history and culture.

4. See *Experience and Nature*: 'Suppose however that we start with no presuppositions save that what is experienced, since it is a manifestation of nature, may, and indeed, must be used as testimony of the characteristics of natural events. Upon this basis, reverie and desire are pertinent for a philosophic theory of the true nature of things; the possibilities present in imagination that are not found in observation, are something to be taken into account' (LW1:27).
5. Dewey's extensive treatise on logic is entitled *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (LW12).
6. On Dewey's view, a sign (say 'apple') is as natural an object as the things to which it refers (this apple). This is not, of course, to say that their qualities are identical.
7. It is clear that as early as 1900, Peirce's ideas about inquiry had become central to Dewey's instrumentalism. See MW1:272.
8. Peirce's 'The Fixation of Belief' (1877) and 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear' (1878) are widely considered to be the two earliest explications of pragmatism's tenets. See Peirce 1992.
9. This description combines two similar accounts of inquiry. See 'Analysis of Reflective Thinking' (LW8) and *Logic* (LW12).
10. Again, because of the 'intellectualism' of traditional philosophy, many philosophers have neglected or dismissed this early and felt phase of reflection.
11. On the contribution of feeling to inquiry, see 'Qualitative Thought' (LW5), especially p. 248.
12. Dewey's notion that hypotheses can only be tested in experience has roots in Peirce, particularly in 'How to Make our Ideas Clear' (Peirce 1992), which champions the pragmatic method of clarifying the meanings of terms and propositions.
13. 'Problems', for pragmatists, denote not only the mundane or physical but intellectual problems as well. See 'What Pragmatism Means by Practical' (MW4:98–115).
14. Taking the practical starting point about judgment means abandoning the idea of perfect, neutral objectivity in judgment. It is to admit that one has a perspective and that judgment is an art, not a science; it involves habit and technique but is not reducible to an algorithm.