

# *Prof. Rex Li's Writings*

**Category:** Study of John Dewey

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**Title:** John Dewey's Metaphysics and Notion of Experience  
(1905 – 1916)

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**Summary/ Abstract:** This paper outlined John Dewey's ideas on metaphysics developed between 1905 and 1916. It offers a summary on:

- The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism (1905)
- The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy (1909)
- Introduction to the Essays in Experimental Logic (1916)

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**Dewey's Metaphysics and Notion of Experience (1905 – 1916)**

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**(A) My Former Understanding**

- (1) In his early years under Hegelianism, John Dewey subscribes to the Absolute.
- (2) He moves away from traditional metaphysics of ultimate cause/ reality, etc. by 1890's and develops action and experience, espousing and keeping evolution and organicity.
- (3) He is more scientifically-oriented for inquiry, where logic is a mode of inquiry.
- (4) He sees experience as subject integrating with object in action, giving it a central role in describing action and change. Nothing mystical in experience or metaphysics. No ultimate, teleological causes, reality.
- (5) In 1925, he published *Experience and Nature*. In 1951, he wrote a new introduction to *Experience and Nature* and regretted using the term "experience", suggesting "culture" to replace it.

**(B) Reading about his writings in early Columbia Years (1904 – 1918)**

It was just 4 pages, Dykhuizen (1973: 173-177) outlines John Dewey's ideas by 1914-15, just before his *Democracy and Experience* appeared. The essays are *The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism* and *Introduction to the Essays in Experimental Logic*.

**(i) *The Postulate of Immediate Experience (1905)***

- (1) Formerly, John Dewey took the position that functionalism, instrumentalism, in short, pragmatism, need not claim any metaphysics, or else it will be self-contradictory (cf. fn 74, p.173).
- (2) However, John Dewey discussed with Woodridge and repositioned that empiricism does not rule out metaphysics.
- (3) John Dewey outlined his metaphysics in "the subject-matter of metaphysical inquiry" (metaphysical inquiry).
- (4) Metaphysical Inquiry: Would science "reveal certain ultimate treats of existence?" (in Dykhuizen'e words)

- (5) John Dewey's answer: Yes ——— universally in “diverse existence, interaction, change”, transcending time, space, enquiry. So there can be metaphysics.
- (6) It is not searching for “ultimate origins and of causation”, nor some “absolute original” of the universe. It is as present: “diversity, specifically and change”.
- (7) It is not “potentiality”, “undifferentiated universe”, immanent potential force, mysterious inherent power (Dykhuizen, 175), but “existing changes with certain conditions now operating”. John Dewey gave an example of a decaying apple.
- (8) Mechanism and organicity but not conscious universe:

Also, the metaphysics Dewey was suggesting resists attempts to reduce the universe to one or another kind of being, such as a cosmic mechanism, an absolute life, mind, or consciousness. It accepts the physico-chemical entities of science, declaring that, with certain interactions and changes in arrangement among them, they take on organizations that behave mechanically, vitally, consciously, or intelligently. It admits, therefore, that the universe contains mechanisms and organisms including those with consciousness or mind, but denies that this warrants anyone to claim that the universe as a whole or in some prior, original state was mechanical or vital or sentient or intelligent. (Dykhuizen, p.175)

- (9) Evolution ——— irreducible transits but not “bio-centric, vitalistic, or psychic”.

(ii) *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy (1909):*

Experience is “a matter of functions and habits”:

.....of active adjustments and re-adjustments, of co-ordinations and activities, rather than of states of consciousness.” It is itself a “mode of existence”, “an act-of-a-certain-specific quality” and “objective”. This analysis of experience made the presence of an organism essential to its occurrence; it also made experience a factor within and continuous with nature. (Dykhuizen, p.176-6)

(iii) *Introduction to the Essays in Experimental Logic (1916)*

- (1) Experience: Nature; organism and environment merge to become experience:

In his “Introduction”, however, Dewey gave an interpretation in which experience and nature tend to merge. So intent was he on making experience objective that he ended with a conception of experience that seemed to his critics to make it identical with nature. For Dewey now argued that the factors making up an environment on the one hand and the desires and interests that attach to an organism on the other, can be extended indefinitely till both organism and environment are lost in what he called “experience.” (Dykhuizen, p.76).

- (2) Conscious experience “is only a very small and shifting portion of experience”.

- (3) Experience, while similar to nature, universe, existence, the word “experience” is used to denote:

“an actual focusing of the world at one point in a focus of immediate shining apparency”. The term “experience” indicates that something here and now attracts, repels, interests, frightens, satisfies, etc.

Explaining how and why the term “experience” came into use, Dewey declared that it was a way “to refer peremptorily to what is indicated in only a roundabout and divided way by such terms as ‘organism’ and ‘environment’, ‘subject’ and ‘object’, ‘persons’ and ‘things’, ‘mind and nature’, and so on”. (Dykhuizen, p.176)

### **(C) Reading and Learning from Dykhuizen (1973: 173-177)**

- (1) This reading enhances my understanding of Dewey’s metaphysics up to 1915.
- (2) His metaphysics of pragmatism (now 100 years old), seems a good starting point and a belief of mine (change forever is the law).
- (3) Science seems to have answered the metaphysical question (origin of universe), but how far human lens and tools filter/ create human understanding is not yet resolved.
- (4) Regrettably I cannot find bearing of Dewey’s metaphysics on *Democracy and Experience*, except that all political systems are products of history. Institutions gain existence by serving functions of status quo and change.
- (5) It appears John Dewey’s ideas in psychology and education were all in place by 1914: *Psychology* (1886), *RAC* (1896), *Pedagogic Creed* (1896), *Mental Development* (1900), *School and Society* (1899), *Child and Curriculum* (1902), *How We Think* (1909), *School of Tomorrow* (1914). It only awaits *Democracy and Education* (1915) and *Human Nature and Conduct* (1918) to put them in a final systemic touch.
- (6) His philosophy is still developing:  
  
*Kant* (1884), *Philosophic Method* (1887), *Ethics* (1888), *Studies in Logical Theory* (1903), *Postulate* (1905), *Darwin* (1909), *Introduction* (1916). By 1916, his metaphysics has developed with a broad shape and some themes: change, experience, pragmatism. It awaits, *Experience and Nature* (1925) to be fully-blown. But the basic ideas are here: how organisms and environment interact in a changing universe of unpredictable existence, a pervasive process and events with qualities, plus how humans consciously experience and live in it.