

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Title: John Dewey's *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (1909)

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Summary/ Abstract: This is a summary of an introductory paper on John Dewey's *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*. Prof. Li also offers a commentary.

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Douglas Browning:**Introduction on *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* by John Dewey**

The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy was a talk given by Dewey in 1909 at Columbia University in the 50th Anniversary of the publication of *Origin of Species*.

(A) Browning's Summary

Browning picked 6 themes and one final remark by Dewey.

- (1) Darwin's evolution proposed change, which is attacking 2000 years of philosophy based on fixity.

The conceptions that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge for two thousand years, the conceptions that had become the familiar furniture of the mind, rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final; they rested upon treating change and origin as signs of defect and unreality. In laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the *Origin of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics and religion. (MW.4.3; 5)

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- (2) The transitional, tentative nature of new philosophy.
- (3) A new metaphysics of change, process and indeterminacy.
- (4) Focus of inquiry: the specific, special, particular, concrete, existent.

Interest shifts . . . to the question of how *special changes* serve and defeat *concrete purposes*; . . . to the *particular intelligences* which things are even now shaping; shifts from an ultimate goal of good to the *direct increments* of justice and happiness that intelligent administration of *existent conditions* may beget and that present carelessness or stupidity will destroy or forego. (MW.4.11; 10, italics mine)

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- (5) Intelligence is inquiry: application of general, generic tools to specific concrete problems:

“The role of intelligence is precisely that of engagement upon method in a responsible manner, and since method is at the center of the new philosophy, intelligence is the pivot upon which not merely the achievement of knowledge but the very betterment of our lives turns. It is not a pre-Darwinian Reason, with a capital R but a down-in-the-trenches, sweat-stained intelligence that deserves our greatest energy and commitment.”

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R: Browning is too eager to distinguish pre-Darwinian Descartes's reason from Dewey inquiry. The distinction is more apparent; Descartes believed and employed reason, so did Dewey, but with growth of knowledge, Dewey has more information, findings and becomes less ignorant.

- (6) Values lie on life experience, not universal nor fixed.

“that in contrast to the traditional view according to which because it is assumed that values are universal, the ends of human good are fixed, and “the meaning of special occurrences depend upon something that once and for all lies behind them” (MW.4.12; 10), it follows that our awareness of such values cannot derive from changing and particularized experience, Dewey's view is that positive values, goods, and meanings as well as negative values, evils, and failures of meaning are simply and straightforwardly experienced in our lives as we live through them, specifically and day by day.

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Final Remark

Philosophy is for real life problems and solution.

In a memorable passage in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” an essay published seven years after the Darwin collection, Dewey repeated this plea: “Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men” (MW.10.46).

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(B) Other Essays Related to Knowledge, Truth and Experience

These are philosophical essays written in Dewey's early Columbia years. It had received lots of commentaries and Dewey answered them. One has to decipher the use of philosophical terms within a context in 1910s before getting a thorough understanding.

- Immediate experience
- Cognitive experience
- Intellectualism (Bradley)
- Experimental knowledge

It requires further review.

(C) Dewey's Claims in *The Postulate of Immediate Experience*

In the essay, Dewey makes several fundamental claims, the most important of which may be summarized as follows:

1. The postulate of immediate empiricism: the things that we immediately experience *are* what they are experienced as.
2. A first clarification of (1): what is revealed in immediate experience as it is experienced is *real*.
3. A second clarification of (1): every immediate experience and every thing that is immediately experienced is *determinate*.
4. Every knowing or experience of truth is a case of immediate experience, but it is not the case that every immediate experience is a knowing or an experience of truth.
5. In the course of inquiry, what is experienced at any stage is no more or no less *real* than anything else experienced at any other stage, but what is experienced at the successful conclusion of inquiry is *truer* than what was experienced in earlier stages.
6. The *meaning* of any term is what it is experienced as.

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(D) Commentary

- (1) It is clear that by 1910s Dewey has come of age in formulating his philosophy. One of his major themes is that the old philosophy (for 2000 years) is wrong, based on fixed reality and truth. It requires an overhaul. He thus wrote *Reconstruction of Philosophy* (1921).
- (2) According to Dewey, Darwin gave impetus to the idea of evolution and change so the dismantling of fixity in philosophy. My view is that Dewey simply rode the Darwinian bandwagon for his pragmatist philosophy, which is a new direction in early 20th century.

(3) Dewey's philosophy must be understood in context:

- Neo-Kantian idealism
- Humean-millian sensationalism
- Santayananian materialism
- Russellian logicist
- Logical atomist
- Critical / new realism
- intellectualism

(4) But evolution theory has moved on to DNA research and neuroscience; science is now able to give a theory of reality and neuroscience / AI can give a theory of knowledge!