

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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John Dewey's Pragmatism and Theory of Knowledge

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Summary/ Abstract: This paper outlined John Dewey's pragmatism and theory of knowledge during his early Columbia Years (1905 – 1916). Prof. Li also gave a review on its present-day relevance.

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Dewey's Pragmatism and Theory of Knowledge During Early Columbia Years (1905- 1916)

(A) Dewey's Pragmatism

- (1) His view can be termed "instrumentalism or pragmatism", instrumentalism in that ideas serve as function/ instrument for understanding and pragmatism in that action mediates an idea and the outcome of fact. It developed in his early Columbia years and went beyond Post-Kantianism.
- (2) During that period, John Dewey had a few papers:
 - (a) *The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism* (1905)
 - (b) *Reality as Experience* (1906)
 - (c) *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (1909)

At the same time, he has outlined his views in *How We Think*:

Idea → Fact → Inquiry → Action

- (3) Idea postulates something out there conceived by the mind. By inquiry and judgment, man act on them and transcends them into facts, similar to a plan carried out to become some realized outcome with consequences:

Within the context of inquiry, it is obvious that the "fact" to which an idea, as plan of action, refers is the consequences it hopes to bring about. Literally, as Dewey pointed out, the term "fact" refers to something done, accomplished, secured; it has an element of assurance and conviction. It is, therefore, the logical antithesis of idea, guess, hypothesis. In a sense, then, the "fact" or "object" transcends the idea just as traditional epistemology maintains. But this transcendence is a practical transcendence, not the ontological one that intellectualist theories of knowledge claim. The fact transcends or lies beyond the idea in the same way as the achieved consequences of a plan lie beyond the plan before it is put into operation. There is a sense, too, in which the "fact" is represented by the idea just as orthodox theory of knowledge holds. But this representation is a practical one, not the pictorial or copy one of the intellectualists. Ideas represent facts, said Dewey, "in the sense in which a signature, for legal purposes, represents a real person in a contract..... They are symbols, in short, and are known and used as such." (Dykhuizen, 1973: 131)

- (4) Action changes "reality" and "creates "facts". "Fact" is not ready-made reality, but the outcome of action and its interpretation. It is through action that ideas transform into facts and create knowledge, according to pragmatism:

When the “idea” is taken as a plan of action and the “fact” is regarded as the consequences of the plan put to work, at hand is a solution to the problem that has always troubled traditional epistemologies: how idea and fact come together so as to result in valid knowledge. From the point of view of functional logic, the passage from idea to fact is effected not by some mysterious or miraculous epistemological leap from one ontological realm to another as in traditional theories of knowledge, but through action. The idea as plan of action, if put to work and if successful, is the new concrete, factual situation it aimed to bring about; it is recognized as such. (Dykhuizen, 1973: 131).

(B) Dewey’s Pragmatism

Based on Dykhuizen’s lucid account, easier to follow (Dykhuizen: 133-4):

(1) Criticism of rationalism and empiricism on “a priori truth”

Dewey’s theory of knowledge also undertakes to give an empirical and naturalistic account of what he called “the machinery of universals, axioms, a priori truths, etc.” Traditional rationalism has always regarded these as innate, intuitive, or, like Kant and the post-Kantians, as *a priori*, transcendental categories of the mind to which the material of knowledge must adjust if valid—that is, if universal and necessary knowledge is to result. But rationalism has never been able to explain the precise mechanism by which the material of knowledge—sensations, feelings, images, etc.—and the *a priori* forms of thought get together so as to yield valid knowledge. Traditional empiricism has always viewed these principles and axioms as originating in experience, as being generalizations or summaries of how men have thought in the past. But empiricism has never been able to explain why these principles or forms of thought should hold equally well for future thought.

(2) Dewey’s position: empiricism

Dewey’s position is to take “a priori” in the context of inquiry, making it empirical and naturalistic.

Dewey argued that when axioms, principles, *a priori* truths are examined within the context of inquiry, they are found to function as the principles or rules of procedure by which men carry on the more distinctly “mental” phases of the inquiry process. They guide men in weighing, comparing, and classifying data, in inferring hypotheses, and in working out the bearings or implications for action of the suggested hypothesis. These principles, rules, canons of investigation, Dewey declared, have evolved in the course of past inquiries, becoming established ways of human thinking because they have proved helpful in past inquiries and give promise of being equally useful in present and future inquiries that retain the same general pattern. “Their value,” said Dewey, “is teleological and experimental, not fixedly ontological”. When certain of these principles are referred to as “eternal” truths, this “does not indicate a property inherent in the idea as intellectualized existence, but denotes a property of use and employment.” The reason that knowledge resulting from reflection and experimental inquiry has the universality and necessity generally associated with valid knowledge is that the process of inquiry that produces such knowledge is strictly controlled and systematized by principles and rules of procedure adopted by thinkers and experimenters everywhere.

R: When rationalism asserts “a priori”, empiricism asserts experience. Now John Dewey asserts inquiry, its mental phases and process. It asserts teleological and experimental value, rejects ontological stance. John Dewey did not assert universal truth; he only asserts truth in use, thus a trimmed-down position. Even so it is an assertion, with fallible assumptions of cultural universality. Chinese don’t carry inquiry the European way.

On the other hand, Dewey asserts universal principles of thinking of experimenters and procedures of investigation. This is challenged by Thomas Kuhn.

- (3) John Dewey acknowledges the limits of human knowledge. The knowing process must be limited to the inquiry process.

.....his conviction that the knowing process must be limited to the inquiry process and that knowledge is to be exclusively identified with the outcome of inquiry. Such knowledge seizes upon the structural, quantitative, and relational aspects of things, giving the power to predict and control. (Dykhuizen, 1973: 135)

- (4) Sensations and perceptions have no knowledge status.

Sensations, perceptions, feelings, and images taken by themselves obviously do not do this; they therefore cannot be viewed as instances of knowing. They are, rather, cases of having, underdoing, enjoying, enduring—“simply natural events having, in themselves (apart from a *use* that may be made of them), no more knowledge status or worth than, say, a shower or a fever.” (Dykhuizen, 1973: 135)

- (5) Inquiry gives cognitive value to immediate experience.

For an immediate experience to have any cognitive value, said Dewey, it must play a role within inquiry. When viewed within the context of inquiry, such immediate experiences as sensations, perceptions, feelings, and images are found to function as stimuli, guides, signs, checks, controls. A smell, for example, taken by itself and apart from inquiry, has no cognitive standing. It is simply an event, occurrence, happening. But when it is taken as a sign that a rose is near, when at the same time, perhaps, it stimulates inquiry to test whether this is so, the smell functions cognitively. (Dykhuizen, 1973: 135)

R: Seen in this way, John Dewey accepts a huge bulk of “reality” we do not know. It is no more noumenal world/ phenomenal world distinction. We know only the part of the world through our action (sensation, perception, interpretation, observation.....). We are part of it and change it.

(C) My Review and Present-day Relevance

- (1) It can be seen that Dewey wrestled with the issue of subject/ object, subjective vs. objective, fact with ideas in his youthful years. He is not satisfied with rationalism and empiricism and

proposed pragmatism to resolve them as seen in above (B(1), B(2)).

(2) He argued that rationalism cannot explain mechanism of knowledge, according to Dykhuizen:

But rationalism has never been able to explain the precise mechanism by which the material of knowledge—sensations, feelings, images, etc.—and the a priori forms of thought get together so as to yield valid knowledge. (Dykhuizen, 1973: 133)

(3) The mechanism of knowledge is no more the problems of the rationalist. In the 20th century, the burden falls on cognitive psychologists and neural scientists. When the mechanism and processing knowledge goes inside the brain, we have made impressive findings in:

- Neural network
- Neural structure
- Cognitive structure
- Underlying semantics (analytic pragmatism, logical expressivism, semantic inferentialism)

(4) Whether we understand knowledge or not, we try to minick it, and represent it. The impressive result is symbolic logic, binary operation, computer and AI.

(5) It is threatening to note that, Dewey's cornerstone, human inquiry, can be minicked and taken up by machines. AI can prove geometric theorems and play chess. Humans' role in knowledge creation may be diminishing. We are facing this new challenge in a new century.