A History of Philosophy
65 John Dewey
By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Before we get to John Dewey, let me just round out what we were saying about American pragmatism generally and William James in particular. We were seeing some similarities between Whitehead's process philosophy and James' kind of pragmatism. We'll find more still in John Dewey.

But similarities because of their rejection of Descartes and foundationalism, because of their concern for the primacy of concrete experience rather than some artificial, abstract view of what experience is, such as you find in John Locke. The organic model, where individual events are all interrelated into one whole process, is what I think is common between pragmatism and Whitehead. The big difference between the two traditions is the methodological naturalism of the pragmatists.

Begun by Charles Sanders Peirce, you remember the handout and his conception of the fixation of belief, but it is also pretty explicit in William James when he talks of pragmatism as a method of settling philosophical disputes. How? Oh, essentially by checking the empirical consequences of a theory. Do they occur? It's a validation by experimental confirmation of a hypothesis, which is the notion of scientific method that Peirce had.

So James is bringing that into philosophy. It means then that philosophy is going to be limited to what has significance for concrete experience, for what has practical consequences. And James had published a book under the title Radical Empiricism.

Radical Empiricism. The point being that John Locke wasn't radical enough. And in Radical Empiricism, he operates, you see, with a pragmatic theory of meaning.

The only meaningful disputes are those that have practical consequences. Pragmatic theory of meaning. And so he refuses to discuss any issue related to substratum or substance, mind, matter, and so forth.

It's unrelated to experience, makes no difference. Similarly, he refuses to get into debates over metaphysical modism versus metaphysical pluralism, materialism versus idealism. And you begin to wonder if the whole range of theoretical issues in philosophy is being abandoned.

Well, it's this sort of thing, the Radical Empiricism theory of meaning, which I think underlay the comment I mentioned to you last time from one of my graduate professors introducing a seminar, who said that to his mind, pragmatism and positivism both amount to the same thing and both of them are dead-end streets.

Because they both have a theory of meaning, the pragmatic theory of meaning and then the positivist theory of meaning that we'll be seeing later, which restricts what is mentally significant, cognitively significant, to what has certain kinds of empirical consequences of a verifiable sort, you see. And here in James, it's radical pragmatism.

In the positivists, it's what Ayer called the elimination of metaphysics. You'll read Ayer's chapter by that title when we get into positivism. So James then has that note.

This tendency to look for empirical consequences, to verify by empirical consequences, comes out in an essay of his called The Will to Believe, which you're likely to read in Philosophy of Religion, for instance. What James is doing is responding to a piece by an earlier writer, W. K. Clifford, a piece called The Ethics of Belief, in which Clifford argued that if there is not a weight of evidence for one view rather than another, a weight of argument, then it's morally irresponsible to make a decision. You should withhold judgment.

There's the old evidentialist line of John Locke, you see. You have to proportion your belief to the evidence. And if there is no greater degree of evidence for one than another, that's significant, then withhold assent.

William James responded in his work on The Will to Believe that withholding assent isn't always possible. There are some momentous options and choices that are forced on us in the realities of life. Concrete experience.

So in the absence of that evidentialist demand, how are you going to decide? You see? And his point is that you ask yourself, in terms of the consequences of the two beliefs, for concrete experience, which, for James, with his psychological background, means for your psychological well-being. You see? So that if one belief promises more for you psychologically than the other, then that is sufficient grounds for exercising the will to believe. You see? The voluntary assent.

That has stood, that essay has stood as one of the classic repudiations of the evidentialist demand of John Locke. You see? The other is, I think, the thing coming out of the Scottish realist influence on contemporaries of ours like Alvin Plantinga, who says to the evidentialist demand, I don't see any reason to believe that. In other words, where's the evidence for the evidentialist demand? Nothing.

Because he's trying to say there are certain beliefs that come so naturally, spontaneously, we really have no choice but to withhold beliefs. So, William James, in that piece, you see his method at work. He has another essay in which he talks of tough and tender-minded philosophers.

Psychological differences, you see. So that if they pay off the cash value of a concrete experience, psychological. And so he thinks that tough-minded philosophers will believe some things.

They'll buy into empiricism and so on and so forth, determinism, and so forth. Tender-minded philosophers will believe other things. The whole personal context of belief.

Now, while that sounds as if it's pretty relativistic, the fact is, if you're looking at the psychology of belief, the nature of a personality does affect it. You know, I wonder if Kant's massive critique, that some of you have fallen in love with, could ever have been written by a California Hippie. You see, that was the work of a Prussian bachelor, whose life was so organized that the neighbors set their clocks by when he walked down the street to his university.

And the laid-back California lifestyle would hardly produce that sort of work. Well, those of you who take the Kant seminar next year with my friend Stu Hackett will see similarities between his type of psychological make-up and the critique of Fureisen. I mean, dear Stu, he's so organized.

Utterly, meticulously, when he went to India to study Hindu philosophy some years ago, he almost had a nervous breakdown because they were so disorganized. The relationship between psychology and personality is a fascinating thing. And of course, if you want to overcome that psychological dependency, obviously, you need some more universal points of reference.

You want to know what is generic human nature, you see, rather than what this particular type is. Keep in mind that the opposite of relative is universal. And there are many, many factors that influence what a person believes and thinks.

Some of them are idiosyncratic, different personality types. Some are cultural. Some are generically human, you see.

And to get beyond the relative to the universal, you have to get the generically human and what comports, what comes naturally for the generically human, which I take it is the sort of thing that Augustine was doing when he says about the heart being restless until, you see, he thinks that's generically him. Well, you will find similarities between that sort of thing and existentialism, some sorts of existentialism as well. The primacy of the practical, you see, involves human subjectivity, the whole person, our inwardness, as well as the consideration of objective factors.

And in James, particularly, that's evident. Well, maybe that's enough about James to illustrate what he's doing. Any comments, or are we ready for the big D? Dewey.

Okay. Dewey sounds fairly recent when I say he was born in 1859 and died in 1952. I think he's the first one of whom we've come past mid-century, 1952.

Dewey is representative not only of pragmatism, which is basically a method, a method of dealing with philosophical and other questions, but he's also representative of what I can, what I like to call, evolutionary naturalism. That is to say, he's a philosophical naturalist. Everything is explicable in terms of physical processes.

But the kind of naturalism he espouses is very much informed by Darwin's theory of natural selection. This evolutionary naturalism of his is a step from the evolutionary idealism in which he began philosophically, evolutionary idealism, with the notion of historical process unfolding to more and more complex forms of life, physical, social, cultural, to more and more concrete experience. Now, in this evolutionary naturalism of his, you find these three key concepts, which I think will help you to see very quickly what he's doing in the various topics he tackles in his philosophical writings.

And, of course, he tackles pretty well all of them. He tackles all of them in his Just in Reconstruction, the book you're reading. His concept of experience, first of all, is much closer to the concept you find in Whitehead and James than it is to the concept of experience in John Locke.

So, Whitehead, James, and Dewey are three of a kind, to a certain extent. Experience includes affective experience, the psychological, emotional. Well, that was the case with Whitehead and James.

But it also includes social and cultural experiences. And as you read his book, you perhaps wonder to yourself if he is influenced by writers in the sociology of knowledge, because he's talking about all of the social and cultural influences in the shaping of philosophy. In fact, if Whitehead is talking about the influence of natural science on philosophy, Dewey is talking about the influence of social change on philosophy.

And whichever one you think of, notice how vastly different that is from Descartes's stove-heated room, in which there are no influences from outside. The stove-heated room becomes symbolic of so much. The isolated individual and the privacy of his own mind, shutting out every external influence, historical or anything else.

Such an abstraction from life. Well, concrete experience, then, is a very, very broad sort of thing. He speaks of fluid experience.

Fluid experience. As if it's a constant flowing process of which you are hardly conscious, it's so fluid. I remember at the time I first read Dewey and came across

the notion of fluid experience, I had a 46 Dodge, which had what was then called fluid drive.

What was fluid drive? Well, I'm not quite sure, but it was, I think, a step towards automatic transmission, because the change was so much smoother that you were hardly conscious of changing gear, though you still changed it manually. Fluid drive. You're hardly conscious of going from one moment or one situation to another.

The one flows into the other. Fluid drive. Fluid experience for Dewey.

But fluid experience, which is really just a product of habit, habitual behaviors, habitual responses, is interrupted by what Dewey calls problem situations. Problem situation. And it's only problem situations that stir thought.

You see, the role of intelligence, of intellect, is in the resolution of problem situations. Otherwise, you go along habitually without thinking. You know, do you think about what you're doing when you drive? Or do you just really think about what to do when you get into a problem situation? I remember driving in Seattle.

And if you've ever driven in Seattle, you know there are some very steep hills with stop signs at the top. It's almost as bad as driving in some parts of San Francisco. You know, you've seen the pictures of the hill that goes round and round and round.

You know, they have ones that go up straight with stop signs at the top. Now, how do you normally behave that way if you grow up driving in flat pig country around here? Problem situation. You think of several alternatives, and then you can do what I've done on such occasions from time to time, pull on the emergency brake, and then push in the clutch and change gear.

And gradually release the emergency brake, hoping that you apply enough gas to get it over the top. Well, the point is that fluid experience is interrupted by problem situations that demand thought. You come up with ideas.

I know what I'll do. Hey, let's try that. And so it's experimental thinking.

You think, experimenting with ideas in order to resolve problems. Now, if you love looking for dialectical situations, a problem situation is a dialectical situation. There's a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis.

The thesis is the fluid experience that is interrupted by the antithesis in a problem situation, some threatening situation. Thesis, antithesis. And what you're looking for in coming up with the right idea is a synthesis that will enable you to embrace the thesis of the antithesis and move on to the next.

The synthesis becomes the thesis for the next. So the dialectic is right there. Well, intelligence then is problem solving in the course of habitual experience, which leads to his functionalist psychology.

Functionalist psychology is, in simple terms, the theory that all of our mental processes, psychological processes, are simply functions of bodily need, functions of biological need. So our desires are biologically based functions of an organism that's trying to adjust to its environment, trying to respond to something in the environment. Reason is a function of the organism that has developed, reflecting on how to adjust to the environment.

And sometimes that reason is involved in modifying desires in the light of what you find out about the problem situation. You don't need to worry. It's going to be all right.

Look and look and look and look at that. And growth is not a steady movement towards a fixed goal, but an ongoing evolutionary process in which various experiences are being incorporated into the ongoing experience, which is the self. Functionalist psychology.

And you can look at something of that in pages 83 to 86, for instance, pages five and six early on, where he insists that we are creatures of desire rather than of intellect, basically. Functionalist psychology. Okay, and that is where you begin to see underlying all of this, the concept of experience and the psychology, his theory of natural selection.

You'll find in chapter three that he explicitly rejects any fixity of species because he recognizes that the traditional view of fixity of species is simply an extension of Aristotle's fixed forms, fixed essences. I think, frankly, he's right that fixity of species is simply a continuation of an Aristotelian tradition. He rejects any real universals, and in rejecting real universals, he rejects intrinsic final causes of a fixed sort.

Talos. There are no fixed ends to pursue in ethics or anything else. There are no fixed laws of thought.

How we think is simply a tool for adjustment in a changing world, and the laws of thought have arisen as tools that have proved successful in that adjustment. So, his point is, then, that philosophy is not pure theory. It arises in a practical context.

It feeds back into a practical context. Concrete experience is its entire matrix, and not theory for theory's sake. Well, those three concepts, I think, sum up what you can call, if you like, the theoretical core of Dewey's thinking.

I have to be careful how I say theoretical with Dewey, but the theoretical core of his thinking. This is the grand hypothesis that generates lesser hypotheses in regard to epistemology, philosophy of mind, etc., etc., for which he thinks there is experimental confirmation. Applications.

All right. Run through those. We can do it rather quickly.

I already said that he talks of experimental thinking, and I don't need to say why again. It's simply the application of the scientific method to everything. And so, he talks of naturalizing epistemology.

In fact, to this day, you have come across books and philosophical articles about naturalized epistemology, and the idea of naturalizing epistemology really begins with Dewey, you see. He wants an epistemology that, rather than prescribing how we should know, instead of a prescriptive epistemology, he wants one that describes the nature of inquiry, if you like, in its natural environment, which is the practical demands of concrete experience. Naturalized epistemology, which means that epistemology is going to be descriptive of the way in which inquiry operates according to the theory of natural selection.

So, the evolutionary thing informs what he's doing. Accordingly, he embraces the operationalist view of scientific concepts very explicitly. In 1925, Percy Bridgman, the Harvard physicist, published a book called The Logic of Physics, in which he had developed the operationalist view, which I think had been hinted at by others before, but it was Bridgman who developed it systematically, and Dewey adopted it.

So, operationalism is simply the view that the meaning of a theoretical concept in science has to do with what is empirically observable when you perform certain operations. It's an operational meaning, an operational definition, an operational definition. Yeah, we find all the time in talking about how to, how we should go about things, people will come up with theories, with proposals, educational theories, curricular ideas, and the question is, how do you operationalize it? The same is true with political policy.

A candidate might come forth with some wonderful idea, and then somebody asks, now how are you going to operationalize this? Now, you see, at work here is the pragmatic theory of meaning, William James, because if you want to know what a theoretical concept means, you ask what its practical consequences are, what happens when you operationalize it? So, operationalism is simply an application of the pragmatic theory of meaning to philosophy of science. The example that I like is from mineralogy, where Mohr's hardness scale, that is to say the, talking about the hardness of minerals, the concept of hardness, Mohr's hardness scale supposedly tells you about the hardness of minerals, at least the relative hardness of one mineral in comparison with another. That's all it does tell you.

Why? Because in that operation of using Mohr's hardness scale, what you do is to rub two minerals against each other, and the one that leaves a mark is by definition harder than the one that is marked. So, what is hardness? Relative scratchability. That's an operational definition of hardness.

It's not telling you what hardness does. No, take it back. It's not telling you what hardness is.

Nothing at all about the essence of hardness. It's about what hardness does when you perform a certain operation. So, operationalism is then in philosophy of science, and this obviously is akin to the instrumentalist view of science.

Instrumentalism is the view that science doesn't tell us about the nature of reality. It's simply giving us useful knowledge that we can use for further inquiry or for developing applications of science. Now, you ask science majors why they go into science, why they're going to have scientific careers.

You'll find an awful lot of them will say, Well, because of what I can do with it. You see, not just earning a living, but doing medicine, doing engineering, doing environmental work, and so forth. The applied science.

Now, instrumentalism is saying that this is really what science is about. You see, scientific theories shouldn't be taken to tell us about the nature of reality. Scientific theories are simply useful instruments for what we call applied sciences.

Now, you're getting into the question of what the relationship is between theory and practice. Theory and practice. The way some people talk about a liberal arts education, you would think that education was of purely instrumental value, not concerned with the real essence of things, what it is to be human, what's the nature of reality.

So, instrumentalism is regarded as a version of anti-realism in science. You see, scientific realism is the view that science tells us about reality. Scientific anti-realism is the view that science does not tell us about reality.

And Dewey is one of the main contributors to scientific anti-realism, in that sense. But notice his reasons for that. Knowledge is a function of a biological organism adjusting to its environment.

In adjusting to an environment that poses problems, you don't need to know about the essence of reality. You don't need an excessive bundle of theory. All you need is some ideas about how to resolve the problem.

And so, rather than talking about traditional formal logic, he speaks of experimental logic, the logic of experimental thinking. He has a book entitled Logic, which has no syllogisms in it. Logic is about experimental thinking, you see.

He has a little book, very pot-level, How We Think, which really says how we think at this pot way, this problem-solving way. All right, you're driving along the highway. Problem situation.

There's a farm wagon pulling out of a side road ahead of you onto the road. What are you going to do? Ideas flash through your mind. Break, number one.

Swerve, number two. Get off the road altogether, number three. Throw up your hands and hope the airbag opens, number four.

You know? Now, in normal behavior, no sooner do those ideas come into your mind than one of them looms large as the thing you're going to do. Why? You draw on funded experience. Yeah, you have a whole fund of experience from having driven for a while, you see, from past episodes.

You extrapolate to this one. So what you do is to jam on the brakes and swerve and get off the highway all at once. Now, maybe some situations where you really have to experiment with the ideas.

And he tells of a case where somebody is going for a job interview. The path leads through a wooded area, across a bridge over a creek, and thence into town. Well, the guy gets to the bridge and finds it's broken down.

It's out. No bridge. What's he going to do? If he goes back and around by the road, he'll be late for his job interview.

If he works his way upstream in the hope of finding another bridge, that's a possibility. He experiments in his mind with that, mental experiments. Let's see, how far is that other bridge up there? How long would it take me to get there, and then, when I've gotten over there, get back? Okay, mental experiments.

Another alternative is to try a long jump across the creek. Well, he's not sure if that'll work, so what he does is practice a few long jumps on the side to see how far he can go. Do you think that'll do it? Well, let's try anyway.

And experimental confirmation. What is an idea? You see, you come up with an idea. What is an idea? It's not some representation, some copy in secondary quality terms of some primary quality object.

No. An idea is a hypothesis. It's a plan for action, tentative.

And you draw on past experience, you experiment with it to see if it'll resolve the problem. And a good idea is one that works. How do you make it work? By putting it into action.

What is it to verify? Verification is making it true. You make it true. And it's only true when you get to your job interview on time, without mud all over you.

So, experimental thinking. This is the way he talks about epistemology. He repudiates certainty for practical purposes.

He repudiates spectator empiricism. John Locke. Tabula rasa.

Passively receiving ideas. Nonsense. He repudiates any subject-object dualism, you know, where the mind is out here gaining mental representations of what's out there.

No, he repudiates all of that. Because they all divorce thought from action. Theory from practice.

It is the utility of an idea that matters. Truth is not some objective thing fixed for all time, independent of the observer. Truth is simply the utility, the workability of an idea.

Okay, so that's the application to logic epistemology. Clear enough? See why he's going that way? Philosophy of mind. Well, little more to be said after the note about functionalist psychology.

Plainly, he is rejecting any substance theory of mind or soul. He has no, at least he sees no mind-body problem if the mind is not a separate entity. All he's prepared to talk about in relation to philosophy of mind is various what we call mental functions.

Mental is an adjective. That is to say, certain biological functions that involve consciousness are all that the word mental refers to. Value theory.

Here, he has a number of important writings. He has a fairly early book called The Theory of Valuation. And then another called Human Nature and Conduct.

And here he regards values simply as ideas. Values are ideas. In what sense? Well, values are ideal outcomes.

Ideal outcomes that emerge in problem situations. That is to say, you don't value avoiding that farm wagon until the situation arises. Then you need, biologically you need, to avoid it.

And out of the biological need is the valuing. Dewey's not interested in value in the sense of what is intrinsically and eternally valuable. He's only interested in value in the sense of what is actively valued.

Values are what is valued. And you value what you value in problem situations. You don't realize it otherwise.

In other words, values are ideas that give rise to other ideas about resolving the problem situation. There are no intrinsically good ends. No intrinsically good ends.

You remember how Aristotle defined the good as intrinsically good. The supreme good embraces all other goods. Intrinsically good, not good for the sake of something else.

Well, what Dewey wants to insist on is a means-end continuum. That is to say, the end, the ideal, involves in itself the means to the end. But when that end is achieved, remember it becomes the thesis for a new antithesis.

So that end itself is a means simply to further ends. There is nothing that is just an end, an intrinsic end, a fixed end. When you get there, you've got there, that's it, period.

It's never a period. It's all process. So there are no moral absolutes.

There is no supreme good. Values emerge with unsatisfied needs. Values are instruments for survival.

Values are not, in some intrinsic sense, moral goods. They are non-moral goods. Survival is a non-moral thing.

Nothing. And yet it becomes loaded with value in certain problem situations. Ethics, then, has to do with how to solve problems and achieve what we desire.

How to solve problems and achieve what we desire. This is an instrumentalist ethic. He calls it that, instrumentalism in ethics.

And Dewey's work on ethics was one of the major factors that fed into the development two or three decades ago of situation ethics. This was popularized in a book by that title, written by Joseph Fletcher, unrelated to another Fletcher of fame around here. Joseph Fletcher at Harvard.

A book on situation ethics. Maintained that, yes, every moral situation has to be addressed individually. There are no general moral rules.

No fixed guidelines. Universal moral principles. Each situation has to be resolved in a way that is satisfying to the persons involved.

He added a few more ingredients, but that's the pragmatic ingredient in it. And it's very plain, Dewey's thing with a few existential notes involved. So, his value theory at that point.

Education? Yeah, in education, you'd want to look at his book, Democracy and Education. Democracy and Education. He sees the function of education as learning to live.

Learning to live. That is to say, education provides you with the necessary instrumentalities for problem-solving. For problem-solving.

Learning is not so that you have things to contemplate all your life. Reading Plato. Melton.

Whatever. Learning is not an attempt to instill fixed values. The heritage of values from the past.

No, that's not the value of learning. That's classical education. Education is rather a preparation for successful adjustment to the environment.

Problem-oriented. Student-oriented. Rather than being discipline-oriented.

Or historically oriented. Or just intellectually oriented. Okay.

I think in American education, we've since Dewey developed sort of a combination of classical traditions and his emphasis on learning that provides life skills. And for reasons, I think, that our view of things has tended to incorporate some of Dewey's concerns without going the whole hog. We still have fixed points of reference.

Application to religion. And here, the important book of his is called Common Face. Common Face.

If there are no fixed truths or values, then religion isn't simply an attempt to transmit certain truths and values. What is it? It's not about static ideals. Religion is again a tool for life adjustment.

The same theme runs all the way through. He is not so much interested in a religion or different religions as in the adjective religious, which refers to a quality, an attitude to life. A religious attitude is one of loyalty to the ideals of the community.

Loyalty to the ideals of the community. Now, why that? Well, two reasons. One is the etymology of the word religion, which means to re-tie.

Or if you like, reunite. And so religion has a function of reuniting individuals within a community by virtue of loyalty to certain intangible ideals of a conventional or traditional sort. Not fixed any two.

In other words, religion is important because of its instrumentality. Not because it's true. But because of its instrumentality.

And in this context, the word God is not a name of a being, but is a symbol for the ideals that the community perceives. The pursuit of God. The pursuit of the ideals of the community.

And he would argue that this is the lowest common denominator in all historical religions. The lowest common denominator of all historical religions. He's not singling out a belief; he's singling out an attitude.

And after all, religions are practiced as a community. United around the concerns of that faith. So, what Dewey is saying about religion is really the essence of religious humanism.

And Dewey was one of the original signers of the Humanist Manifesto, which in the 1930s declared that the universe is self-existing, man is a part of nature, and has emerged as a result of a continuous process. Men's religious culture is the product of a gradual development due to interaction with the natural environment. Science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values.

Religious humanism considers the complete realization of human personality, satisfaction, and so forth, to be the end of life. And so forth. And I have copies of that Humanist Manifesto, which you can pick up as you leave, which you can read as you will.

Very interesting document. The secular humanism of the 70s and 80s is simply the later descendant of this. Religious humanism is a naturalistic religion.

Get it? Naturalistic religion. Where God means what Dewey says. Namely, it's a symbol for ideals.

No more. And very often it's a naturalistic humanism which you find nowadays in Unitarian circles. Unitarianism historically was a kind of theism.

You see, as against Trinitarianism. But increasingly Unitarianism and the unity movement are simply naturalistic humanism. With the espousal of certain values.

Actually, the moral values and social values espoused are often very fine. So that it's the religious dimension that is the naturalistic element. Well, okay, we'll pick up on this next time.

Some commentary on John Dewey.