

History of Philosophy

65 John Dewey

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Abstract:

This text provides an overview of **American pragmatism**, focusing specifically on the transition from **William James** to **John Dewey**. The author highlights how these thinkers rejected traditional **foundationalism** and abstract philosophy in favor of **concrete experience** and **methodological naturalism**. A significant portion of the discussion examines Dewey's **evolutionary naturalism**, which views human intelligence and reason as biological tools for **problem-solving** rather than means for discovering absolute truths. The sources further detail how Dewey applied this **instrumentalist** approach to fields such as **education, ethics, and religion**, redefining them as functions of social and environmental adjustment. Ultimately, the text illustrates how this movement shifted the focus of philosophy from theoretical metaphysics to the **practical utility** of ideas within a changing world.

Briefing Document:

The Philosophical Framework of John Dewey and American Pragmatism

Executive Summary

This briefing document synthesizes the philosophical contributions of John Dewey and his predecessors in the American Pragmatist tradition, specifically William James and Charles Sanders Peirce. Central to this school of thought is the rejection of Cartesian foundationalism and the "spectator empiricism" of John Locke. Instead, Pragmatism emphasizes the primacy of concrete experience and the methodological application of scientific inquiry to philosophical disputes.

John Dewey's work is characterized by "evolutionary naturalism," a perspective heavily informed by Darwinian theory. Dewey views the human mind and its functions not as separate metaphysical entities but as biological tools developed

for environmental adjustment. His philosophy transforms logic into "experimental thinking," ethics into "instrumentalism," and religion into "religious humanism." The ultimate takeaway of Dewey's system is that ideas are hypotheses for action, and truth is defined by the practical utility and workability of those ideas in resolving "problem situations."

Foundations of American Pragmatism

American Pragmatism serves as a bridge between process philosophy and methodological naturalism. It originated with Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of the "fixation of belief" and was expanded by William James and John Dewey.

Key Divergences from Traditional Philosophy

- **Rejection of Foundationalism:** Pragmatists discard the search for an absolute, unshakable foundation for knowledge (e.g., Descartes).
- **Critique of Abstract Empiricism:** They argue that traditional empiricists like John Locke provided an artificial, abstract view of experience rather than a concrete one.
- **Methodological Naturalism:** Pragmatism employs the scientific method—validation through experimental confirmation of hypotheses—to settle philosophical disputes.

Radical Empiricism (William James)

William James introduced "Radical Empiricism," which asserts that the only meaningful disputes are those with practical consequences for concrete experience.

- **The Pragmatic Theory of Meaning:** If a theory (such as substance, mind, or matter) makes no difference to experience, it is considered cognitively insignificant.
- **The Will to Believe:** James argued against the "evidentialist demand" (the idea that one must withhold judgment if evidence is equal). In "momentous" life choices, James posited that if a belief promises psychological well-being, one has grounds for a "voluntary assent."

Dewey's Evolutionary Naturalism

Dewey shifted from evolutionary idealism to evolutionary naturalism, a view where all phenomena are explicable through physical processes and natural selection. His philosophy rests on three core pillars:

1. Broadened Concept of Experience

Unlike the isolated, private experience of Descartes, Dewey's "fluid experience" is a broad, constant process involving:

- **Affective Elements:** Psychological and emotional states.
- **Social and Cultural Influences:** The shaping of thought by the environment and community.
- **Fluidity vs. Problems:** Most life is a "fluid experience" governed by habit. Thought is only stirred when this flow is interrupted by a **problem situation**.

2. Functionalist Psychology

Dewey views mental processes as biological functions of an organism trying to adjust to its environment.

- **Desire vs. Intellect:** Humans are primarily creatures of desire; reason is a developed function used to modify desires and solve problems.
- **The Self:** Growth is an ongoing evolutionary process where new experiences are incorporated into the "self," rather than a movement toward a fixed goal.

3. Rejection of Fixity

Following Darwin, Dewey rejected the Aristotelian tradition of fixed species, essences, or "universals."

- **Laws of Thought:** These are not eternal truths but successful tools for adjustment.
 - **Final Causes:** Dewey denies the existence of fixed ends (*telos*) in ethics or any other field.
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Logic and Epistemology: Experimental Thinking

Dewey "naturalized" epistemology, moving it from a prescriptive field (how we *should* know) to a descriptive one (how inquiry *actually* operates in nature).

Concept Dewey's Definition

Idea	A hypothesis or a "plan for action"; it is tentative and drawn from funded experience.
Logic	The study of "experimental thinking" or problem-solving, rather than formal syllogisms.
Truth	Not an objective, fixed correspondence to reality, but the "utility" or "workability" of an idea.
Verification	The act of "making true" by putting an idea into action and achieving a successful resolution.

Operationalism and Instrumentalism

Dewey adopted **Operationalism**, the view that the meaning of a concept is defined by the operations performed to observe it (e.g., "hardness" is defined as relative scratchability).

Furthermore, he advocated for **Instrumentalism** in science, a form of anti-realism. In this view, scientific theories do not describe the "essence" of reality; they are merely useful instruments for further inquiry and applied science.

Value Theory and Instrumental Ethics

Dewey's ethics are entirely situational and process-oriented, rejecting the notion of intrinsic or supreme goods.

- **Values as Ideas:** Values are "ideal outcomes" that emerge specifically in response to unsatisfied biological or social needs.
- **The Means-End Continuum:** There are no "fixed ends." Every achieved end becomes a "means" or a "thesis" for the next situation in a continuous dialectic process.

- **Situation Ethics:** Dewey's influence led to the development of situation ethics, which maintains that moral situations must be addressed individually without the guidance of universal moral principles or absolutes.

Social Applications: Education and Religion

Progressive Education

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argued that the function of schooling is "learning to live."

- **Life Skills:** Education should provide instruments for problem-solving rather than instilling fixed values or historical heritage.
- **Student-Oriented:** The focus is on successful adjustment to the environment rather than a discipline-oriented or intellectualist approach.

Religious Humanism

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey redefined religion through a naturalistic lens.

- **The Religious Attitude:** Not a set of dogmas, but a quality of "loyalty to the ideals of the community."
- **Symbolic God:** The word "God" does not refer to a supernatural being but is a symbol for the community's highest perceived ideals.
- **The Humanist Manifesto:** Dewey was a signatory of the 1930s Humanist Manifesto, which declared:
 - The universe is self-existing and man is a part of nature.
 - Science makes supernatural guarantees of human values unacceptable.
 - The end of life is the complete realization of human personality and satisfaction within a naturalistic framework.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Pragmatism of William James and John Dewey

This study guide examines the development of American pragmatism, focusing on the transition from the radical empiricism of William James to the evolutionary naturalism of John Dewey. It explores key themes such as the rejection of foundationalism, the primacy of concrete experience, and the application of scientific methodology to epistemology, ethics, and religion.

Short Answer Quiz

1. What is the "pragmatic theory of meaning" as defined by William James? The pragmatic theory of meaning asserts that the significance of a philosophical dispute or theory is determined by its practical, empirical consequences. According to James, if a theory has no impact on concrete experience or makes no practical difference, the debate surrounding it is essentially meaningless.

2. How does William James's "Radical Empiricism" differ from the traditional empiricism of John Locke? James argued that Locke was not "radical" enough because he relied on abstract, artificial views of experience, such as the *tabula rasa*. Radical Empiricism insists on the primacy of concrete, "fluid" experience, including the interrelatedness of events, rather than treating experience as a collection of isolated, passive mental representations.

3. Explain the "Will to Believe" as a response to W.K. Clifford's "Ethics of Belief." Clifford argued that it is morally irresponsible to believe anything without sufficient evidence; however, James countered that some "momentous" life choices are forced upon us where evidence is unavailable. In these cases, James argued that one is justified in exercising the "will to believe" based on which belief provides the best psychological well-being and practical results.

4. What characterizes John Dewey's "evolutionary naturalism"? Dewey's evolutionary naturalism is the view that all phenomena are explicable in terms of physical processes, specifically informed by Darwin's theory of natural selection. It represents a shift from his early evolutionary idealism to a framework where human

thought and social structures are seen as tools for biological and cultural adaptation.

5. How does Dewey distinguish between "fluid experience" and "problem situations"? "Fluid experience" describes the continuous, habitual flow of life where individuals act without conscious thought. This flow is interrupted by "problem situations"—dialectical moments of tension that demand the use of intelligence and experimental thinking to reach a resolution or synthesis.

6. Define "functionalist psychology" within Dewey's philosophical framework. Functionalist psychology posits that all mental and psychological processes are functions of biological needs. In this view, reason and desire are not abstract faculties but tools developed by the organism to adjust to its environment and resolve practical problems.

7. What is "operationalism" in the context of Dewey's philosophy of science? Adopted from Percy Bridgman, operationalism suggests that the meaning of a scientific concept is defined by the empirical observations that occur when specific operations are performed. For example, "hardness" is not an essence but is operationally defined by the "relative scratchability" of minerals when rubbed together.

8. How does Dewey's "instrumentalism" affect his view of scientific theories? Instrumentalism is a form of scientific anti-realism which holds that science does not describe the ultimate nature of reality. Instead, scientific theories are seen as useful instruments or tools for further inquiry and for developing practical applications in fields like medicine or engineering.

9. What is the "means-end continuum" in Dewey's value theory? Dewey rejected the idea of "fixed ends" or "supreme goods," arguing instead for a continuum where ends and means are inextricably linked. Once an "ideal outcome" (an end) is achieved, it immediately becomes a means (a thesis) for addressing the next problem situation in an ongoing process.

10. How does Dewey define "God" and "religion" in his work *A Common Faith*? Dewey viewed "religion" as a quality of experience—a "religious attitude" of loyalty to community ideals—rather than a set of dogmas. He redefined "God" not

as a being, but as a symbol for the intangible ideals of a community that unite individuals and aid in life adjustment.

Short Answer Quiz: Answer Key

Question Core Concept for Answer

- 1 Significance is found in empirical consequences and practical differences.
 - 2 Locke is abstract/passive; James is concrete/radical and focuses on the interrelatedness of process.
 - 3 Rejects Clifford's evidentialism; permits belief based on psychological well-being when evidence is absent.
 - 4 Naturalism informed by Darwinian natural selection; physical processes explain everything.
 - 5 Fluidity is habitual behavior; problem situations are the "antithesis" that sparks active intelligence.
 - 6 Mental processes are biological functions used for environmental adjustment.
 - 7 Concept meanings are tied to the results of specific performed operations (e.g., Mohr's scale).
 - 8 Science is a tool for application, not a description of the "essence" of reality.
 - 9 Rejection of moral absolutes; ends become means for future situations in a constant process.
 - 10 Religion is a community-uniting attitude; "God" is a symbol for shared human ideals.
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Essay Questions

1. **The Rejection of Cartesianism:** Discuss how the pragmatist rejection of Descartes's "stove-heated room" and foundationalism leads to a different understanding of the "isolated individual." Contrast this with the pragmatist emphasis on social, cultural, and biological influences.
2. **Experimental Logic vs. Formal Logic:** Analyze Dewey's transition from Aristotelian fixed forms and syllogisms to "experimental thinking." How does this shift reflect his belief that laws of thought are merely tools for adjustment in a changing world?
3. **Naturalized Epistemology:** Examine Dewey's argument for a "descriptive" rather than "prescriptive" epistemology. How does the theory of natural selection justify an inquiry-based approach to knowledge?
4. **Instrumentalism in Ethics and Education:** Evaluate Dewey's claim that education is "learning to live" rather than the "instillation of fixed values." How does his instrumentalist ethic—focusing on problem-solving—impact modern educational theory?
5. **Religious Humanism:** Critically analyze the "Humanist Manifesto" as the culmination of Dewey's naturalism. How does his "Common Faith" attempt to preserve the "religious" while explicitly rejecting the supernatural?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Anti-Realism (Scientific):** The view that scientific theories do not necessarily describe the nature of reality but are instead useful for prediction and practical application.
- **Concrete Experience:** The focus on the actual, "fluid" flow of life and interrelated events, as opposed to abstract or artificial philosophical definitions of experience.
- **Evidentialism:** The philosophical position, associated with John Locke and W.K. Clifford, that one should only believe something in proportion to the evidence provided.

- **Evolutionary Naturalism:** A philosophical framework where everything is explained through physical processes, heavily influenced by Darwinian natural selection and biological adaptation.
- **Fixation of Belief:** A concept from Charles Sanders Peirce regarding the method by which individuals settle upon and maintain their convictions.
- **Foundationalism:** The theory that knowledge must be built upon a foundation of certain, indubitable truths; a concept rejected by pragmatists.
- **Functionalist Psychology:** The theory that mental and psychological processes (like reason and desire) are biological functions that help an organism adjust to its environment.
- **Instrumentalism:** The perspective that ideas, theories, and even ethical values are tools (instruments) for problem-solving and survival rather than objective truths.
- **Methodological Naturalism:** The practice of seeking only natural explanations and checking the empirical consequences of theories as a means of settling disputes.
- **Operationalism:** The view that the meaning of a concept is defined by the empirical results of specific operations or tests (e.g., defining "hardness" by scratch-resistance).
- **Pragmatic Theory of Meaning:** The principle that the meaning of a concept or dispute lies in its practical, observable consequences in experience.
- **Radical Empiricism:** William James's approach to experience, which argues that the relations between things are as much a part of experience as the things themselves.
- **Religious Humanism:** A movement, supported by Dewey, that views the universe as self-existing and man as part of nature, treating "God" as a symbol for human community ideals.
- **Spectator Empiricism:** A term Dewey used to critique the traditional view (like Locke's) that the mind is a passive observer ("tabula rasa") receiving data from the outside world.

- **Will to Believe:** William James's argument that in cases of momentous, forced choices without sufficient evidence, one has the right to believe based on the practical/psychological benefits.