

History of Philosophy

66 Dewey's "Reconstructive Philosophy"

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes examines **John Dewey's Reconstruction in Philosophy**, highlighting the shift from **classical substance metaphysics** to a **process-oriented view of human nature**. Dewey replaces the traditional focus on **static essences and eternal truths** with a **functionalist psychology** that views humans as creatures of **desire and action**. By adopting **Francis Bacon's** notion that **knowledge is power**, Dewey argues that philosophy should function as an **instrumental tool for social problem-solving** rather than mere theoretical contemplation. He rejects **Platonic dualisms** and **fixed moral rules**, proposing instead a **situational ethic** where **truth is measured by its practical utility** in navigating an ever-changing environment. Ultimately, the text illustrates how Dewey's **evolutionary naturalism** transformed education and logic into methods for **effecting tangible change** in the human condition.

Briefing Document:

Analysis of Dewey's Reconstructive Philosophy

Executive Summary

John Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy* marks a fundamental departure from the classical philosophical tradition, advocating for a shift from a "substance-based" metaphysics to a "process-based" evolutionary naturalism. The core of this reconstruction is the redefinition of philosophy itself: moving away from a set of static, theoretical doctrines toward a reflective attitude aimed at resolving human conflicts and problem situations.

Critical Takeaways:

- **Human Nature as Process:** Dewey rejects the concept of a fixed rational soul or substance, viewing human beings instead as biological organisms

within a continuous process of experience driven by desire rather than pure intellect.

- **Knowledge as Power:** Borrowing from Francis Bacon, Dewey argues that knowledge is not the contemplation of unchanging essences but a tool (instrument) for effecting change in the human estate.
- **Experimental Logic:** Logic is reconstructed as "experimental thinking." Ideas are redefined as hypotheses or "plans for action," and truth is measured by "workability" or utility in satisfying situational needs.
- **Ethical Situationalism:** Dewey repudiates both fixed moral laws and traditional Utilitarianism. He focuses on future-oriented conflict resolution and the "fact-value continuum," where values arise naturally within problem situations.
- **Social Application:** The ultimate goal of this reconstruction is to apply scientific problem-solving techniques to social, political, and international upheavals.

Metaphysical Foundations: From Substance to Process

Dewey's reconstruction begins with a radical reassessment of human nature and reality, contrasting the classical tradition with modern evolutionary insights.

The Shift from Substance to Experience

- **Classical View:** Based on "substance" metaphysics, which posits unchanging, qualitatively static entities (e.g., the soul or matter) as the basis of reality.
- **Dewey's View:** Views the human as a "process of experience." This is rooted in evolutionary naturalism, where life is an ongoing development rather than a fixed essence.
- **The Role of Desire:** In Dewey's functionalist psychology, humans are primarily "creatures of desire" rather than intellect. Concrete experience is loaded with affective attitudes (hopes, fears) and physiological responses;

intellectual thought is merely a function developed to manage these experiences.

The Continuum of Experience

Dewey critiques the "atomistic" view of experience found in the empiricism of John Locke, where experience is made of isolated, simple ideas.

- **Internal Relatedness:** Dewey argues for a "causal continuum" in experience. There are no isolated atoms of thought; rather, experience is a biological continuum of activity adapted to an environment.
- **Passive vs. Active:** He rejects the "Macawber-like" view of the mind waiting for impressions. Instead, the organism acts on its surroundings according to its own structure.

The Nature of Knowledge: Power and Utility

The "watershed" moment in philosophical history, according to Dewey, is the distinction between contemplation and discovery.

Feature	Old Philosophy (Aristotelian)	New Philosophy (Baconian/Deweyan)
Goal	Contemplation of unchanging essences.	Exercising power to effect change.
Method	Abstraction and deductive reasoning.	Discovery and experimental problem-solving.
Structure	Demonstration and proof.	Logic as a tool for "the relief of the human estate."

Extension to Social Sciences

Dewey argues that while the technological revolution has successfully applied science to nature, it has not yet been systematically applied to human social problems. He envisions:

- **Conflict Resolution:** Politics should be viewed as a science of resolving conflicts rather than a branch of applied ethics based on eternal principles.

- **Ad Hoc Public Policy:** Moving from universal principles to specific means for resolving situational problems as they arise.

Logic and the Theory of Instrumentalism

Dewey reconstructs logic from a formal, deductive system into a method of "experimental thinking."

- **Ideas as Hypotheses:** Ideas are not fixed conceptions or dogmas; they are "plans for action" or instruments. An idea's value is found in its ability to reorganize experience and adjust the organism to its environment.
- **Truth as Workability:** Dewey adopts a pragmatic definition of truth. An idea is "true" if it functions effectively as a hypothesis to satisfy the desires of a given situation.
- **The "Highwayman" Analogy:** Dewey notes that the usefulness of a road (or an idea) is not measured by its use by a criminal, but by whether it actually functions as a means of transportation. Truth is "service in making just that contribution to reorganization" that the idea claims it can make.

Moral and Social Reconstruction

Dewey's moral philosophy is often confused with Utilitarianism, but he makes critical distinctions to separate his "Instrumentalist" ethics from the old empiricism.

Distinction from Utilitarianism

1. **Future vs. Past:** Utilitarians base moral rules on generalizations of past experience. Dewey focuses entirely on the future consequences of a specific hypothesis.
2. **Specific vs. General:** Utilitarians seek a "highest good" or supreme rule (e.g., the greatest happiness for the greatest number). Dewey views goods as situational and specific to the conflict at hand.
3. **Resolution vs. Rules:** Dewey rejects a morality of fixed rules in favor of a morality of problem-solving.

The Problem of Evil

Dewey dismisses the theoretical or logical problem of evil (reconciling evil with a good God) as "pragmatically meaningless" or "irrelevant." To him, the "real" problem of evil is practical: "What can we do about it?"

Educational and Contemporary Influence

Progressive Education

Dewey's reconstruction of reason as "problem-solving intelligence" transformed education:

- The classroom should be a site for exploring a "fund of ideas" to handle problem situations.
- The goal is to develop "practical intelligence" rather than the art of dialectic or abstraction.
- The past is studied not for eternal truths, but as a resource to avoid repeating mistakes.

Modern Pragmatism

The document identifies the ongoing influence of Dewey's thought in the work of contemporary philosophers:

- **W.V.O. Quine:** Developed a "naturalized epistemology" and the "Web of Belief," rejecting the traditional dichotomy between analytic and synthetic propositions.
- **Richard Rorty:** Utilized Deweyan pragmatism to critique "representationalism" (the "Mirror of Nature"). Rorty argues that because we cannot demonstrate absolute truth, philosophy should shift from a search for certainty to an "interesting conversation."

Study Guide:

A Study Guide to Dewey's Reconstructive Philosophy

This document provides a comprehensive review of Dr. Arthur Holmes' lecture regarding John Dewey's seminal work, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. It examines Dewey's departure from classical substance metaphysics toward a process-oriented, instrumentalist framework that prioritizes experience, problem-solving, and the utility of knowledge in a social context.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided lecture context.

1. **Metaphysical Shift:** How does Dewey distinguish between the "substance" view of classical philosophy and his own "process" view?
2. **Human Nature:** Why does Dewey argue that humans are primarily creatures of "desire" rather than "intellect"?
3. **The Influence of Francis Bacon:** In what way does Dewey extend Francis Bacon's dictum that "knowledge is power"?
4. **Concept of Experience:** How does Dewey's view of experience differ from the "atomistic" view found in the tradition of John Locke?
5. **Fixed Forms and Species:** What is the significance of Dewey's rejection of fixed species and "closed" world potential?
6. **The Nature of Ideas:** Within Dewey's instrumentalism, what is the functional definition of an "idea"?
7. **Fact-Value Continuum:** How does Dewey resolve the Enlightenment dualism between facts and values?
8. **Critique of Utilitarianism:** Why does Dewey categorically repudiate the suggestion that he is a utilitarian?

9. **The Problem of Evil:** What is the "real" problem of evil according to Dewey's pragmatic framework?
 10. **Postmodern Pragmatism:** According to the lecture, why did Richard Rorty move from philosophy to the humanities?
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Part II: Quiz Answer Key

1. **Metaphysical Shift:** Classical philosophy relies on "substance" metaphysics, which views reality as composed of unchanging, qualitative entities. Dewey replaces this with a "process" metaphysics, where reality and human nature are understood as an unfolding evolutionary process of experience.
2. **Human Nature:** Dewey views thought as a function of a biological organism responding to experience, which is initially physiologically based and affective. Consequently, human consciousness is activated by hopes, fears, and desires rather than disinterested intellectual inquiry or speculation.
3. **The Influence of Francis Bacon:** While Bacon applied the utility of knowledge (knowledge as power) to the natural sciences and technology, Dewey extends this vision to the human and social sciences. He believes the problem-solving capacity of knowledge should be used to resolve social, political, and international conflicts.
4. **Concept of Experience:** Unlike Locke's "thin," atomistic view where experience is composed of isolated simple ideas, Dewey sees experience as a rich, continuous "causal continuum." He argues that there are internal relationships within experience, making it an active affair of "doing" rather than a passive reception of impressions.
5. **Fixed Forms and Species:** Dewey follows Darwinian theory to argue that there are no fixed ends or species, resulting in an "open-ended" evolutionary process. He believes that the classical theory of fixed forms paralyzed human invention by suggesting that change was limited by pre-defined potential.
6. **The Nature of Ideas:** For Dewey, ideas are not fixed conceptions or theoretical dogmas, but rather "hypotheses" or "plans for action." Their value

is strictly instrumental, serving as tools to reorganize experience and resolve specific problem situations.

7. **Fact-Value Continuum:** Dewey rejects the idea of a value-free universe, arguing that values are not external intuitions but arise naturally within the context of problem-solving. Ideals (values) come into focus when experience presents a threat or a need for resolution, creating a continuum between the facts of a situation and the values required to fix it.
8. **Critique of Utilitarianism:** Dewey rejects utilitarianism because it is based on past empirical generalizations and fixed ideals, such as "the greatest happiness." Dewey's ethics are situational and future-oriented, focusing on unique hypotheses for specific problems rather than universal rules.
9. **The Problem of Evil:** Dewey dismisses the theoretical or logical problem of evil (reconciling evil with a good God) as pragmatically meaningless. To him, the "real" problem is practical: identifying what can be done to resolve the specific "evils" or problem situations encountered in experience.
10. **Postmodern Pragmatism:** Rorty moved to the humanities because he concluded that the "representational" view of philosophy (the mind as a mirror of nature) had failed. Believing that truth cannot be demonstrated and that nothing is knowable for certain, he opted for "interesting conversation" over the philosophical pursuit of logical certainty.

Part III: Essay Format Questions

The following questions are designed for deeper synthesis and do not include provided answers.

1. **The Evolution of Logic:** Compare and contrast the "old logic" of formal deduction with Dewey's "experimental logic." How does this shift affect the way a society approaches social and political upheavals?
2. **Education and Intelligence:** Based on Dewey's changed conception of experience and reason, analyze how his "progressive education" model differs from classical models based on Plato or Aristotle. Focus on the roles of abstraction versus practical intelligence.

3. **The Rejection of Dualisms:** Dewey and Whitehead are described as being "impatient with all of the traditional dualisms." Discuss how Dewey specifically collapses the distinctions between Mind/Body, Ideal/Actual, and Fact/Value.
4. **Pragmatism and Truth:** Critically examine Dewey's definition of truth as "workability" or "satisfied desire." Use the "highwayman" analogy from the text to explain how utility serves as the measure of a hypothesis.
5. **Contemporary Trajectories:** Evaluate the influence of Dewey's naturalized epistemology on modern thinkers like W.V.O. Quine. How does Quine's "Web of Belief" represent a departure from foundationalism in favor of a pragmatic, mutually supportive system of thought?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Analytic-Synthetic	A traditional logical dichotomy; Quine argues this is actually a "contextual distinction" where a proposition's status depends on its instrumental function.
Closed World	A metaphysical view (Platonic/Aristotelian) suggesting a universe with pre-defined potential and fixed species/limits.
Evolutionary Naturalism	The view that the process of development in nature is an extensive process of experience without fixed ends or species.
Functionalism	A psychology based on biology that views thought as a function of the biological organism adapting to its environment.
Instrumentalism	The theory that ideas, logic, and intelligence are tools (instruments) used by humans to solve practical problems and reorganize experience.

Macorber-like	A literary allusion to a Dickens character; used by Dewey to describe a "passive" organism that waits for something to turn up, rather than acting on its environment.
Naturalized Epistemology	The view that belief and knowledge arise as part of a nature-based psychology, serving instrumental rather than purely speculative needs.
Open World	A universe characterized by constant evolutionary change where "anything is possible" because there are no fixed forms or natural laws.
Pragmatic Theory of Meaning	The principle that the meaning of an idea is found entirely in its practical consequences or "cash value."
Representationalism	The epistemological view (associated with Descartes and Locke) that the mind contains ideas that "mirror" or represent an external reality.
Substance Metaphysics	A classical tradition that views the basic building blocks of reality as unchanging, qualitatively consistent entities (e.g., the "soul" or "matter").