

# Two Concepts of Inquiry

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## Abstract

Contemporary commentary on American Pragmatism is dominated by the view that the founders of the movement—Peirce, James, and Dewey—shared a set of basic philosophical tenets and concerns. In this article, the author disputes this view by showing that Peirce and Dewey held distinct views of inquiry.

H. S. Thayer articulates what has become a standard understanding of pragmatism in the following quotation:

Thus, in a word, pragmatism is a method of philosophizing often identified as a theory of meaning first stated by Charles Sanders Peirce in the 1870s; revived primarily as a theory of truth in 1898 by William James; and further developed, expanded, and disseminated by John Dewey...(Thayer, 1981)

On this view, which we shall call the *developmental picture*, pragmatism is the name of a continuous philosophical tradition beginning with C. S. Peirce, continuing through William James, and finally culminating in the work of John Dewey.<sup>1</sup> On the developmental picture, then, one can identify distinct philosophical theses which are distinctive of pragmatist philosophy.<sup>2</sup> To maintain these theses is to be a pragmatist. To demonstrate that these theses are false, or otherwise unsatisfactory, is to refute pragmatism.

But is the developmental picture accurate? Does a close examination of the texts central to the tradition reveal a continuous development of Peirce's original statement of pragmatism? Or do we rather find a tradition marked by discontinuity, sharing little more than a label?

Although some support for the developmental picture can be marshaled

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<sup>1</sup> For a more recent treatment which accepts the developmental picture, but expands it to include Quine, Rorty, and Davidson, see (Murphy, 1990)

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty has on several occasions suggested what these theses might be. See especially his "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism" (in Rorty 1986) and also his "Pragmatism As Anti-Representationalism" (the introduction to Murphy).

from Dewey's own understanding of the pragmatist tradition as expressed in his 1925 essay, "The Development of American Pragmatism" (LW2),<sup>3</sup> discord among the pragmatists can be found as early as William James's 1898 essay, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results."<sup>4</sup> In this essay, James reveals that he thinks that the "principle of pragmatism. . . should be expressed more broadly than Mr. Peirce expresses it" (James, 348). By 1905, Peirce disassociates himself entirely from James's pragmatism; in "What Pragmatism Is," Peirce rejects the label and famously announces "the birth of the word 'pragmaticism', which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers" (5.415).<sup>5</sup> A similar unease is found in Dewey's 1908 review of James's *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, "What Pragmatism Means by Practical" (MW4). In the review, Dewey forges some distance from James's doctrine of truth,

Since Mr. James has referred to me as saying "truth is what gives satisfaction," I may remark (apart from the fact that I do not think that I ever said that truth is what *gives* satisfaction) that I have never identified any satisfaction with the truth of an idea, save *that* satisfaction which arises when an idea as working hypothesis or tentative method is applied to prior existences in such a way as to fulfill what it intends. (MW4:109)

This brief survey demonstrates that pragmatism was a contested concept from its very beginning. Nevertheless, as I have said, the developmental picture dominates contemporary commentary. The sole recourse for those, such as myself, wishing to promote an alternate reading of the tradition – a reading which emphasizes discontinuity and pluralism within pragmatism – is to address themes central to the supposed development of pragmatism and show that the relevant texts do not support the developmental picture.

The notion of inquiry, construed as a pragmatist alternative to the traditional epistemological concept of knowledge, is central to the developmental

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<sup>3</sup> Citations to Dewey's work will follow the standard convention of indicating the volume of *The Collected Works* from which the citation is drawn followed by the page number. Thus, (LW12:26) denotes volume twelve of Dewey's Later Works, page 26.

<sup>4</sup> References to the work of William James will be keyed to McDermott, ed. *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*.

<sup>5</sup> References to the writings of Peirce will be keyed to *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, and will follow the standard formula: (volume number. paragraph number). For a more detailed examination of James's alleged "kidnapping" of Peirce's pragmatism, see Talisse 2000b.

picture in so far as it provides a solid link between Peirce's 1877 and 1878 *Popular Science Monthly* papers, which, as James tells us, should be regarded as marking the birth of pragmatism (James, 348) and Dewey's 1938 masterwork, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.<sup>6</sup> For it is in these early Peirce papers that core pragmatist concepts such as inquiry, doubt, belief, and meaning are given their first expression. The Peircean terminology is retained by Dewey in his *Logic*; however, it is certain that the developmental picture hinges upon *intellectual continuity* rather than mere *terminological similarity*. It is the objective of the present paper to demonstrate that, despite the aforementioned terminological similarity which perhaps generates the appearance of the required continuity, Dewey and Peirce actually propose distinct and ultimately incompatible theories of inquiry.

### Peirce's Theory of Inquiry

Peirce's 1877 "The Fixation of Belief" contains a comprehensive statement of his theory of inquiry. Inquiry, according to Peirce, is the "struggle" to attain a state of "belief" from a prior state of "doubt" (5.374). "Belief," on the Peircean model, is a state which "guides[s] our desires and shape[s] our actions" (5.371); it is "a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid" (5.372) which provides a "more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions" (5.371). "Doubt," on the other hand, "never has such an effect" as to guide our actions, but rather marks a disturbance in action. Doubt is the state which results when one is confronted with a situation to which prior habits of action—that is, prior beliefs—are unfit to respond. It is a state in which one feels the need to act in some way, yet finds the conditions under which action must be undertaken sufficiently unfamiliar as to render standard courses of response inappropriate; thus doubt is a state in which one knows not how to act. As such, doubt is an "uneasy state from which we struggle to free ourselves" (5.372).

The process of inquiry, then, occurs only when one is confronted with doubt; hence, "the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion" (5.375). That is, inquiry is undertaken for the sole purpose of eliminating doubt and

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<sup>6</sup>"The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," respectively. On this reading, James would be seen more as a transitional thinker since he does not emphasize the idea of inquiry; however, see James's "The Sentiment of Rationality," which might be construed as promoting a theory of inquiry.

attaining belief, “when doubt ceases, mental action on the subject comes to an end” (5.376).

From these conceptions, it follows that any process by which doubt is exchanged for belief will qualify as inquiry. In “The Fixation of Belief,” Peirce evaluates various competing methods of inquiry according to a fairly standard criterion: we should adopt only that method of inquiry which tends to produce beliefs which are stable.<sup>7</sup> A belief is stable in so far as it does not occasion doubt. The logic of Peirce’s argument is clear—if the sole objective of inquiry is the destruction of doubt and the production of belief, those methods of inquiry are best which tend to result in beliefs that are unlikely to generate doubt.

According to Peirce, the method of science is the only inquiry procedure which satisfies his evaluative criterion. The scientific method alone countenances an “external permanency” upon which “our thinking has no effect” against which our beliefs are to be tested. The fundamental advantage of the scientific method is its “hypothesis of Reality”:

There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be lead to the one True conclusion. (5.384)

Representative Realism, then, is a presupposition of all scientific inquiry according to Peirce. It must be added that Peirce’s formulation of Realism commits him to a certain theory of truth. In his 1878 “How To Make Our Ideas Clear,” Peirce elaborates,

All the followers of science are animated by a cheerful hope that the processes of investigation, if only pushed far enough, will give one certain solution to each question to which they apply it. (5.407)

Peirce says of a group of scientists, “They may at first obtain different results, but, as each perfects his method and his processes, the results are found to move steadily together toward a destined center” (5.407). Peirce continues,

<sup>7</sup> See also Talisse 2001.

So with all scientific research. Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion. (5.407)

From this follows Peirce's conception of truth,

This activity of thought by which we are carried, not where we wish, but to a fore-ordained goal, is like the operation of destiny. No modification of the point of view taken, no selection of other facts for study, no natural bent of mind even, can enable a man to escape the predestinate opinion. This great hope is embodied in the conception of truth and reality. The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to be all who investigate, is what we mean by truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. (5.407)

We are now in position to extract from what has been said some general principles operative within Peirce's theory of inquiry. We shall list four.

### *The Psychological Principle*

"Doubt" and "belief" are for Peirce strictly psychological phenomena. They are repeatedly defined by Peirce in terms of mental states. As inquiry is the name for the process by which one moves from states of doubt into states of belief, inquiry itself is primarily an inner operation.

### *The Permanency Principle*

Reality is characterized as an "external permanency." This suggests that there is some mind-independent, objective, and "fixed" Reality which it is the purpose and destiny of scientific inquiry to know. This Reality, which is the object of the final opinion at the end of the road of inquiry, exists antecedent to the operations of inquiry, waiting to be discovered.

### *The Correspondence Principle*

Experience is understood on a traditional empiricist model. There are external objects which affect our sense organs according to regular laws. These

affectations produce in us ideas of the external objects.<sup>8</sup> True ideas are those which accurately represent their objects by revealing how they “really and truly are” (5.384).

### ***The Positivist Principle***

It follows from the Correspondence Principle that scientific inquiry can be applied only to those entities which can “affect” the senses. The reality investigated by science is strictly physical; therefore there could be no scientific treatment of value. As truth is defined in terms of the long-run terminus of scientific inquiry, there are no truth values pertaining to propositions of value (such as moral propositions). Thus Peirce’s model implies the standard dichotomy of fact and value.

### **Dewey’s Theory of Inquiry**

The 1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* contains Dewey’s most extensive treatment of inquiry. Before turning to the *Logic*, however, some remarks regarding Dewey’s theory of experience are in order; for, as Richard Bernstein correctly observes, “Dewey’s philosophy represents a new empiricism” (Bernstein, p. 45).<sup>9</sup>

Dewey’s new empiricism is the thread that runs throughout his work. Dewey constantly urged that the foremost philosophical implication of the Darwinian theory of evolution was its call for the reconstruction of philosophy’s traditional conception of experience. According to this conception, experience is primarily the passive affair of the mind receiving impressions of external objects through the sense organs. In his 1917 “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy”, Dewey insists that experience is “an affair of the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment” (MW10:6). A similar expression is given in *Democracy and Education*, “when we experience something, we act upon it, we do something with it; and then we suffer and undergo the consequences” (MW9:146). Turning to his 1925 *Experience and Nature*, Dewey articulates his view of experience thus,

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<sup>8</sup> In *How To Make Our Ideas Clear*, Peirce claims that “Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects” (5.401).

<sup>9</sup>For a full elaboration of Dewey’s empiricism, see (Talisso 2000a).

Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are what are experienced. Linked in certain ways with another natural object—the human organism—they are *how* things are experienced as well. (LW1:12-13)

What constitutes experience on Dewey's view is not merely the sense perceptions of passive spectators on the world, but rather the dynamic participation, the continuing process of an organism's "adjustment" not simply *to* environing conditions but *within* a social and biological environment. In the process of *experiencing*, something *happens* – an organism actively *encounters* a world within which it must adjust (MW10:9). Clearly, Dewey is not an anti-realist; there are antecedent, objective conditions which affect the organism in certain ways; the organism, in turn, causes changes within the environment, it interacts with the environment, it *does something* to effect alterations in antecedent conditions, it attempts to gain control over its surroundings.

Inquiry, on Dewey's view, is a particular kind of experiencing. Particularly, one conducts inquiry within and in response to what Dewey calls a "problematic situation." 'Situation' is a technical term for Dewey:

What is designated by the word 'situation' is *not* a single object or event or set of events. For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole. This latter is what is called a 'situation'. (LW12:72)

It denotes the entire, pervasive, unique character of all conditions under which and *within* which an individual organism functions at a given time. An example might be helpful.<sup>10</sup> You are driving your car on a busy highway. The situation (I do not say *your* situation because the situation is not *yours*) in which you are immersed includes factors as varied as your speed and position relative to the other cars, the driving conditions, the condition of your automobile, your present psychological condition, as well as many other factors which one can imagine. Driving is a *par excellence* example of Dewey's concept of experience, for driving is clearly a process of an organism interacting within an environment, a situation.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The example is drawn from Talisse 2000a, 45.

<sup>11</sup> "Environment" and "situation" are synonymous terms for Dewey. Dewey drops "environment" around 1920 and begins to talk about "situations." The reason for this, I think, is that Dewey found "environment"

A situation is problematic or indeterminate when its constitutive factors are in disorder. This disorder incites inquiry. Dewey defines inquiry as follows:

Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an Indeterminate situation into one that is as determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole. (LW12: 108, entire passage in italics in original)

Like Peirce, Dewey defines inquiry as an operation activated in response to doubt; however, unlike Peirce, Dewey understands doubt to be an “existential” condition rather than a psychological phenomenon (LW12:30). It is the *situation* which is doubtful, not simply the organism. “Doubt” characterizes situations which are themselves “uncertain, unsettled, [and] disturbed”; doubt is not exclusively private or inner state, “it is the *situation* which has these traits” (LW12:109). Thus, the object of inquiry is not the discovery of an antecedent, fixed Reality, but rather the controlled *reconstruction* of existing conditions.

Let us consider another example. You are driving your car on an unfamiliar street in some suburb. The road is narrow, curved, and lined with country houses. In the distance, you see a soccer ball roll out into the street. Now, under these conditions, within *this* situation (and others similar to it, although *this* situation is identical to no other), a ball *means* children at play. The situation has now turned problematic – will there be a child carelessly darting out into the street after his ball? The problematic character of the situation is, of course, a function of context. There is nothing problematic about the ball in itself; the appearance of ball marks problematicity in the situation because it does not fit in with the other factors operative within the situation. Balls do not belong in streets. Moreover, operative social factors constitute the problematicity of the situation as well. We live in a society where children are often left unsupervised, and as such, are more likely to behave in careless ways. Moreover, our society values the lives of children and tends to punish those who hit children with cars. As such, you have an interest in *avoiding* an accident with the child to whom the ball belongs.

Given this problematic situation, you begin inquiry; that is, you begin to introduce certain *alterations* within the situation to effect to resolution of the problem. You raise your attention, you apply the brakes in order to slow the car down, you look to the side of the street from which the ball came, shut off your

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too physicalistic for his intended meaning; experience occurs within a physical and social environment. The term “situation” avoids the physicalistic connotations.

radio and listen for the sounds of children playing. In short, you begin to *transform* the situation, you introduce controlled *changes* into the world. Each change effects a *reconstruction* of the situation—you applying of the brakes slow the car down and thus allows for better observation. These are not psychological activities.

Inquiry ceases when the situation is transformed so as to eliminate the problem. Let's say that as you approach the ball, a child comes running out into the street to recover his ball. The child retrieves the ball and returns to playing in his yard. The situation is now determinate or non-problematic, and you continue on your way.

We are now in position to extract some general features of Dewey's theory of inquiry. We shall, again, list four.

### ***The Existential Principle***

Terms such as “doubt” “belief” and “inquiry” denote external and existential operations rather than inner psychological processes. Doubt and belief are understood by Dewey in terms of the character of the organism's interaction within a given situation. “Doubt” characterizes a situation which has become problematic, that is, existentially confused. Inquiry, then, is the attempt of an organism to introduce controlled changes so as to *transform* the problematic situation into a “determinate” situation.

### ***The Darwinian Principle***

Reality is characterized as an environment or situation which is prone to unexpected changes and may be transformed through the actions of organisms functioning within. Although the conditions of the environment are mind independent and objective, they are not fixed. Knowledge is construed as a function of an inquiring organism, the object of knowledge is the transformed situation, not the antecedent conditions.<sup>12</sup> There is no external permanency to be known at the end of inquiry. Knowledge itself implies change in given

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<sup>12</sup> Dewey's 1929 *The Quest for Certainty* is an extended criticism of the view which places epistemic value in antecedent existences.

conditions.

### ***The Transaction Principle***

Experience is understood on a Darwinian model as the interaction of an organism and certain factors within an environment. Experience is thus broader than sense perception. Experience is not primarily concerned with representation (although it may involve this) but with survival, or, rather, the control of enviroing conditions which guarantees survival. Ideas are principally proposals for purposive action. Ideas are true just in so far as they successfully guide action toward its purpose.<sup>13</sup> Knowing is therefore not a matter of attaining an accurate picture of how “things really and truly are”, but rather it is the ability to control and direct enviroing conditions (5.384).

### ***The Pluralist Principle***

Since experience has to do with the active functioning of organisms within situations, and since situations are constituted by both physical (or, as Dewey prefers, “biological”) *and* cultural factors, there is no reason why a given situation cannot be *morally* problematic.<sup>14</sup> A morally problematic situation is one in which the social conditions are objectively disordered. Moral inquiry is the process by which social conditions are changed so as to effect the reconstruction and resolution of moral problems. Processes of moral inquiry are just as scientific as inquiry of any other kind. In fact, one can say with some confidence that the main objective of Dewey’s entire philosophical career was to dissolve the supposed dichotomy of fact and value.<sup>15</sup>

A quick look back over the principles identified with Peirce’s theory of inquiry will indicate the essential incompatibility of Dewey’s theory of inquiry with Peirce’s. Peirce’s view fuses traditional empiricism and realism together with fallibilism regarding human epistemic capabilities to form a theory of

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<sup>13</sup> Dewey drops this word prior to 1930 and adopts “warranted assertibility” in the 1938 *Logic*. The difference is one of more than mere terminology, but it would require another paper to show how Dewey’s notion of “warranted assertion” involves the rejection of the pragmatist theory of truth as expressed by James.

<sup>14</sup> See the second chapter of *Logic*, “The Existential Matrix of Inquiry: Biological” (LW12:30).

<sup>15</sup> As early as 1903, Dewey is writing on this issue. See, for instance, “The Conditions of a Scientific Treatment of Morality” in MW3. See also Talisse 2000a, ch. 5.

inquiry which sustains philosophy's "quest for certainty" by deferring certitude (and hence knowledge) to some envisioned point in the future at which inquiry will end because scientists will have discovered how things "really and truly are." Dewey's view, by contrast, employs concepts of experience and reality reconstructed along Darwinian lines. Experience is, on Dewey's view, not a passive receptivity, but an active encounter of an organism and its environment. Dewey rejects certainty not because scientists will always be working with fallible instruments, but rather because he adopts a Darwinian picture of reality. The metaphysical lesson Dewey draws from Darwin is that philosophy must surrender its supposition of an antecedent, fixed reality. On a Darwinian view, nothing is fixed. Certainty is unattainable because the world itself is constantly in process. The objective of inquiry is not to attain an accurate picture of the way the world is, but to devise methods and procedures by which the flux of enviroing conditions can be controlled and directed. In this way, Dewey is an anti-representationalist; yet he rejects anti-realism. On Dewey's view, experience and inquiry involve the confrontation of an organism with external and objective conditions within an environment. For Dewey, there is a mind-independent, non-phenomenalist way the world is; however, Dewey rejects that this way is constant and fixed, and he maintains that accurate descriptions of this way are of, at best, derivative epistemic value because knowledge is primarily concerned with action.

### Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have emphasized the opposition inherent in Dewey's and Peirce's theories of inquiry. The concept of inquiry is essential to any developmental reading of pragmatism insofar as it appears that Dewey's 1938 *Logic* constitutes a completion of the principal idea sketched by Peirce in "The Fixation of Belief" Taking "Fixation" as a founding document, the developmental picture portrays Dewey's last great work as both a return to and a consummation of the Peircean roots of pragmatism. But if my argument is correct, Dewey cannot plausibly be read as "completing" the Peircean project. More strongly, he cannot be plausibly read as "expanding" or "developing" Peirce's ideas; if my reading is correct, Dewey *transformed* the core of Peircean pragmatism into something

Peirce could not have endorsed.<sup>16</sup> Insofar as the developmental picture is committed to doctrinal continuity within the tradition running from Peirce to Dewey, the developmental picture is in trouble.

The trouble is deepened once it is recognized that the doctrinal discontinuity does not end with Peirce and Dewey on inquiry. One could in addition cite important and well-attested disagreements between Peirce, James, and Dewey on a variety of topics involving meaning, truth, ethics, and religion. This might lead one to conclude that discontinuity is a prevalent trait of the tradition known as pragmatism. If this is correct, then an obvious problem arises. If there is no core doctrine holding the pragmatist tradition together (which is what I am suggesting), then wholesale criticisms and defenses of pragmatism lose their force. What could it mean to criticize pragmatism *simpliciter*? What is it to defend pragmatism? If my vision of pragmatism is correct, if there is no core to pragmatism as the developmental picture insists, then we might do well to simply drop the term except as shorthand for “Peirce, James, and Dewey, and those who see their work importantly connected to them.” Hence we would abandon the term in its *philosophical* sense.

This suggestion might be met with the objection that I’ve sought for continuity at an unreasonable level of specificity. It might be said that there is within any philosophical school or tradition plenty of room for disagreement, and that the pragmatist tradition is unified by the more general commitment to the priority of practice and action to theory and contemplation. I would argue that this suggestion is implausible because it entitles too many philosophers to the pragmatist label. Such an account renders Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Marx, and (on some readings) Hegel pragmatists; one could further imagine interpretations under which philosophers as diverse as Hume and Marcuse would qualify. This would invite the same trouble as I indicated above, namely, what could critiques and endorsements of pragmatism *simpliciter* possibly mean? Again, a term that captures too much loses its usefulness just as a term that captures too little. My suspicion is that “pragmatism” is such a term – no detailed account of its content will render it philosophically useful. If I am correct, nothing will be lost if the term is jettisoned.

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<sup>16</sup> Peirce’s dissatisfaction with Dewey’s logical theory is evident in a letter Peirce wrote to Dewey (but did not send) about Dewey’s 1903 *Studies in Logical Theory*. Peirce charges Dewey with reducing logic to an anthropological account of human thinking. A full examination of the affair is found in Colapietro 2002.

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