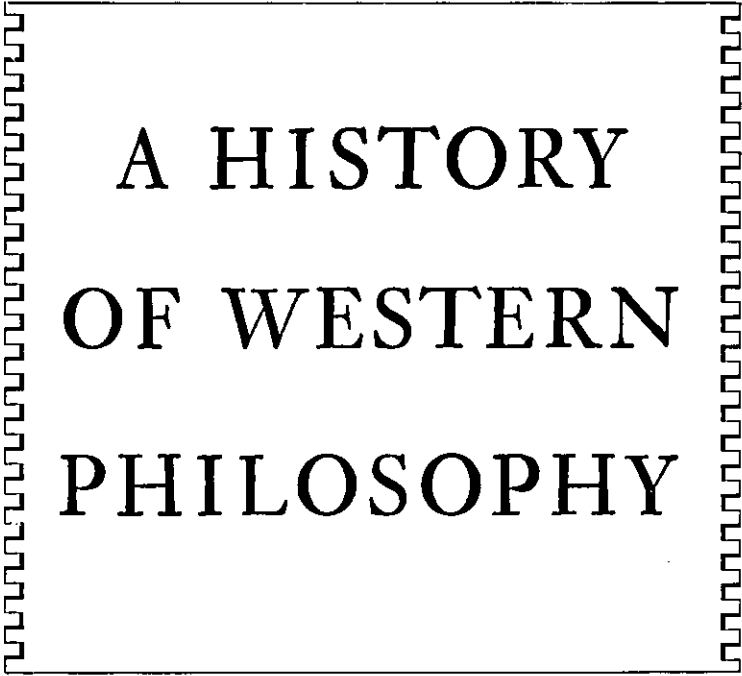


BERTRAND RUSSELL



A HISTORY
OF WESTERN
PHILOSOPHY

*And Its Connection with Political
and Social Circumstances from the
Earliest Times to the Present Day*

1945

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CHAPTER XXX

John Dewey

JOHN DEWEY, who was born in 1859, is generally admitted to be the leading living philosopher of America. In this estimate I entirely concur. He has had a profound influence, not only among philosophers, but on students of education, aesthetics, and political theory. He is a man of the highest character, liberal in outlook, generous and kind in personal relations, indefatigable in work. With most of his opinions I am in almost complete agreement. Owing to my respect and admiration for him, as well as to personal experience of his kindness, I should wish to agree completely, but to my regret I am compelled to dissent from his most distinctive philosophical doctrine, namely the substitution of "inquiry" for "truth" as the fundamental concept of logic and theory of knowledge.

Like William James, Dewey is a New Englander, and carries on the tradition of New England liberalism, which has been abandoned by some of the descendants of the great New Englanders of a hundred years ago. He has never been what might be called a "mere" philosopher. Education, especially, has been in the forefront of his interests, and his influence on American education has been profound. I, in my lesser way, have tried to have an influence on education very similar to his. Perhaps he, like me, has not always been satisfied with the practice of those who professed to follow his teaching, but any new doctrine, in practice, is bound to be subject to some extravagance and excess. This, however, does not matter so much as might be thought, because the faults of what is new are so much more easily seen than those of what is traditional.

When Dewey became professor of philosophy at Chicago in 1894, pedagogy was included among his subjects. He founded a progressive school, and wrote much about education. What he wrote at this time was summed up in his book *The School and Society* (1899), which is

considered the most influential of all his writings. He has continued to write on education throughout his life, almost as much as on philosophy.

Other social and political questions have also had a large share of his thought. Like myself, he was much influenced by visits to Russia and China, negatively in the first case, positively in the second. He was reluctantly a supporter of the first World War. He had an important part in the inquiry as to Trotsky's alleged guilt, and, while he was convinced that the charges were unfounded, he did not think that the Soviet régime would have been satisfactory if Trotsky instead of Stalin had been Lenin's successor. He became persuaded that violent revolution leading to dictatorship is not the way to achieve a good society. Although very liberal in all economic questions, he has never been a Marxist. I heard him say once that, having emancipated himself with some difficulty from the traditional orthodox theology, he was not going to shackle himself with another. In all this his point of view is almost identical with my own.

From the strictly philosophic point of view, the chief importance of Dewey's work lies in his criticism of the traditional notion of "truth," which is embodied in the theory that he calls "instrumentalism." Truth, as conceived by most professional philosophers, is static and final, perfect and eternal; in religious terminology, it may be identified with God's thoughts, and with those thoughts which, as rational beings, we share with God. The perfect model of truth is the multiplication table, which is precise and certain and free from all temporal dross. Since Pythagoras, and still more since Plato, mathematics has been linked with theology, and has profoundly influenced the theory of knowledge of most professional philosophers. Dewey's interests are biological rather than mathematical, and he conceives thought as an evolutionary process. The traditional view would, of course, admit that men gradually come to know more, but each piece of knowledge, when achieved, is regarded as something final. Hegel, it is true, does not regard human knowledge in this way. He conceives human knowledge as an organic whole, gradually growing in every part, and not perfect in any part until the whole is perfect. But although the Hegelian philosophy influenced Dewey in his youth, it still has its Absolute, and its eternal world which is more real than the temporal process. These can have no place in Dewey's thought, for

which all reality is temporal, and process, though evolutionary, is not, as for Hegel, the unfolding of an eternal *Idea*.

So far, I am in agreement with Dewey. Nor is this the end of my agreement. Before embarking upon discussion of the points as to which I differ, I will say a few words as to my own view of "truth."

The first question is: What sort of thing is "true" or "false"? The simplest answer would be: a sentence. "Columbus crossed the ocean in 1492" is true; "Columbus crossed the ocean in 1776" is false. This answer is correct, but incomplete. Sentences are true or false, as the case may be, because they are "significant," and their significance depends upon the language used. If you were translating an account of Columbus into Arabic, you would have to alter "1492" into the corresponding year of the Mohammedan era. Sentences in different languages may have the same significance, and it is the significance, not the words, that determines whether the sentence is "true" or "false." When you assert a sentence, you express a "belief," which may be equally well expressed in a different language. The "belief," whatever it may be, is what is "true" or "false" or "more or less true." Thus we are driven to the investigation of "belief."

Now a belief, provided it is sufficiently simple, may exist without being expressed in words. It would be difficult, without using words, to believe that the ratio of the circumference of a circle to the diameter is approximately 3.14159, or that Caesar, when he decided to cross the Rubicon, sealed the fate of the Roman republican constitution. But in simple cases un verbalized beliefs are common. Suppose, for instance, in descending a staircase, you make a mistake as to when you have got to the bottom: you take a step suitable for level ground, and come down with a bump. The result is a violent shock of surprise. You would naturally say, "I thought I was at the bottom," but in fact you were not thinking about the stairs, or you would not have made the mistake. Your muscles were adjusted in a way suitable to the bottom, when in fact you were not yet there. It was your body rather than your mind that made the mistake—at least that would be a natural way to express what happened. But in fact the distinction between mind and body is a dubious one. It will be better to speak of an "organism," leaving the division of its activities between the mind and the body undetermined. One can say, then: your organism was adjusted in a manner which would have been

suitable if you had been at the bottom, but in fact was not suitable. This failure of adjustment constituted error, and one may say that you were entertaining a false belief.

The *test* of error in the above illustration is *surprise*. I think this is true generally of beliefs that can be tested. A *false* belief is one which, in suitable circumstances, will cause the person entertaining it to experience surprise, while a *true* belief will not have this effect. But although surprise is a good criterion when it is applicable, it does not give the *meaning* of the words "true" and "false," and is not always applicable. Suppose you are walking in a thunderstorm, and you say to yourself, "I am not at all likely to be struck by lightning." The next moment you are struck, but you experience no surprise, because you are dead. If one day the sun explodes, as Sir James Jeans seems to expect, we shall all perish instantly, and therefore not be surprised, but unless we expect the catastrophe we shall all have been mistaken. Such illustrations suggest objectivity in truth and falsehood: what is true (or false) is a state of the organism, but it is true (or false), in general, in virtue of occurrences outside the organism. Sometimes experimental tests are possible to determine truth and falsehood, but sometimes they are not; when they are not, the alternative nevertheless remains, and is significant.

I will not further develop my view of truth and falsehood, but will proceed to the examination of Dewey's doctrine.

Dewey does not aim at judgements that shall be absolutely "true," or condemn their contradictories as absolutely "false." In his opinion there is a process called "inquiry," which is one form of mutual adjustment between an organism and its environment. If I wished, from my point of view, to go as far as possible towards agreeing with Dewey, I should begin by an analysis of "meaning" or "significance." Suppose for example you are at the Zoo, and you hear a voice through a megaphone saying, "A lion has just escaped." You will, in that case, act as you would if you saw the lion—that is to say, you will get away as quickly as possible. The sentence "a lion has escaped" *means* a certain occurrence, in the sense that it promotes the same behaviour as the occurrence would if you saw it. Broadly: a sentence S "means" an event E if it promotes behaviour which E would have promoted. If there has in fact been no such occurrence, the sentence is false. Just the same applies to a belief which is not expressed in words. One may

say: a belief is a state of an organism promoting behaviour such as a certain occurrence would promote if sensibly present; the occurrence which would promote this behaviour is the "significance" of the belief. This statement is unduly simplified, but it may serve to indicate the theory I am advocating. So far, I do not think that Dewey and I would disagree very much. But with his further developments I find myself in very definite disagreement.

Dewey makes *inquiry* the essence of logic, not truth or knowledge. He defines inquiry as follows: "Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole." He adds that "inquiry is concerned with objective transformations of objective subject-matter." This definition is plainly inadequate. Take for instance the dealings of a drill-sergeant with a crowd of recruits, or of a bricklayer with a heap of bricks; these exactly fulfil Dewey's definition of "inquiry." Since he clearly would not include them, there must be an element in his notion of "inquiry" which he has forgotten to mention in his definition. What this element is, I shall attempt to determine in a moment. But let us first consider what emerges from the definition as it stands.

It is clear that "inquiry," as conceived by Dewey, is part of the general process of attempting to make the world more organic. "Unified wholes" are to be the outcome of inquiries. Dewey's love of what is organic is due partly to biology, partly to the lingering influence of Hegel. Unless on the basis of an unconscious Hegelian metaphysic, I do not see why inquiry should be expected to result in "unified wholes." If I am given a pack of cards in disorder, and asked to inquire into their sequence, I shall, if I follow Dewey's prescription, first arrange them in order, and then say that this was the order resulting from inquiry. There will be, it is true, an "objective transformation of objective subject-matter" while I am arranging the cards, but the definition allows for this. If, at the end, I am told: "We wanted to know the sequence of the cards when they were given to you, not after you had re-arranged them," I shall, if I am a disciple of Dewey, reply: "Your ideas are altogether too static. I am a dynamic person, and when I inquire into any subject-matter I first alter it in such a way as to make the inquiry easy." The notion that such a procedure

is legitimate can only be justified by a Hegelian distinction of appearance and reality: the appearance may be confused and fragmentary, but the reality is always orderly and organic. Therefore when I arrange the cards I am only revealing their true eternal nature. But this part of the doctrine is never made explicit. The metaphysic of organism underlies Dewey's theories, but I do not know how far he is aware of this fact.

Let us now try to find the supplement to Dewey's definition which is required in order to distinguish inquiry from other kinds of organizing activity, such as those of the drill-sergeant and the bricklayer. Formerly it would have been said that inquiry is distinguished by its purpose, which is to ascertain some truth. But for Dewey "truth" is to be defined in terms of "inquiry," not *vice versa*; he quotes with approval Peirce's definition: "Truth" is "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate." This leaves us completely in the dark as to what the investigators are doing, for we cannot, without circularity, say that they are endeavoring to ascertain the truth.

I think Dr. Dewey's theory might be stated as follows. The relations of an organism to its environment are sometimes satisfactory to the organism, sometimes unsatisfactory. When they are unsatisfactory, the situation may be improved by mutual adjustment. When the alterations by means of which the situation is improved are mainly on the side of the organism—they are never *wholly* on either side—the process involved is called "inquiry." For example: during a battle you are mainly concerned to alter the environment, i.e., the enemy; but during the preceding period of reconnaissance you are mainly concerned to adapt your own forces to his dispositions. This earlier period is one of "inquiry."

The difficulty of this theory, to my mind, lies in the severing of the relation between a belief and the fact or facts which would commonly be said to "verify" it. Let us continue to consider the example of a general planning a battle. His reconnaissance planes report to him certain enemy preparations, and he, in consequence, makes certain counter-preparations. Commonsense would say that the reports upon which he acts are "true" if, in fact, the enemy have made the moves which they are said to have made, and that, in that case, the reports remain true even if the general subsequently loses the battle. This view

is rejected by Dr. Dewey. He does not divide beliefs into "true" and "false," but he still has two kinds of beliefs, which we will call "satisfactory" if the general wins, and "unsatisfactory" if he is defeated. Until the battle has taken place, he cannot tell what to think about the reports of his scouts.

Generalizing, we may say that Dr. Dewey, like everyone else, divides beliefs into two classes, of which one is good and the other bad. He holds, however, that a belief may be good at one time and bad at another; this happens with imperfect theories which are better than their predecessors but worse than their successors. Whether a belief is good or bad depends upon whether the activities which it inspires in the organism entertaining the belief have consequences which are satisfactory or unsatisfactory to it. Thus a belief about some event in the past is to be classified as "good" or "bad," not according to whether the event really took place, but according to the future effects of the belief. The results are curious. Suppose somebody says to me: "Did you have coffee with your breakfast this morning?" If I am an ordinary person, I shall try to remember. But if I am a disciple of Dr. Dewey I shall say: "Wait a while; I must try two experiments before I can tell you." I shall then first make myself believe that I had coffee, and observe the consequences, if any; I shall then make myself believe that I did not have coffee, and again observe the consequences, if any. I shall then compare the two sets of consequences, to see which I found the more satisfactory. If there is a balance on one side I shall decide for that answer. If there is not, I shall have to confess that I cannot answer the question.

But this is not the end of our troubles. How am I to know the consequences of believing that I had coffee for breakfast? If I say "the consequences are such-and-such," this in turn will have to be tested by its consequences before I can know whether what I have said was a "good" or a "bad" statement: And even if this difficulty were overcome, how am I to judge which set of consequences is the more satisfactory? One decision as to whether I had coffee may fill me with contentment, the other with determination to further the war effort. Each of these may be considered good; but until I have decided which is better I cannot tell whether I had coffee for breakfast. Surely this is absurd.

Dewey's divergence from what has hitherto been regarded as com-

mon sense is due to his refusal to admit "facts" into his metaphysic, in the sense in which "facts" are stubborn and cannot be manipulated. In this it may be that common sense is changing, and that his view will not seem contrary to what common sense is becoming.

The main difference between Dr. Dewey and me is that he judges a belief by its effects, whereas I judge it by its causes where a past occurrence is concerned. I consider such a belief "true," or as nearly "true" as we can make it, if it has a certain kind of relation (sometimes very complicated) to its causes. Dr. Dewey holds that it has "warranted assertability"—which he substitutes for "truth"—if it has certain kinds of effects. This divergence is connected with a difference of outlook on the world. The past cannot be affected by what we do, and therefore, if truth is determined by what has happened, it is independent of present or future volitions; it represents, in logical form, the limitations on human power. But if truth, or rather "warranted assertability," depends upon the future, then, in so far as it is in our power to alter the future, it is in our power to alter what should be asserted. This enlarges the sense of human power and freedom. Did Caesar cross the Rubicon? I should regard an affirmative answer as unalterably necessitated by a past event. Dr. Dewey would decide whether to say yes or no by an appraisal of future events, and there is no reason why these future events could not be arranged by human power so as to make a negative answer the more satisfactory. If I find the belief that Caesar crossed the Rubicon very distasteful, I need not sit down in dull despair; I can, if I have enough skill and power, arrange a social environment in which the statement that he did not cross the Rubicon will have "warranted assertability."

Throughout this book, I have sought, where possible, to connect philosophies with the social environment of the philosophers concerned. It has seemed to me that the belief in human power, and the unwillingness to admit "stubborn facts," were connected with the hopefulness engendered by machine production and the scientific manipulation of our physical environment. This view is shared by many of Dr. Dewey's supporters. Thus George Raymond Geiger, in a laudatory essay, says that Dr. Dewey's method "would mean a revolution in thought just as middle-class and unspectacular, but just as stupendous, as the revolution in industry of a century ago." It seemed to me that I was saying the same thing when I wrote: "Dr.

Dewey has an outlook which, where it is distinctive, is in harmony with the age of industrialism and collective enterprise. It is natural that his strongest appeal should be to Americans, and also that he should be almost equally appreciated by the progressive elements in countries like China and Mexico."

To my regret and surprise, this statement, which I had supposed completely innocuous, vexed Dr. Dewey, who replied: "Mr. Russell's confirmed habit of connecting the pragmatic theory of knowing with obnoxious aspects of American industrialism . . . is much as if I were to link his philosophy to the interests of the English landed aristocracy."

For my part, I am accustomed to having my opinions explained (especially by Communists) as due to my connection with the British aristocracy, and I am quite willing to suppose that my views, like other men's, are influenced by social environment. But if, in regard to Dr. Dewey, I am mistaken as to the social influences concerned, I regret the mistake. I find, however, that I am not alone in having made it. Santayana, for instance, says: "In Dewey, as in current science and ethics, there is a pervasive quasi-Hegelian tendency to dissolve the individual into his social functions, as well as everything substantial and actual into something relative and transitional."

Dr. Dewey's world, it seems to me, is one in which human beings occupy the imagination; the cosmos of astronomy, though of course acknowledged to exist, is at most times ignored. His philosophy is a power philosophy, though not, like Nietzsche's, a philosophy of individual power; it is the power of the community that is felt to be valuable. It is this element of social power that seems to me to make the philosophy of instrumentalism attractive to those who are more impressed by our new control over natural forces than by the limitations to which that control is still subject.

The attitude of man towards the non-human environment has differed profoundly at different times. The Greeks, with their dread of hubris and their belief in a Necessity or Fate superior even to Zeus, carefully avoided what would have seemed to them insolence towards the universe. The Middle Ages carried submission much further: humility towards God was a Christian's first duty. Initiative was cramped by this attitude, and great originality was scarcely possible. The Renaissance restored human pride, but carried it to the point

where it led to anarchy and disaster. Its work was largely undone by the Reformation and the Counter-reformation. But modern technique, while not altogether favourable to the lordly individual of the Renaissance, has revived the sense of the collective power of human communities. Man, formerly too humble, begins to think of himself as almost a God. The Italian pragmatist Papini urges us to substitute the "Imitation of God" for the "Imitation of Christ."

In all this I feel a grave danger, the danger of what might be called cosmic impiety. The concept of "truth" as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways in which philosophy hitherto has inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness—the intoxication of power which invaded philosophy with Fichte, and to which modern men, whether philosophers or not, are prone. I am persuaded that this intoxication is the greatest danger of our time, and that any philosophy which, however unintentionally, contributes to it is increasing the danger of vast social disaster.

CHAPTER XXXI

The Philosophy of Logical Analysis

IN philosophy ever since the time of Pythagoras there has been an opposition between the men whose thought was mainly inspired by mathematics and those who were more influenced by the empirical sciences. Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, and Kant belong to what may be called the mathematical party; Democritus, Aristotle, and the modern empiricists from Locke onwards, belong to the opposite party. In our day a school of philosophy has arisen which sets to work to eliminate Pythagoreanism from the principles