

EMPIRICISM AND PHILOSOPHIC METHOD

PROFESSOR DEWEY'S VIEWS

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SOME two or three years ago, in a stimulating volume of essays on Critical Realism, one of the more polemical contributors to the symposium attacked the philosophy of Prof. John Dewey and pointed out that one could not determine whether that eminent Pragmatist was an idealist or realist. The critic added that Professor Dewey's appeal to "experience" was of little significance, since "only God knew what the Pragmatists meant by experience."

It must be admitted that the impartial bystander found considerable point or force in those complaints. Professor Dewey had not up to that time made sufficiently clear what his full definition of experience was, nor what his neutrality toward the belligerents in the renewed warfare between neo-idealism and neo-realism implied, or how it was justified.

In the more elaborate and solid series of lectures on philosophy, entitled "Experience and Nature," recently given by Professor Dewey on the Paul Carus Foundation, however, legitimate doubts are set at rest, questions of acute critics indirectly but satisfactorily answered, and ambiguities cleared up. Professor Dewey, unfortunately, is at times unnecessarily involved and heavy; the lighter touch and the simpler style of his *Reconstruction in Philosophy* or his *Human Nature and Conduct* would have made his new and important work profitable to thousands of lay students of contemporary thought whom highly technical language may intimidate and discourage. But the attentive and earnest reader will find the volume rich, pregnant, deep and well worthy of the intellectual effort it requires.

The present writer intends to devote two or three short papers to Professor Dewey's mature exposition of his philosophy and to

make certain comments upon some of his propositions or conclusions. The first lecture, devoted to the question of method in a philosophy which claims to be rational and scientific, is so fundamental and so important that it will be treated here as an independent essay.

Professor Dewey is a frank champion of the empirical method. Not because he finds it to be superior to any other, but because, as he has little difficulty in showing, *there really is no other method available to philosophy*. Those schools which reject empiricism reason in a vacuum, as it were; they arrive nowhere and do not even make a start. The schools which half-heartedly or inconsistently adopt empiricism become sterile and rhetorical at the precise point at which empiricism is dropped or ignored.

The empirical method, says Professor Dewey, involves a conscious, bold repudiation of two bad traditions in philosophy. In the first place, the empiricist appeals to universal human experience, and does not claim "a private access to truth." Indeed, "the final issue of empirical method," writes Professor Dewey, "is whether the guide and standard of belief and conduct lies within or without *the shareable situation of life*." The mystic has his claims, but he offers no guide or standard; he offers nothing "shareable," and no tests can be applied to exclusive "psychical" possessions. The empiricist works in the open with the materials supplied by life and by verifiable facts. He does not turn his back on common sense; he seeks to enrich, organize and aid common sense.

In the second place, the empiricist scorns "loaded dice." By this Professor Dewey means that the empiricist does not beg the question, does not frame premises which assume the very thing that is to be proved; he does not flout or violate the requirements of logical procedure; he does not ask you to embark with him on a journey with a set of alleged ultimates, or alleged irreducible elements, which condemn the whole discussion to futile word-play.

The empiricist, then, builds upon experience. But what does the term "experience" mean in philosophy? Professor Dewey's answer is startling enough. He is content to accept the definition of the average practical man. Why make a mystery of a perfectly plain and intelligible affair? The trouble with too many philosophers has been precisely this—that they have indulged in unnecessary mystification and either laboriously solved unreal problems, problems no one ever encounters in science or in life, or else have offered purely verbal solutions of very real and disturbing problems. Now, there is nothing about the term experience that troubles the reason-

able layman. He knows what he means by such phrases as business experience, legal experience, esthetic experience, and he expects you to know it. Experience means working, trading, dealing with men and things, suffering, enjoying, reading, thinking, dreaming, waking, and the like. "Experience," in Professor Dewey's words, "is political, religious, industrial, intellectual, esthetic, mine, yours." It is not limited to what the Gradgrinds call "hard facts"; ideas, fancies, impulses resisted, impulses yielded to, fears felt and overcome, inward struggles, self-reproaches, all these things are as *real* as houses, bridges, food to be eaten, clothes to be worn, money to spend or to save.

The difference between the common sense notion of experience and that of the scientific, philosophic thinker is a difference of degree. The narrower the life, the more elementary the education, the smaller is the quantity of one's experience. We all know that persons who study, read, travel, look through telescopes and microscopes, visit museums and institutes and zoological gardens, have more experience than the uncultured, ignorant, provincial persons possess. We all know that where the ordinary man sees a round and smooth table, and asserts rightly that he sees such a table, the man of science is aware that the same table is neither round nor smooth. But we have no quarrel with the layman; the scientist merely point out that, if you look at the table through certain spectacles, you will realize that it is not really round or smooth. And the layman will be convinced by the demonstration and be grateful for it. He will observe, without knowing that he is pragmatic, that, to all intents and purposes, and *functionally speaking*, the table *was* round and smooth, but that indubitably from the viewpoint of science, it was deficient in both of those qualities. The man's experience will have been enlarged.

Professor Dewey insists that philosophy loses nothing and gains everything by taking experience for its foundation and guidance. Of course, as he stops to explain, no science, and therefore, no philosophy, can take *all* experience for its province. Experience is all-inclusive; the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets are severally parts of our experience. So is the past of our planet and of organic and other life. Science selects, as art does, each science deals with a section of the field of experience and seeks to illuminate it. Philosophy cannot hope to escape the limitations of human thought or of science, and, therefore, must select, classify, exclude and interpret. Well, select what; exclude what; interpret what?

This question is pertinent and even crucial. Professor Dewey does not blink it or underestimate its significance. His answer is significant and big with consequences. Here it is, in his own words: ". . . In some sense, all philosophy is a branch of morals.

"Our constant and inalienable concern is with good and bad, prosperity and failure, and hence with choice. We are constructed to think in terms of value, of bearing upon welfare. The ideal of welfare varies, but the influence in it is pervasive and inescapable. In a vital, though not the conventional, sense, all men think with a moral bias and concern, the 'immoral' man as truly as the righteous man; wicked and just men being characterized by bents toward different kind of things regarded as good."

Professor Dewey's meaning is clear—philosophy seeks to give men understanding and wisdom in order to enable them to choose that which is ethically good, lovely and desirable—that which conduces to abundant life and to the greatest possible rational happiness. But philosophy does not *know what is good when it sets out on its quest*; it should beware of its bias and refrain from making "eulogistic predicates" or tacit estimates. It should not use such terms as "permanence, real essence, totality, order, unity" to describe the *foundations* of a given system; these terms, and others like them, are terms of self-praise. The philosopher may have unity, permanence, order, etc., for his objectives, but he must not claim them as implicit in his postulates, for in that case he has nothing left to demonstrate and, besides, he naively repudiates the only rational method of demonstration. The bias in the philosopher's mind is inevitable but he must be on his guard against it. Professor Dewey has no use for any "will-to-believe" in philosophy.

But Mr. Dewey has still another answer to the objection that, to take all experience for one's province, is to suffer from an embarrassment of riches, to lack standards, to lose one's self in a jungle of disconnected facts, perceptions and emotions. This other answer is somewhat difficult to grasp, though the thought, once grasped, is clear and sound. It is, briefly, this—that the term experience as used by empirical philosophy designates not alone stuff, subject-matter, to sum total of things experienced, but also a *method*. To think constantly of experience, in the human sense, is to escape all sorts of snares. Thus it prevents the empirical philosopher from accepting as primitive, original, simple distinctions that are the result of reflection, study and experience. It also warns one against the confusion between characteristics of objects viewed in a certain

light, or organized in a certain way, and the so-called "reality" or essence of the object, no matter what its form or mode of organization. Finally, it tells us that we *must begin with things in their bewildering entanglements rather than with arbitrary simplifications*. To realize the value of the method of experience is to understand that there is no such a thing as a "problem of knowledge" in a peculiar sense. Knowledge itself is and must be *experienced*. On this point, Professor Dewey must be quoted lengthily. He writes:

"A problem of knowledge in general is, to speak brutally, nonsense. For knowledge itself is one of the things we empirically *have*. While skepticism may be in place at any time about any specific intellectual belief and conclusion, in order to keep us on the alert, to keep us inquiring and curious, skepticism as to the things which we *have* and *are* is impossible. No one ever frankly engaged in it. Its pretentiousness is concealed, however, by the failure to distinguish between objects of knowledge where doubt is legitimate, since they are matters of classification and interpretation, of theory, and things which are *directly had*.

"A man may doubt whether he has measles, because measles is an intellectual term, a classification; but he cannot doubt what he empirically has—not, as has so often been asserted, because he has an immediately certain knowledge of it, but because *it is not a matter of knowledge at all*; not an intellectual affair, not an affair of truth or falsity, certitude or doubt, but one of *existence*."

There must be *something*, in other words, present in experience, something that may be recalled later, pointed to in reflection, acted upon, before there can be subject-matter or objective for knowledge. A man says to himself or to a friend: "There is something the matter with me." Here is the primary and immediate stuff. Something is *given*, and it is irreducible. The man may not know what his ailment is; he may not know its name, its cause or its course and proper treatment. Those things science must tell him, if it can, or philosophy, if it can. But to deny the given something is to commit intellectual suicide.

And here we strike the question Professor Dewey's critics have asked concerning his position in the old-but-ever-new controversy between idealism and realism—namely, whether he is a neo-idealist or a neo-realist. His answer is definite and lucid. The empirical method and the empirical philosophy are *realistic*, but in the *unsophisticated* sense of that term, the term of common sense. Says Professor Dewey:

"Things are first acted toward, suffered: and it is for the things themselves, as they are followed up, to tell, by their own traits, whether they are subjective or objective. . . . Practically, the distinction drawn between subjective and objective, personal and impersonal, is of immense importance, but for theory it falls within a continuous world of events. . . . Political institutions, the household arts, technologies, embodied objective events long before science and philosophy arose. Political experience deals with barriers, mountains, rivers, seas, forests and plains. Men fight for these things; for them they exercise jurisdiction, fight and rebel. Being and having, exercising and suffering such things as these exist in the open and public world."

That "open and public world" is *not* a dream, and no rational person really thinks it is. No one certainly is a skeptic for any purpose other than so-called philosophical, and Professor Dewey sees no reason or rhyme in isolating philosophy and putting before it problems that have no real meaning, no relation to behavior, no possibility of scientific or practical treatment.

Let it be understood, however, that Professor Dewey is not bound to contend that the question whether the world we know is a reality or an illusion, a fact or an idea, is not a legitimate one for *any* set of thinkers to take up and endeavor to solve. What he is concerned to emphasize and establish is the proposition that the controversy between the realists and idealists is *not a philosophic controversy*. Just as the politician, the moralist, the educator, the soldier, the engineer, the physician, the artist ignore that controversy and rightly ignore it, so should the scientific and the empirical philosopher serenely ignore it. His business is with the world in which we all live, suffer, rejoice, build, destroy, co-operate and quarrel. What would the advocate of prison reform, or the strenuous opponent of capital punishment say to the metaphysician or philosopher who should ridicule his efforts, his sacrifices, his whole appeal, on the ground that the world was, or might be, nothing but an illusion, a fancy, an idea in his brain? What would a nation attacked by an enemy say to the philosopher who should urge it to remain passive and calm on the ground that the enemy, the machine guns, the bombing planes, the battleships, the poison gas are only "ideas"?

Well, Professor Dewey maintains that the controversy between idealism and realism is about as empty, irrelevant and absurd to the true philosopher as it is to the statesman, ethical leader, reformer,

lawmaker, or lover of beauty. The issues of philosophy are either significant and vital, or else they are not issues at all.

One can imagine Professor Dewey saying to the idealists, or to the sophisticated realists, for that matter: "I might agree with you as to the ultimate issues, as you are pleased to call them, but pray do not drag any such issues into the discussion of the methods, objectives and mission of *philosophy*. As philosophers we take certain things *as given*, or for granted, and *existence* is one of those things. Experience, not in any occult, peculiar, "subjective" sense, but in the ordinary sense is another of the *given* things. We face life as it is, with its terrible problems. We must help the men and women to solve those problems. If we cannot offer any help, we are bankrupt. If we cannot expect ever to be of use to struggling, groping humanity, then we are worse than bankrupt, for there is no hope of future solvency. We had better shut up shop and retire from a business so flat, unprofitable and futile.

We have summarized and attempted to interpret Professor Dewey's introductory lecture. His position being clear and his critics being silent, at least for the moment, we shall next ask what Professor Dewey has to say in the volume under consideration of the essential business of philosophy, and of the metes and bounds of the philosophic province. Here, too, there are objectors and critics to deal with. The present writer has already shown in a paper in *The Open Court* (Oct., 1923) that he does not regard Professor Dewey's definition and delimitation of philosophy as quite satisfactory. We must see, however, what light the new and serious work throws on this initial and pivotal question. Method is indeed important to science, to art and to philosophy, but method implies a problem conceived and formulated, a goal or objective.