

# Pragmatism and Truth:

John Dewey

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## Introduction

John Dewey provides our third and final test case for the 'caricature' accusation that pragmatism reduces truth to what pays. I will show that Dewey accepts a correspondence theory, though he interprets correspondence in terms of ongoing practical transactions, rejecting a merely abstract copying relationship. This pragmatist emphasis on transactions inclines him to focus on the future: in this mood, Dewey holds that truth = correspondence = practical transactions = future use. Future use, however, can readily be reconstrued as future *success*, and hence prudential advantage, and this makes a prudentialist reinterpretation possible. Unfortunately, future use = prudential advantage does not solve any of the familiar problems of the correspondence theory: it merely adds new problems of its own. This being so, it makes more sense to resist both the over-emphasis on the future and the equation of use with success, and interpret Dewey as holding a transactionalist correspondence theory.

## Dewey and the future

For Dewey, as for James and Peirce before him, pragmatism is first and foremost a species of empiricism. In one retrospective essay, he described it as a form of empiricism - as radical as Berkeley or Hume - but differing from them in its special focus on the future. Where Locke and Hume had demanded a source in past experience for problematic concepts, and where Berkeley had demanded that even a theoretical concept such as an infinitely small increment should make some possible difference in present experience, pragmatism looks to differences in the *future* course of experience, and identifies these as constituting the real meaning of the concept.

Dewey writes:

Pragmatism, thus, presents itself as an extension of historical empiricism with this fundamental difference, that it does not insist upon antecedent phenomena but upon consequent phenomena; not upon the precedents but upon the possibilities of action, and this change in point of view is almost revolutionary in its consequences.

(‘The Development of American Pragmatism’, 1925, in The Essential Dewey: vol 1 eds. Hickman and Alexander, Indiana University Press, p.8).

The revolutionary consequences he had in mind were:

- a) that general conceptions and theories are not merely summaries of past experience, but rational constructions for organizing future experiences,
- b) that the future is open, and that human thought and freedom make a genuine difference,
- c) that theories and conceptions are to be seen as instruments, as aids to future action, and a generally instrumentalist view of science is to be preferred.

These are interesting claims, but we shall ignore them and consider instead the consequences of this forward-facing empiricism for the concept of truth. Dewey again:

The classic theories of truth in terms of the coherence or compatibility of terms, and of the correspondence of an idea with a thing, hereby receive a new interpretation. A merely mental coherence without experimental verification does not enable us to get beyond the realm of hypothesis. If a notion or a theory makes pretense of corresponding to reality or to the facts, this pretense cannot be put to the test and confirmed or refuted except by causing it to pass over into the realm of action and noting the results which it yields in the form of concrete observable facts to which this notion or theory leads. If, in acting upon this notion, we are brought to the fact which it implies or which it demands, then this notion is true. A theory corresponds to the facts when it leads to the facts which are its consequences, by the intermediary of experience (ibid p.8).

Dewey goes on to insist that all such verifications are 'in the last analysis hypothetical and provisional' but he does not make a sceptical case from this: 'a large number of these propositions have been so frequently verified without fail that we are justified in using them as if they were absolutely true'. This is the combination of fallibilism with anti-scepticism which Putnam described as 'perhaps *the* basic insight of American Pragmatism' (in his Pragmatism, Blackwell 1995, p.21).

In this passage, Dewey clearly accepts a correspondence theory of truth, with the proviso that the correspondence must be verified in experience, or must have been verified in experience, if we are actually to accept the proposition as true. In short, what it *means* to say that an empirical belief or judgment is true is that it corresponds to reality or the facts: whether it is in fact acceptable as true is to be decided by 'experimental verification'.

So far, there is nothing here which would have been unwelcome to a correspondence theorist such as Russell - quite the reverse. The input from pragmatism seems to amount only to an emphasis on the role of human action in testing and registering results. Even the insistence on future consequences is qualified by Dewey's acceptance of the importance of past results. There is no radical critique (so far) of the notion of correspondence: a proposition corresponds to the facts when it 'leads to', or 'yields', or 'has as consequences' certain concrete observable facts.

It is true that Dewey emphatically rejected a dualist model of *knowledge*. Again and again, he argues against the knower as spectator, distinct from the scene in view N1. Dewey's alternative is to place the

knower in the scene as a doer: 'if it be true that the self or subject of experience is part and parcel of the course of events, it follows that the self...becomes a mind in virtue of a distinctive way of partaking in the course of events' N2. But this rejection of the knower-as-spectator, and of mind-as-substance, is not a rejection of truth-as-correspondence. Granted, if the mind is not to be understood as a spectator, then correspondence cannot be understood as a kind of quasi-visual 'projection' of judgment onto reality: rather, correspondence has to be reconstrued as involving the mind's interaction with its environment. But thanks to this reconstrual, knowledge as interaction is compatible with truth as correspondence.

It may seem surprising to see Dewey as a correspondence theorist, in part because pragmatism has become associated with a rejection of correspondence (a point emphasised by Rorty, who takes Dewey as his paradigm pragmatist). William James proposed a pragmatist change to what we might call the theory of acceptance or confirmation, urging that prudential considerations have a central role. However, as Dewey and most others read James, this change has a very limited application (to 'world-defining' beliefs), and a non-theoretical purpose. James' purpose, according to Dewey, was to 'force the general public to realize that certain problems, certain philosophical debates have a real importance for mankind, because the beliefs which they bring into play lead to very different modes of conduct' (ibid p.5-6).

In an earlier paper, we considered James' various ideas about truth. Overall, one cannot but sympathise with Richard Kirkham's exasperated comment: 'There is hardly any theory of truth James did not endorse at one time or another' (*Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction*, MIT Press, 1992, p.88). It is clear, however, that Dewey rejects a Jamesian theory for truth proper. Conduciveness to human well-being might make it rational to accept the belief that All is One, or even that God exists: it does not make it rational to believe that apples grow on trees, nor does it explain what truth consists in for such propositions.

Accepting, then, that Dewey holds a correspondence theory of some kind, we should ask how the Deweyan principle that 'future consequences fix meaning' is to be applied to it. Our pre-theoretical take on the notion of correspondence between a proposition and reality is what we might call absolutist - we suppose that 'The cat sat on the mat' corresponds to a particular situation regardless of human experiences, preferences and interpretations. It is true that the correspondence can only be *seen* by someone who understands the proposition and construes the facts as we do, but it *obtains* (we tend to suppose) regardless of whether anyone sees it or not. In the same way, we normally suppose that even though a star can only be seen by someone with such-and-such visual equipment, it is nevertheless *there* even if no creature with the right equipment exists to see it. Faint stars did not pop into existence when we devised telescopes powerful enough to detect them.

But if the *meaning* of correspondence has to be given in terms of future experience, then correspondence does not after all obtain 'regardless of whether anyone sees it or not'. It has to be cashed out precisely in terms of someone's interaction with the world. In fact, there are three possible positions here, depending on whether we wish to reinterpret correspondence in terms of actual, possible, or idealised, future experience. But essentially the same problem arises for all three, that if future events fix meaning, then we cannot *now* be sure that the concept has any meaning, or what its meaning might be. Worse, we cannot now identify any actual, possible or idealised consequences as consequences of a particular theory

or concept, except insofar as our existing understanding makes one set of consequences likelier than another. But this means that we must already have a grasp of the meaning, *not* fixed by reference to future consequences.

The position is a little complicated: future consequences *can* function (for an empiricist) as a test of *meaningfulness*. If a belief has no consequences whatever for the future, an empiricist should regard it with the deepest suspicion. It is also true that our understanding of an empirically respectable belief will include expectations about future consequences. Someone from whose understanding all expectations about the future consequences of a belief were removed, would be seriously lacking in comprehension. But it is not true that future consequences fix meaning. We need not wait and see how believing *p* turns out, in order to understand what *p* means - indeed we couldn't *identify* the consequences of believing *p* unless we already understood what *p* means N3.

There is a response to this objection however - that the future consequences test must be understood as a method of meaning-correction, that is, as a way of discovering the true 'cash value' of the promissory note we currently possess, or as a way of developing a 'clear idea' of a concept we currently possess in unclear form. On this view, pragmatism's emphasis on the future makes it an inherently evolutionary form of empiricism. Though it can - like Hume or Berkeley - declare a concept meaningless, its general tendency will be to reshape existing understandings, moulding them more and more in the direction of (future) empirical verification.

But it is nevertheless hard to see why, if future experience counts towards the meaning of a concept, past and present experience should not count equally, or more. Present and past experiences were at one time future. What is special about future experience (relative to our present), except that we don't yet have it? And isn't this lack of possession a *weakness* when it comes to determining meaning?

To put it in a nutshell, if the core idea of pragmatism is its emphasis on future consequences, as Dewey claimed, then it is theory which promises us 'Jam tomorrow'. And the pragmatic meaning of that is, 'No jam today'.

I take the series of three lectures published in 1911 as 'The Problem of Truth' to be a central text for our purposes. In it, Dewey offers a (very brief) response to the 'No jam today' problem. In note 9, he writes:

That the standpoint and reference are future, does not mean that the *content* is future. Failure to note this simple distinction has been the cause of a lot of futile criticism of the pragmatic notion (ED vol 2 eds. Hickman and Alexander, Indiana University Press, 1998 p.129, and see also 'A Short Catechism Concerning Truth', Chapter 6 of Dewey's 1910 book The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays).

On the other hand, Dewey himself had earlier made the prescient point, against the Socratic demand for definitions, that giving *examples* may be 'in the end, the only sensible mode of procedure' (ED vol 2 p.111). If this is so, reference and content are not so easily separated as Dewey requires in note 9. If - as

Wittgenstein urged - examples are in many cases the only meaning we attach to concepts, then to the extent that those examples lie in the future, the present meaning is not fixed. For Wittgenstein, this is not a problem, or a failing of ordinary language, because he (unlike Dewey) gives due weight to past and present examples. As we turn now to examine the distinctive features of Dewey's correspondence account of truth, we should remain alert to this tension between present 'content' and future 'reference', because it creates problems both for his interpretation of what pragmatism is, and for his theory of truth.

### **Dewey and correspondence**

Dewey accepts a truth-making relationship between propositions and the way things are. He says for example (in the 1911 lectures):

A cognitive presentation means that the presentation is concerned with something beyond itself; the proposition is *about something*, not about itself. This something which it states is accordingly the measure of its truth... Dreams are none the less dreams if they happen to be self-agreeing; the crucial thing is whether they agree with hard facts (ED vol 2 p.112).

He accepts coherence (which he understands as the self-consistency of a collection of beliefs) as a prerequisite of truth, but insists on correspondence to 'hard facts' as what confers truth.

However, to define truth in terms of correspondence...

...seems so conclusive, so satisfactory just because it assumes all there is at issue. It assumes that we have already got truth, or that some propositions do surely agree. The moment we subject this assumption to the least suspicion, behold we are in a dilemma. To be sure, a statement is true if it states things as they "really are", but *how are* they "really"? The difficulty belonging to the "truly" of the proposition is just shifted to the "really" of the thing... To tell whether a proposition reflects a thing as it really is, we seem to require a third medium in which the original proposition and its object are surveyed together, are compared and their agreement or disagreement seen. Now this is either itself a proposition or it is not [leading, if it is, to an infinite regress, and if it is not, making truth, not a correspondence of judgment to reality after all, but a characteristic of this third thing, whatever it is] (ibid. p.112).

On Dewey's view, then, a definition in terms of coherence falls to the objection that a collection of beliefs or propositions could be internally coherent and yet false, and a definition in terms of correspondence is unilluminating because it takes for granted the very thing we want explained. Dewey wants a definition of truth to explain how we come to *know* propositions as truths - to refute the suspicion that we may not possess any truths - and this guarantee the correspondence theory fails to provide.

The situation is ripe for a third theory, Dewey believes, and he moves to provide one. This third theory will supplement - not supplant - the forward-looking correspondence theory Dewey has accepted. It

will build on the future reference point to provide a more genuinely explanatory account of truth.

Dewey presents his pragmatist theory of truth in three steps. Step one is to re-examine what a proposition is. Dewey argues that

...the primary common assumption of both realistic and idealistic conceptions is that a statement by its nature implies an assertion of its own truth. No, replies the pragmatist, a statement, a proposition... implies a doubt concerning its own truth and a *search* for truth (ibid. p.113).

Dewey concedes that there are statements which have been 'repeatedly verified' and whose truth is regarded as established. However, he regards these as 'no judgment, but a mere putting in words of an established fact' (ibid. p.114). In short, the truth of a genuine judgment (as opposed to a mere putting in words) lies in the future.

We might already object that these 'facts-in-words' (such as 'Apples grow on trees') are at least as true as judgments which are not yet verified, so that an account of *truth* has to deal equally with both. But for the sake of argument, let us grant Dewey this distinction.

Dewey's second step is a corollary of the first: judgments or propositions (insofar as they are subject to doubt and inquiry) 'get a future outlook and reference, while the orthodox notion makes them refer to antecedent conditions'.

The pragmatist says that since every proposition is a hypothesis referring to an inquiry still to be undertaken (a proposal in short) its truth is a matter of its career, of its history: that it becomes or is made true (or false) in process of fulfilling or frustrating in use its own proposal (ibid. p.114).

Dewey has an odd argument to show that this future reference is necessary, independently of step one: he attempts to show that no human report or representation of events which refers exclusively to the past, can be true or false. If I understand him, this is because a proposition which has no use for us now or in future must be a mere symptom, as far as we are concerned, of the causal nexus which produced it. But I think we can concede Dewey his second step, at least for the sake of argument, without examining this argument in detail (though the symptom/representation issue arises again - and in a very fundamental way - for Rorty).

The third step in Dewey's presentation of his pragmatist account of truth urges that, 'since the representation has intrinsically and necessarily reference to a future, its truth or falsity is a matter of success or failure in performing its mission' (ibid. p.116). Dewey's claim here is that the point and reference of the proposition consists in its effect on future actions of ours, and therefore, its truth lies in the success of these actions.

But what does Dewey mean here by 'performing its mission'? Is it the proposition's 'mission' to prompt the inquiry which will determine its truth? Or to facilitate some desired outcome (in the way, for example, that 'The key is under the flowerpot' might help someone to get into a house)? For the sake of

consistency with the first and second steps, the proposition's 'mission' must be a matter of prompting inquiry (as Dewey himself realises, for example, in 'What Pragmatism Means by "Practical"' ED vol 2, p.382). Its 'proposal' must be 'Let's make a test of p'. But Dewey instead presents a series of analogies which emphasise desired results:

The good minister is the one who gets the results his country sent him to secure. The piece of paper is good money whose exchange for a beefsteak can be enforced. A good watch is the watch that runs well, and the watch that runs well is the watch that enables people to do the things whose doing depends on considerations of time. Handsome is that handsome does (ED vol 2, p.116).

In short, we can grant that some propositions - those Dewey calls judgments as opposed to propositions already accepted as true - have yet to be confirmed as true or false. This is mere stipulation. In this sense, they intrinsically have a future 'reference'. But nothing at all follows from this about the desirability or otherwise of what the proposition asserts. It might be a proposition, such as 'A very large asteroid is on a collision course with the earth' which, if true, would be catastrophic. Even if it is a proposition which facilitates a desired outcome, no reason has so far been given for regarding its usefulness as constituting its truth. Dewey simply slides from future reference as determining test, to future reference as desired outcome, and then - by mere fiat - identifies these desired results with truth.

However, even if Dewey's pragmatist account derives no support from steps one and two, it might nevertheless be the best account we have. Dewey proceeds to commend its advantages, chief among which is its ability to accept and explain correspondence as a mark of truth: it is *because* we use the proposition to secure some desired outcome that it has to correspond with the facts (a point also emphasised by William James). Dewey claims that, while 'correspondence' as used in the standard correspondence theory is something mysterious and unknowable, correspondence in his account is entirely familiar and unproblematic:

...our definition of truth through reference to consequences, uses correspondence as a mark of a meaning or proposition in exactly the same sense in which it is used everywhere else; in the sense in which two friends correspond, that is, interact as checks, as stimuli, as mutual aids and mutual correctors, or as the parts of a machine correspond. The orthodox realistic theory, on the contrary, has to invent a unique and undefinable meaning for this particular case of correspondence (ibid. p.117-8).

Dewey's idea here is that since the proposition is something we use in coping with our environment, it can be said to interact with the other environmental components involved, rather as the gears in an engine mesh to transmit power effectively N4.

One immediate problem is that propositions do not literally interact with asteroids or beefsteaks: if they have any *causal* role, it is only as sounds or marks. Dewey flies in the face of common sense when he asserts that a proposition, 'operates... just as directly as any *thing* would operate' (ibid. p.118, his italics).

Instead - we normally suppose - propositions help to prepare *us* for the situation, or help to guide *us* in dealing with it, insofar as we understand them. What's more, their usefulness in doing this depends on our realising that they correspond with the way things are, in more or less the orthodox sense. 'The key is under the flowerpot' will be useful to me only if I know that the word 'key' corresponds to such-and-such a metal device, used for opening and closing locks, and so on. It looks, then, as if Dewey has not substituted an unproblematic meaning of correspondence for the orthodox one, but superimposed a problematic meaning - which requires us to think of propositions as causally efficacious - on top of it.

Recall, too, that correspondence only becomes mysterious, according to Dewey, when asked to guarantee that we do in fact possess some truths. Two points should be made about this. First, it might be argued that explaining what we mean by a certain concept is in general something different from establishing if and when the concept has real application: we can explain what we mean by words like 'dinosaur' or 'unicorn' even if they apply (in the present or future) to nothing at all. In the same way, a correspondence theorist might insist that the theory explains what we mean by 'true', and quite properly says nothing about our actual possession of truths.

This point needs care. First, a correspondence theory probably does not need to show that we do in fact possess truths. Its aim need not be anti-sceptical. Nor does it need to insist that knowing a particular truth depends on knowing the appropriate correspondence - as Wolfgang Künne points out in his admirable study *Conceptions of Truth* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2003, p.128f - since it might legitimately aim to explain the meaning of the concept of truth rather than the epistemological provenance of particular truths. Nevertheless, it probably *does* need some account of how knowledge of correspondence is possible, since a form of correspondence which was unknowable would seem, to put it mildly, unhelpful. And it may well be that attempts to provide this account will founder on an inability to explain what 'correspondence' is.

Second, however, it is not clear that Dewey has devised any better answer to his own question. Dewey refers to 'inquiry' and 'verification' as establishing truth. But suppose we ask for a guarantee parallel to the one Dewey himself demanded: how do we know that any particular, alleged verification really is a verification? Are we launched on an infinite regress of verifications of verifications, or are we to opt for a mysterious third medium, in which the verifying power of the alleged verification shines out? Bear in mind that all these verifications are in the future. In short, Dewey's stated reason for dissatisfaction with correspondence is neither immediately to the point, nor resolvable in the way he suggests.

Dewey is certainly right to connect our understanding of the meaning of a concept with its associated methods of inquiry, and with desired outcomes too. Someone who did not know how to verify that a given object was a beefsteak would lack at least part of the concept, and someone who knew the appropriate method of verification but had no idea of a beefsteak's culinary potential would lack a different part. Substituting truth for beefsteak, it is natural to think that our understanding of the concept of truth must involve a knowledge of methods of inquiry and verification, and a grasp of the importance of truth for practical success. (In Wittgenstein's terms, it must involve mastery of various practices, and a background form of life.) But Dewey has given no reason to favour future inquiries or outcomes over past or present ones in explaining our concept of truth - and there is a clear reason not to, since we do already have the



concept we have, and we do not yet have anything future: present expectations about the future are of course present. Neither does the conceptual connection with inquiries and outcomes justify us in saying that truth just *is* success in desired outcomes, any more than a beefsteak just *is* the seeing and eating of it. Our concept of a beefsteak also includes what we might call its cultural history - the role it typically plays in our society and the attitudes people typically have towards it. A gourmet, a devout Hindu, a cattle rancher, a chef, a vegetarian, a butcher and a mainstream Western consumer might all agree about method of verification and nutritional value. But there remains a substantial area of divergence between them, and someone who knew nothing about this would obviously lack an important part of the concept. In the same way, someone who knew how to verify particular truth-claims, and knew that those who possess truths tend to do better, but knew nothing about respect for truth and truth-telling, about the search for truth as an overarching goal, about fiction and verisimilitude, or about punishment for deceit, would clearly lack something crucial to the concept of truth. The cultural role of truth is part of the concept we have of it - and it is for this reason that it is important to retain the idea of correspondence (as Dewey attempts to do).

To sum up, Dewey's correspondence theory interprets correspondence as a relation between hypotheses and the world, such that, when the relation obtains, our social processes of inquiry and action go well. For Dewey, a live hypothesis is one with real importance for our ongoing efforts to cope with our environment, and when the hypothesis fits the environment well - when it corresponds to reality in the way that the parts of a machine mesh with each other - we find that our efforts to cope are more likely to succeed.

I suggest three main criticisms of this account. First, a theory of *truth* should also deal with those results of previous inquiry which are now established, and with truths which have little or no practical importance. Second, it is hard to understand how a hypothesis can correspond with a tree or rock in the way those things can 'correspond' with each other: a rock can bounce off a tree, but a hypothesis *qua* hypothesis cannot interact with a tree in any way. Third, Dewey's pragmatist reinterpretation of correspondence seems not to replace a more traditional interpretation but to depend on it: the hypothesis 'A tree has fallen across the road' will help us to cope only if 'tree' corresponds in the traditional sense to a certain large plant, and so on.

Before we move on, we should notice that Dewey also connects truth with warranted assertibility. However, his claim is that warranted assertibility gives the 'cash value' of knowledge as it results from successful inquiry. His idea is that inquiry ends when the inquirer is able to make a warranted assertion regarding some previously doubtful question N5. For our purposes here - our central concern is with the meaning of truth, not the dynamics of belief - Dewey's remarks on inquiry and warranted assertibility can be separated from his 'transactional' correspondence theory.

Dewey's central idea about truth, explained above, follows from his functionalism. Let's call the thing which corresponds to some reality a 'truth-bearer': when the truth-bearer matches reality, or corresponds to it, we have a truth. Dewey's fundamental idea is that a thing cannot become a truth-bearer by any merely intellectual process of (Tractatus-like) 'projection'. It becomes a truth-bearer only insofar as it is *used* as one, in dealing with some real situation. It must be construed, not as a ghostly blueprint hovering before

the mind-as-spectator, but as a kind of tool used and manipulated in the situation: it is an appliance, not a depiction. Dewey believes that this functionalist or transactionalist reinterpretation provides a correspondence theory which is not only closer to common sense, but philosophically defensible.

Now it is possible that he is wrong about both these points - as I have argued - but this is at least an original and interesting claim. To say that we can replace truth by warranted assertibility is just a version of the ancient idea that there is no truth, only opinion: the word 'warranted' may seem to offer some protection against a thorough-going relativism, until we realise that, on this view, there are no truths about warrant. It seems to me, therefore, that to present Dewey as seeking to replace truth by warranted assertibility does him no favours. A subtler and more interesting interpretation will take its lead - I suggest - from the transactionalist things he says about correspondence.

## **Conclusion**

Dewey hoped to reconcile our common sense commitment to correspondence with the practical role of warranted assertibility in inquiry, and with the human importance of successful outcomes. In fact, he also endorsed Peirce's ideal limit theory as defining the *abstract idea* of truth N6. But amidst these various strands, there is no doubting his fundamental commitment to correspondence (construed as he and - he believes - common sense construe it). James wrote of him that

Dewey ... has insisted almost ad nauseam that the whole meaning of our cognitive states and processes lies in the way they intervene in the control and revaluation of independent existences or facts. His account of knowledge is not only absurd, but meaningless, unless independent existences be there of which our ideas take account (see the preface to The Meaning of Truth, Dover 2002, p.xvii).

Dewey himself went so far as to claim that 'my *type* of theory is the only one entitled to be called a correspondence theory of truth', (in ED vol 2, p.207), where by his 'type' of theory he meant, first, one which deals with social organisms coping in an inquiring way with their environment, as opposed to a solipsistic consciousness inspecting its sense-data, and second, one in which ideas do not merely copy an already existing reality, but actively and essentially contribute to changing it.

We ought to notice, finally, that Dewey does occasionally say things which may look, to a superficial view, like rejections of the correspondence theory. In 'What Pragmatism Means by "Practical"', for example, he writes (following James) that:

...ideas are essentially intentions (plans and methods), and...what they, as ideas, ultimately intend is prospective - certain changes in prior existing things. This contrasts again with rationalism, with its copy theory, where ideas, *as* ideas, are ineffective and impotent since they mean only to mirror a reality ... complete without them (ED vol 2, p.377-8).

Dewey's aim here is to insist that correspondence must form a basis of action, must have some future

reference. In other words, what is wrong with rationalism's 'copy theory', for Dewey, is that it tries to make sense of *mirroring* the world, abstracted from *interacting* with the world: he wants to restore to a central place this element of ongoing interaction or function, not to reject a correspondence theory outright (see, for example, *Experience and Nature*, Dover 2000, p.161).

We may conclude, then, that Dewey proposes an interesting kind of correspondence theory - correspondence as future or ongoing function. His exclusive emphasis on *future* consequences is, at least for the meaning of truth, unnecessary and problematic. And his flirtation with successful outcomes is incidental: it depends on and does not replace correspondence. Once we set aside his remarks on knowledge and inquiry as related but separable issues, what remains is truth as (transactional) correspondence. This notion has difficulties of its own, requiring a truth-bearer to interact with the world in some presumably causal way. But it is obviously far removed from the 'caricature' claim that truth is pragmatic success.

Looking back, now, over these three essays (on Peirce, James and Dewey), it is clear that the 'pragmatist theory of truth' beloved of introductions to philosophy has little basis in the historical record. The nearest thing to it we find is James' partly prudentialist theory of acceptance for 'world-defining' beliefs. The three founding fathers of American pragmatism do have very different things to say about truth, but none of them advance the caricature claim that truth is whatever pays.

## NOTES

N1 For more on Dewey's rejection of the spectator model, see for example Christopher Kulp's *The End of Epistemology* Greenwood, 1992.

N2 See 'The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy', 1917, in *Pragmatism: A Reader* ed. L Menand, Vintage 1997 p.225.

N3 Here, by way of example, is William James weaving between these acceptable and unacceptable versions of a forward-facing empiricism:

The pragmatic rule is that the meaning of a concept may always be found, if not in some sensible particular which it directly designates, then in some particular difference in the course of human experience which its being true will make [1]. Test every concept by the question "What sensible difference to anybody will its truth make?" and you are in the best possible position for understanding what it means and for discussing its importance [2]. If, questioning whether a certain concept be true or false, you can think of absolutely nothing that would practically differ in the two cases, you may assume that the alternative is meaningless and that your concept is no distinct idea [3]. If two concepts lead you to infer the same particular consequence, then you may assume that they embody the same meaning under different names [4]." (*Some Problems of Philosophy*, p.60)

In this short passage, sentence 2 makes the point that our understanding of a concept essentially involves expectations about the future (so that asking about these expectations gives us a fruitful way into the meaning of the concept). Sentence 3 proposes future consequences as a test of meaningfulness. But sentences 1 and 4 veer towards identifying meaning with future consequences, and this invites the simple

objection that we need, and have, an understanding of the concept in the present.

N4 For more on Dewey's interpretation of correspondence, see David Hildebrand's Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism, Vanderbilt Univ Press, 2003, p.37-42. John R Shook also discusses the sense in which Dewey was, and the sense in which he was not, committed to a correspondence theory in Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality Vanderbilt University Press, 2000, p.212, 254, 257.

N5 See his response to Russell in 'Propositions, Warranted Assertibility, and Truth', The Essential Dewey vol.2 p.201-12.

Dewey does occasionally say, for example, that 'the true means the verified and nothing else', and it is sometimes claimed that Dewey's intention - at least in his later writings - is to *replace* truth by warranted assertibility. Against this view, it seems to me, first, that assertions of this kind in Dewey are generally qualified by some phrase indicating that he is thinking specifically about the practical outcome of an inquiry. His point is that when someone says something like 'So my hypothesis was true' - specifically in the context of a completed experiment or other inquiry - the 'cash value' of that statement is that there is now sufficient warrant to assert the hypothesis. In short, the claim is limited to 'true' as used at the conclusion of some process of inquiry, and is not intended to apply generally. If Dewey intended, second, to explain the meaning of truth in general as warranted assertibility, he would be open to the obvious objection that 'p is not warrantably assertible but it is nevertheless true' would have to be regarded as either obsolete (if 'true' is to be eliminated) or self-contradictory (if 'true' is to be reduced). In fact, 'p is not warrantably assertible but it is nevertheless true' might be stubborn or optimistic, but it is plainly both usable and self-consistent. In some historical cases, it has been that thought which turned out to serve the scientific community best.

Of course, a reductionist revision of an ordinary concept might be necessary if we can show that ordinary concept to be untenable. My own view is that our ordinary concept of truth is defensible, so that no important motive for reductionism about truth remains.

N6 See his 1939 essay 'Experience, Knowledge and Value: a Rejoinder' in The Philosophy of John Dewey, ed. PA Schilpp, Northwestern University, 1939. p. 49-73.

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