

COPERNICAN REVOLUTIONS IN THOUGHT: THE KANT-DEWEY DIALECTIC

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... with the outstanding exception of Peirce, I have learned most from writers
with whose positions I have in the end been compelled to disagree.¹

John Dewey

Introduction

What I wanted to be able to say was that Dewey began as an anti-Kantian because of the Hegelian aspects of his philosophy. That this Hegelian basis began to erode as he developed more completely his own philosophy during his Chicago and Columbia years and that ultimately his philosophy, made up a comprehensive philosophical system like the Kantian system that he had rejected in his early career. That Dewey, like Kant began a "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy. That is what I wanted to say. What I can say is that Kantian philosophy had at least as much impact on Dewey, even if from a dialectical position, as did the Hegelianism that we are so willing to find in his works, that much of Dewey's work, especially the early works make up a dialogue with Kantian philosophy.

Kant's Copernican Revolution in metaphysics posited that instead of our knowledge conforming to objects, that objects must conform to our knowledge. Reason operates as a regulative principle, guiding understanding, moral action, and judgment. Behavior, for Kant, had its source in duty and its limit in the categorical imperative. Dewey's Copernican Revolution replaces the Kantian conception of knowledge based on reason with knowledge based on experience, intelligence, and existence. The resulting behavior is based on the consideration of its consequences.

Kant and Dewey are remarkable in that their intellectual production progressed and developed in such an orderly way that the evolutionary quality of their writing and the progressive nature of their thought make it difficult to divide their work into periods dominated by a single idea or concept. Kant scholars look at the earlier work of Kant as his pre critical period. His acceptance of a dualistic conception of knowledge, especially the distinction between the world of the senses and the world of the mind, caused him to reformulate his ideas in *The Critique of Pure Reason* published in 1781. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant developed a system to which his succeeding works adhered.

We can divide Dewey's work into what we call his idealistic period and his Hegelian-idealist period. He divided mature work into what he called his experimental-idealist period, his functionalist period, and his instrumentalist period. The early periods roughly

correspond to the influences of his mentors. H. A. P. Torrey and George Sylvester Morris.

Torrey's influence came during Dewey's pre-Johns Hopkins studies. It was with Torrey that Dewey studied philosophical German. The works of Kant must have been included. Kant was, after all, among the first philosophers to write in the German language instead of Latin. This fact continues to create problems with the translation and interpretation of Kant's writing. During this period, Dewey wrote two essays for publication in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* edited by William Torrey Harris. He called these articles "highly schematic and formal," and said "they were couched in the language of intuitionism."² They were *Kantian* but of the Scotch common sense realist variety which he had, no doubt, learned from Torrey.

Dewey's Hegelian-idealist period began with his translation of some articles on Hegel for Harris and lasted until the early 1890s. The influence of his Johns Hopkins professor and later University of Michigan colleague, George Sylvester Morris, an avowed Hegelian, was a major source of Dewey's decade-long adherence to Hegelian philosophy. It was his discovery of the limits of Hegel's system that resulted in his progression from the Hegelian viewpoint to the development of his personal philosophy. Dewey's Hegelian-idealist period lasted until about 1891. His *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* was his last Hegelian-idealist work. In 1892 and 1893 Dewey published two essays in which he broke loose intellectually from Hegelian-idealism. Idealist theories were disappearing from his writing but the idealist language remained. He was saying new things in old ways. He began calling himself an "experimental idealist" in 1894.³

We commonly think of Dewey as a Hegelian, even one of the Young Hegelians. Dewey admitted that his study of Kant under Morris at Johns Hopkins slanted toward Hegel. "Morris," he said, "came to Kant through Hegel instead of to Hegel by way of Kant, so that his attitude toward Kant was the one expressed by Hegel himself."⁴ Dewey thought that this was "in favor of Mr. Morris."⁵ Hans Reichenbach in *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy* disagreed. He wrote,

Hegel has been called the successor of Kant; that is a serious misunderstanding of Kant and an

unjustified elevation of Hegel. Kant's system ... was the attempt of a great mind to establish rationalism on a scientific basis. Hegel's system is the poor construction of a fanatic who has seen one empirical truth and attempts to make it a logical law within the most unscientific of all logics. Whereas Kant's system marks the peak of the historical line of rationalism, Hegel's system belongs in the period of decay of speculative philosophy which characterizes the nineteenth century.... More than any other philosophy, Hegel's system has contributed to the division between scientists and philosophers. It has made philosophy an object of derision from which the scientist wishes to keep his course clear.⁶

These comments aside, the Hegelian system was very powerful. A good deal of philosophy after Hegel amounted to the evaluation of prior philosophical systems through the Hegelian framework. Much of the subsequent discussion centered on the application of the Hegelian system in various ways. Perhaps the most important was the Marxian application of Hegel's dialectical law within the framework of a political movement.

We often forget is that the young Hegelians rejected as much or more of Hegel as they retained. Marx, for example, eliminated the idealistic aspects of Hegel's philosophy while retaining the dialectic and the Hegelian sense of history, turning Hegel on his head as he said. Dewey, in his turn, exchanged Hegelian metaphysics for experience, community, and the application of intelligence.

John Dewey's doctoral dissertation on Kant was, we think, critical of Kant's psychology. We do not know this with certainty because the copies of the dissertation have disappeared. Nevertheless, later writing and comments give us a good idea of what that dissertation contained. He later wrote that his article, "Kant and Philosophic Method," reached very much the same conclusions.⁷ Dewey had plenty to say about Kantian philosophy in his later writing, most of which used the Kantian system as a starting-point to discuss modern developments in philosophy.

Carl J. Friedrich, who edited the Modern Library edition of *The Philosophy of Kant* was not surprised that Dewey's criticism focused so much on the work of Kant. He wrote that

Any attempt to describe Kant's influence must end up in being a history of philosophy after 1800. Not only the German idealists, but Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Marx and the positivists, T. H. Green and Bosanquet and Hobhouse, as well as the

numerous neo-Kantians down to Vaihinger's *Philosophy of As-If* and the "Existentialists" and "Phenomenologists" testify to the all-pervading impact of Kant's thought. It is impossible to assess the "influence" of Kant on succeeding generations precisely because it is so vast.⁸

Intellectual environment

The enlightenment and the changes that resulted enriched the intellectual environment in which Kant worked. The old dualism between reason and the senses had broken down. The world became orderly and could be understood through the use of reason and the collection of facts. Reason became the basis for speculation about the human condition. Law became the process for regularizing the economic and social processes. New social classes and new political movements removed the rule by divine right. The concept of natural rights and the progressive development of society began to take hold.

Post-Civil War American democracy very much influenced Dewey's intellectual environment, the everyday experiences of individuals living in society, and the intellectual environment of the day. That environment was, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, beginning to emphasize science over faith. Religion began to wane as an intellectual influence. Darwinism attracted a significant following. The social sciences, especially the new psychology, sociology, and anthropology, were carving out their own intellectual place in the movement toward modernism. The foundations of pragmatism were being constructed on the thought of Peirce and James.⁹

Kant and Dewey both were raised in working middle-class families. Kant's father was a craftsman saddle maker in Göttingen in East Prussia and Dewey's was a store keeper in Burlington, Vermont. Kant never left Göttingen. Dewey could not wait to get out of Burlington. Kant's mother was a Lutheran pietist, Dewey's was a strict Congregationalist, "a kind and generous person, but narrow and strict in her views of morals and religion."¹⁰

Both Dewey and Kant strayed from their mothers' religious training. Their philosophies became more secular than theological though they struggled with their religious backgrounds for all their lives and in all of their work. Dewey observed, "Religious feeling is unhealthy when it is watched and analyzed to see if it exists, if it is right, if it is growing. It is as fatal to be forever observing our own religious moods and experiences, as it is to pull up a seed from the ground to see if it is growing."¹¹

Dewey discovered that "the liberal evangelicalism

he was finding in church and college, a form of Christianity more palatable to his developing intellect than was his mother's religion ... (and) in Neo-Hegelianism a philosophy that softened the oppositions in liberal evangelical teachings without impairing the Christian content. (L)iberal evangelicalism ... rejected the notion that (the Bible) must be read and interpreted literally or in terms of some historic denominational creed. It believed, instead, that Scripture must be read in the light of experience and intelligence."¹²

It is interesting that among their early publications both Kant and Dewey produced works on the thought of Leibniz. Kant's combined criticism of Leibnizian rationalism with his criticism of empiricism of Locke, Hume, and others. Kant was seeking a reconciliation of the rationalistic with the empiricist. He judged Leibniz to be a rationalist and viewed the chasm between rationalism and empiricism as one that had to be bridged.

Dewey's critique of Leibniz came from perhaps the highpoint of his Hegelian period. Morris published Dewey's *Leibniz's Essays Concerning Human Understanding* as one volume in a series on German philosophy that he edited. Dewey found Leibniz to be a philosopher who recognized the role of the developing sciences. He had an appreciation for Leibniz's organic view of the world that did not include the dualistic view of the world of the idealists.

White says that "Dewey's work on Leibniz ... points up very clearly his organic view of the world, his emphasis on activity and continuity, and his attack on dualism and formalism."¹³ Dewey's Hegelian point of view is expressed clearly through his analysis of Leibniz. His own conception of an organic world, idealistic in origin is later "supplemented and fortified (and transformed, of course) by his contact with Darwinism."¹⁴ White finds: "The fact that he was aware of a tendency in some philosophers to begin with vaguely formulated metaphysical notions and then to sharpen them by using the results of science, facilitated his own transition to instrumentalism.... Dewey later went further and changed his whole philosophy to suit the results of empirical science."¹⁵

Dewey's criticism of Leibniz was, in part, related to Leibniz's dependence on "scholastic formal logic" and its contrast to the development of scientific thought leading to "constant conflict between the method and content of his philosophy, between its letter and its spirit."¹⁶ Dewey, of course, eschewed formal logic in favor of scientific thought. This distrust in a highly formal system applied later to Dewey's assault on the Kantian system and the neo-Kantians.

Eli Gordon observes that "neo-Kantianism today has become in great measure a philosophical ghost, and

like many such ghosts it has taken up a home in the history of ideas, where it troubles no one."¹⁷

But Gordon also speaks of the importance of neo-Kantianism in the late nineteenth century. He said, "The various forms of neo-Kantianism ... make the movement in its entirety difficult to define. Perhaps what most united its many schools was a shared conviction that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the metaphysical extravagances of romanticism and speculative idealism had at last been spent, and that genuine philosophical renewal could be achieved in Germany only by returning to the methodological rigor of epistemological critique. "Zuruck zu Kant" was the battle cry of the movement. Taking their cue from Kant's critique of metaphysics, the neo-Kantians set out to demonstrate that philosophy properly conceived must confine itself to laying down the formal conditions for knowledge, whether such knowledge be that of natural science or of culture."¹⁸

Amos Funkenstein wrote that "the excellence of philosophical systems is often recognizable by their ability to dig their own graves."¹⁹ ... The crucial idea is Hegelian: philosophical movements do not follow each other in the fashion of waves, one succeeding another in mere series. Rather, schools of thought emerge in violent opposition; they protest some older doctrine whose very radicalism has grown intolerable and seems in any case on the verge of internal collapse.... (T)his "digging one's own grave" metaphor is a means of explaining a crucial moment of intellectual history. Students ... were themselves schooled in the philosophy they then set about dismantling. This phenomenon of philosophical burial is therefore one illustration of what Funkenstein called "counter-history."²⁰

Neo-Kantian philosophy was very popular in the nineteenth century but in competition with the Hegelian and Phenomenological philosophies in European universities neo-Kantianism became the scapegoat of those newer systems. Students in Berlin observed that "die Philosophie ist mit Stumpf und Riehl ausgerottet worden" (philosophy has been destroyed root and branch), a resentful pun on the names of Karl Stumpf and Alois Riehl, two of the oldest and most revered professors of "critical" or "scientific" philosophy.²¹

Dewey's critique of Kant

"Kant," says Dewey, "the founder of modernist philosophy, calls upon Reason to undertake the most difficult of tasks, self knowledge, and establish a tribunal to decide all questions according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws. This self-knowledge of reason, then, is the Method and criterion which Kant offers. (His) categories ... are so many conceptions of the understanding ... thus

furnish the subject-matter of Logic. But they also have relation to objects, and, as such, are synthetic and furnish subject-matter of Transcendental Logic.... The categories have objective validity or synthetic use because without them no experience would be possible. The categories are not errors, which one goes through on the way to truth. Their completed system in its organic wholeness is *the Truth*.²²

Kant recognized that reason had synthesizing as well as analytic powers, the former enabling it to construct an intelligible world. But Kant makes a "mechanical" separation of subject and object, the phenomena of a synthesizing reason and the noumena, the thing-in-itself lying outside of reason. This separation, this dualistic metaphysical view causes Kant's philosophy to end in "subjectivism, phenomenalism, and agnosticism, falling short of providing a valid method. Kant's doctrine, however, contains the germ of the correct method."²³

In short, said Dewey, the relation of subject and object is not a "transcendent" one, but an "immanent," and is but the first form in which Reason manifests that it is both synthetic and analytic The material which was supposed to confront Reason as foreign to it is but the manifestation of Reason itself.²⁴

All through Kant's "*Critiques*" is woven in the notion of an intuitive understanding which is the ultimate criterion of all truth ... an organic system of experience or self-consciousness.... What is involved in the notion of organism? Why, precisely the Idea ... of a Reason which is both analytic and synthetic ... and the theory of this Reason is the Philosophic method.²⁵ This method is "an account of the conceptions or categories of Reason which constitute experience, internal and external, subjective and objective, and an account of them as a system, an organic unity in which each has its own place fixed."²⁶ But Kant never develops this theory of an intuitive understanding it was left to Hegel to arrive at the "completed Method of Philosophy.... (Any philosophy which can pretend to be a method of truth must show Reason both as analytic *and* synthetic."²⁷

The problem for Dewey was that Kantianism naturally invoked universal bonds to restore objectivity. But, in so doing, it accepted the particularism of experience and proceeded to supplement it from non-empirical sources.... With the downfall of the traditional notion of experience, the appeal to reason to supplement its defects becomes superfluous. ... The historic outcome was a new crop of artificial puzzles about relations; it

fastened upon philosophy for a long time the quarrel about the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* as its chief issue.... But it soon becomes obvious that while there is assuredly something *a priori*--that is to say, native, unlearned, original--in human experience, that something is *not* knowledge, but is activities made possible by means of established connexions of neurones. This empirical fact does not solve the orthodox problem; it dissolves it. It shows that the problem was misconceived, and solution sought by both parties in the wrong direction.... Organic instincts and organic retention, or habitforming, are undeniable factors in actual experience.²⁷

Dewey appreciated the contributions of earlier philosophers but thought that reliance upon pre scientific philosophy was inappropriate. He said that while it is a sign of an illiberal mind to throw away the fertile and ample ideas of a Spinoza, a Kant, or a Hegel, because their setting is not logically adequate, it is surely a sign of an undisciplined one to treat their contributions to culture as confirmations of premises with which they have no necessary connection.²⁸

Dewey thought that Kant's unification of rationalism and empiricism was a transitional stage, that it marked the "transition of the old abstract thought, the old meaningless conception of experience, into the new concrete thought, the ever growing, ever rich experience."²⁹ It did not question traditional beliefs and institutions. He said,

If we ignore the cumbrous technicalities of Kant, we may take him as one whom the rise of natural science impressed and the role played in science by the idea of causation, this being defined as a necessary, universal or invariant connection of phenomena. Kant saw that in all consistency this principle applies to human phenomena as well as to physical; it is a law of all phenomena.³⁰

Dewey believed that such a dependence on linked phenomena left no room for freedom. Kant's idea of duty as freedom was insufficient since it existed under a reign of law. He said,

No freedom seems to be left save by alleging that man is somehow supra-natural in his make-up--an idea of which Kant's noumenal and transcendental man is hardly more than a translation into a more impressive phraseology.³¹

and that

Kant's philosophy served to provide an intellectual justification or "rationalization" of subordination to fixed and ready-made universals, "principles,"

laws.... (B)ecause he taught that the understanding employs fixed, *a priori*, concepts, in order to introduce connection into experience and thereby make known *objects* possible (stable, regular relationships of qualities), he developed in German thought a curious contempt for the living variety of experience and a curious overestimate of the value of system, order, regularity for their own sakes.³²

For Dewey experience was the spring from which all knowledge, all philosophy flowed and that "... the notion of experience implied in the questions most actively discussed gives a natural point of departure."³³ But Dewey contrasted the orthodox description of experience and "that congenial to present conditions. He said that the orthodox view regards experience

1. primarily as a knowledge-affair. But to eyes not looking through ancient spectacles, it assuredly appears as an affair of the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment.
2. According to tradition experience is (at least primarily) a psychical thing, infected throughout by "subjectivity." What experience suggests about itself is a genuinely objective world which enters into the actions and sufferings of men and undergoes modifications through their responses.
3. (In orthodox view) ... the past exclusively counts ... what has taken place, reference to precedent, is believed to be the essence of experience. ... But experience in its vital form is experimental, an effort to change the given; it is characterized by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connexion with a future is its salient trait.
4. The empirical tradition is committed to particularism. An experience that is an undergoing of an environment and a striving for its control in new directions is pregnant with connexions.
5. In the traditional notion experience and thought are antithetical terms. ... But experience ... is full of inference. There is, apparently, no conscious experience without inference; reflection is native and constant. ... experience means living; and that living goes on in and because of an enviroing medium, not in a vacuum.... The very point of experience, so to say, is that it doesn't occur in a vacuum.... Dynamic connexions are qualitatively diverse, just as are the centers of action. *In this sense*, pluralism, not monism, is an established empirical fact.³⁴

Dewey believed that Kant fostered the spirit of absolutism while technically denying the possibility of absolutes. Kant's teaching that *a priori* conceptions are necessary components of reason and without these conceptions experience is anarchic and chaotic, strengthened the conceptions of the separation between

"Sense and Thought, Experience and Reason." For Dewey, "Success and failure are the primary "categories" of life; achieving of good and averting of ill are its supreme interests; hope and anxiety (which are not self-enclosed states of feeling, but active attitudes of welcome and wariness) are dominant qualities of experience."³⁵

Dewey regarded the work of Kant as "a perpetuation of the method of adjustment by means of partition of territories."³⁶ He thought that Kant substituted the idea of faith grounded in practical reason for the idea of faith in revelation. Dewey asserted that "the main characteristic of his (Kant's) system is precisely a division of territory between the objects of cognitive certitude and those of equally complete moral assurance."³⁷

The *Critique of Pure Reason*, says Dewey, secures the foundation of natural knowledge. *The Critique of Practical Reason* "performs like office for the foundations of moral and religious conceptions."³⁸

Kant, says Dewey, "limited science to phenomena in space and time in order that the world of higher and noumenal realities may be appropriated by ideals and spiritual values. Each has complete jurisdiction and undisputed sovereignty in its own realm."³⁹ Kant devised his system so that the natural realm and the trans-phenomenal realm excluded each other but made each other necessary. Dewey said, "the neat way in which the elements of one dovetailed into those of the other was to him (Kant) a convincing proof of the necessity of the system as a whole. If the dovetailing was the product of his own intellectual carpentry, he had no suspicion of the fact."⁴⁰

The Kantian system supported both the continuing development of science and the continuation of the traditional authority. Kant's

Copernican revolution was a shift from theological to a human authorship of knowledge. He edited a new version of old conceptions about the mind and its activities in knowing. A genuine reversal of traditional ideas about the mind, reason, conceptions, and mental processes, said Dewey, means abandoning the opposition between knowing and doing and theory and practice. It means substituting security for certainty and accepting regulation of change in place of unchanging absolutes. It transfers the standard of judgement from "antecedents to consequents, from inert dependence upon the past to intentional construction of the future.... If such changes do not constitute, in the depth and scope of their significance, a reversal comparable to a Copernican revolution, I am at a loss to know where such a change can be found or what it would be like."⁴¹

ENDNOTES

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