Dewey's Metaphysics
Boisvert, Raymond

Published by Fordham University Press

Boisvert, Raymond.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63960
II

EXPERIMENTALISM
Darwin, Change, and the Transition to Experimentalism

1. A Renewed Emphasis on Change

Dewey's transformation from an idealist to a philosopher of experimentalism was not the result of a sudden and thorough rejection of his earlier views. As we saw, Dewey's own formulation was that he "drifted" from Hegelianism. In fact, the transition from idealism to experimentalism stemmed from the isolation and elevation in significance of two topics that were components in his idealistic synthesis. We know that Dewey's idealism was a dynamic one that gave due recognition to the fact of change. We also know, from his book on Leibniz, of his tendency to assimilate this view to a biological model. He had inherited from Morris and Trendelenburg an appreciation for the achievements of science in general and the specific importance of integrating Darwin's theory of evolution into a philosophical analysis. These two concerns were now separated from his idealism and became the main pillars on which his experimental phase was built.

The beginning of Dewey's experimental phase is marked by his first public presentation of a new logical position in Studies in Logical Theory, published in 1903. This is a logic based on the experimental methodology of the sciences, and as such is fully in line with the emphasis on change which dominates this period of his development. For Dewey, logic means essentially methodology. A method based on that of the sciences requires that the subject matter of investigation, far from being rigid and unchanging, be amenable to alterations and manipulations during the process of inquiry.

This recognition of the importance of change as crucial to a novel way of philosophizing was not a uniquely Deweyan insight. In this
respect, Dewey simply typifies a movement of early twentieth-century thought. In Europe, for example, the French philosopher Julien Benda has spoken of the "hiatus" which separates earlier thinkers from their twentieth-century counterparts. This hiatus, he has argued, "consists of the fact that for the former the most honored mode of being was immutability, whereas for the latter it is movement, change." Sterling Lamprecht, an American historian of philosophy, agrees, but goes further in stating that this attitude was especially prevalent in his home country. "In any case, and however the facts of history are arranged, the development of a deliberate emphasis upon process or becoming is characteristic of a considerable part of twentieth-century philosophy, especially, I believe, of twentieth-century philosophy in the United States." Dewey was a leader in molding American philosophy in the manner Lamprecht describes. The present chapter examines Dewey's specific version of this general movement and sets forth the context in which his metaphysics in the post-idealistic writings can be discussed.

I begin by analyzing the impact of Darwin's theory of evolution on Dewey, for it was this theory which most influenced his view of change. Next, I touch on a matter pertinent to my interpretation of Dewey, the charge of many critics that he remained an idealist. I have argued that the idealistic period can be divided into two phases. The first of these, dominated by Kant and epistemological concerns, was antithetical to ontological considerations. On such a view, nothing can be said of beings as such; they remain an unknowable "x." My whole endeavor in this work, to describe the kind of ontology Dewey developed, would fail if he had never really altered his original Kantian outlook. The matter I take up in a late portion of this chapter involves critics of Dewey who make this very claim. They argue that Dewey remained an idealist, and explicitly compare him to Kant.

2. Darwin's Impact on the Conception of Form

John Dewey was born one month before Darwin published *The Origin of Species.* This fact is a mere historical curiosity, but Darwin's influence on Dewey is not. In 1909 Dewey delivered a famous lecture entitled "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy." Linking the new philosophical appreciation of change to the bio-
logical theory of evolution, he argued that until Darwin philosophy had been predisposed toward the permanent and the unchanging. Prior to Darwin, living beings were thought to manifest eternal types or species. The Greek predisposition toward the permanent and the unchanging appeared to be empirically verified in the flora and fauna found so abundantly throughout the world. Darwin challenged this kind of verification. "The influence of Darwin upon philosophy resides in his having conquered the phenomena of life for the principle of transition, and thereby freed the new logic for application to mind and morals" (MW IV 7–8). This quotation contains the major ingredients for Dewey’s experimentalism. Darwin and transition (change) are the axes on which Dewey’s thinking in this phase will revolve, while the most significant contribution of the period is his “new logic,” which can be applied not only to mind but to morals as well.

To understand Dewey’s position, it is important to pay attention to the attitude he believed Darwin’s theory had overturned. It is an attitude summarized by the term *eidos*.

The conception of *eidos*, species, a fixed form and final cause, was the central principle of knowledge as well as of nature. Upon it rested the logic of science. Change as change is mere flux and lapse; it insults intelligence. Genuinely to know is to grasp a permanent end that realizes itself through changes, holding them thereby within the metes and bounds of fixed truth. Completely to know is to relate all special forms to their one single end and good: pure contemplative intelligence. Since, however, the scene of nature which directly confronts us is in change, nature as directly and practically experienced does not satisfy the conditions of knowledge. Human experience is in flux, and hence the instrumentalities of sense-perception and of inference based upon observation are condemned in advance. Science is compelled to aim at realities lying behind and beyond the processes of nature, and to carry on its search for these realities by means of rational forms transcending ordinary modes of perception and inference [MW IV 6].

By a series of identifications, Dewey makes explicit what *eidos* means. He begins by offering translations of the term, first into Latin, *species*, and then into English, *form*, which he qualifies with the adjective “fixed.” Now, this identification of *eidos* as species, as
form, is not at all unexpected from someone familiar with the history of thought. Nonetheless, since one aim of these chapters is to discover how Dewey revises the concept of form in his own thought, it is important to be clear about what he means when he refers to it with respect to antecedent thought.

In a step which reflects his accurate historical sense, Dewey goes on to link form with final cause. He does not refer to any specific thinkers in his analysis, but in this respect he is following the tradition of Aristotle, for whom form and end, as two of his four causes, are closely interrelated in just the sense Dewey describes. The end of a particular line of development is the mature form of an individual being. Up to this point, there appears to be nothing objectionable in the position Dewey describes. This is especially true if we consider the embryo as our model of development. Here changes do occur, but these changes are not unguided. They are directed toward a certain preferred state.

But in Dewey's interpretation eidos means more than this, and in this additional meaning Dewey finds reason for criticism. Eidos is identified with a fixed form and involves a permanent end. Packed into these two adjectives are all the objections he will bring to bear on the classical conception of form. His major criticism is that the actual fact of change is underemphasized when the focus of philosophical attention is placed on the fixed and permanent. The fixed form and permanent end may have been brought about by a series of changes, but the changes involved in producing these results are secondary and negligible. As long as natural entities are seen as being merely the unfolding of a prearranged plan, the real occurrence of change and alteration will be interpreted as insignificant, as making no real difference in the production of a being that had its end-state absolutely fixed from the beginning of growth and development.

Knowledge, on the traditional view, seeks to go beyond the vagaries of opinion and belief, aiming at the fixed and the permanent. Thus, ontology and epistemology combine to reinforce the importance of permanence at the expense of change. Dewey is arguing that in the Greek view of nature change is not so much denied as minimized. It is seen as so secondary and unimportant that philosophers would betray their exalted stature by concentrating on
the changing aspect of reality. They ought instead to seek the permanent, the static, and the unchanging.

In another work, twenty years later, Dewey ascribes this predisposition toward the fixed to the hierarchical structure of Greek society, with its artistic and religious practices. Practical activity, the concern with the mundane, the ever changing, was for lesser mortals; intellectuals concerned themselves with theory. “They glorified the invariant at the expense of change, it being evident that all practical activity falls within the realm of change” (QC 14). From the Deweyan point of view, the difficulty with this attitude is that the world confronting us is continually in flux. If only the permanent will satisfy the conditions of knowledge, and if reality as we experience it is in a constant state of change, then knowledge and science cannot deal with the immediate, lived world given to the thinker in everyday experience. Characterized by flux, uncertainty, strivings, successes, and frustrations, this immediate, lived world can never qualify as a proper source of knowledge in the Greek understanding of that term. Knowledge, in this sense, if it is to be secure, sure, absolutely certain, must have for its corresponding object a reality that is permanent and fixed.

Since philosophy interpreted in this way must seek the stable, it searches for it in a realm separated from experienced reality. It then spends its time, as Dewey says, seeking the “realities lying behind and beyond the processes of nature.” All this is significant because it follows from the acceptance of an ontology that posits forms and ends. If Dewey rejects such an ontology, it is because it has traditionally led away from the concerns of the here and now to a concern with a hidden stability, with an exalted world of stasis and permanence.

I should indicate at this point that quotations from Dewey must be approached guardedly whenever historical references are involved. This is an issue that will recur throughout the present book. Passages of this sort are of importance for clarifying Dewey's own doctrines, but they provide very little accurate information about the thinkers he is criticizing. Dewey's penchant for gliding over significant details in the positions of an individual thinker or movement is nowhere more prevalent than in his treatment of Greek philosophy. More often than not, he lumps Greek thinkers together
and attributes a single position to all of them. For example, the passage cited above, concerning “realities lying behind and beyond the processes of nature,” applies more directly to Plato than to any other Greek thinker. Dewey nonetheless implies that *eidos* meant the same thing for all the Greek philosophers. This kind of oversimplification is especially disappointing in a thinker who, following the example of his teacher Morris, was well versed in the history of thought. One of Dewey's students, Walter Veazie, in commenting on this situation, could only come to the conclusion that there were two Deweys. One, the faculty member and teacher, was meticulous in his approach to the history of thought. “On one occasion a member of the faculty was outlining to us an article subsequently published. He summed up a paragraph of the 'Transcendental Dialectic' of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Dewey: 'Wait a minute. It's been 25 years since I have seen the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but if I remember rightly, the passage runs thusly,' and Dewey quoted the paragraph *verbatim*.” Dewey, according to Veazie, insisted on the same kind of rigorous standards from his students, demanding that they be able to recall the “exact words” of an earlier thinker. In spite of this historical competence, Veazie readily admits that there was a second Dewey, the author. In his written works, Veazie says, Dewey would make statements for which “he would have flattened a student.” Since many of the passages I shall cite contain references to Greek thought, this frustrating habit of Dewey's will have to be constantly kept in mind.

Dewey's technique, although unsound from a scholarly point of view, is effective from a polemical one. Once he has established what the pre-Darwinian view with its Greek roots involved, the impact of Darwin's theory can by contrast be set forth clearly and decisively. Darwin's significance lies in the fact that he undercut the scientific basis for such an interpretation of nature and, in so doing, inaugurated a new era, one in which change (or process, or variation) was not interpreted as a defect or a mark of inferior being, but was now actually seen to characterize reality. “In laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the *Origin of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics and reli-
This mode of thinking was an exact reversal of the older one: "And change rather than fixity is now a measure of 'reality' or energy of being; change is omnipresent" (RP 114). Contemporary scientists are no longer concerned with essences, as the manifestations of the permanent. They attempt, rather, to discover correlations of changes. Unlike their Greek counterparts, they do "not try to define and delimit something remaining constant in change" (RP 114).

If anything can now be labeled all-encompassing, it is change. Dewey quite rightly recognized that this philosophical turnabout was to a large extent due to Darwin's work. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, published in 1922, he went so far as to define evolution strictly in terms of change. "In fact evolution means continuity of change; and the fact that change may take the form of present growth of complexity and interaction" (HNC 197). As late as 1948, however, after both he and the *Origin* had been around for eighty-nine years, Dewey noted that the implications of this view had not yet really taken hold. The new introduction written especially for the reprinting of *Reconstruction in Philosophy* repeated his analysis of the effect of the discoveries of science, and complained that not all philosophers had yet come to realize the full significance of the scientific advances. Once again he formulated the new position against the background of the philosophical search for "the immutable and ultimate."

Into this state of affairs in natural science as well as in moral standards and principles, there recently entered the discovery that natural science is forced by its own development to abandon the assumption of fixity and to recognize that what for it is actually "universal" is *process*; but this fact of recent science still remains in philosophy, as in popular opinion up to the present time, a technical matter rather than what it is: namely, the most revolutionary discovery yet made [RP 260–61].

These are strong words, and they indicate the seriousness with which any interpreter must approach the issue of change and permanence. For Dewey the significance of this "most revolutionary discovery yet made" is that philosophy cannot turn to an analysis of contemporary issues without being forced into certain prejudged molds. A philosophy that sought ultimate Being, the really real, be-
hind or within reality was most unsuited for dealing with problems posed by changing circumstances. In these situations, which after all are the situations in which humans continually find themselves, it is not an antecedent fixity that must be resorted to, but a consequent readjustment. “Significant stages in change are found not in access of fixity of attainment but in those crises in which a seeming fixity of habits gives way to a release of capacities that have not previously functioned: in times that is of readjustment and redirection” (HNC 197).

2.1 Implications of the New View for Traditional Philosophical Problems

A philosophical position that admits change as not only real and pervasive but also as the proper object of intellectual scrutiny can deal successfully with these situations. Unlike ancient philosophy which sought to uncover the antecedently real, it tries to “gain the kind of understanding which is necessary to deal with problems as they arise” (QC 14). This emphasis on dealing with problems must be underscored if we are to understand Dewey correctly, for his concerns are never far removed from the moral sphere. Even in discussions of ontology, this concern for ethical issues, which pervades his works, is manifest. For this reason he makes such a forceful point of criticizing the ancient tradition. An ontology of fixed forms and ends contributes to a stagnant social situation, one in which novelty and innovation are restricted. Once these fixed forms and ends are accepted as characterizing natural existence, the social realm remains immobile. These fixed forms and ends, Dewey claims, “paralyze constructive human inventions” and condemn them to failure because human activity can “conform only to ends already set by nature” (RP 119-20).

Although Dewey interpreted Darwin’s thesis as the major force liberating philosophy to deal effectively with concrete problems, it is important to examine in just what manner Darwin’s influence was felt in philosophy. A philosophical outlook that took change seriously would, Dewey believed, prove fruitful in a special sense: it would enable philosophers to resolve problems which had traditionally frustrated them, especially prominent among which were
those formulated as irreconcilable oppositions—those, for example, of subject vs. object, freedom vs. determinism, teleology vs. mechanism, and substance vs. accident. Dewey argued that an accurate description of the situation would emphasize the dissolution rather than the solution of difficulties. It is a misunderstanding to think that all problems are solved by choosing one of the two alternatives assumed in the very posing of the problems. “Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place” (MV IV 14).

Recent discussions in philosophical biology serve as a good elucidation of the point Dewey is trying to make. During the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the early portion of this century, the mechanist–vitalist controversy was much debated. The controversy polarized opinions. If all entities, including living beings, are thought to be composed solely of matter arranged in a certain configuration, and if matter is interpreted as passive and inert, then the problem can be posed in terms of rigid alternatives. Given this foundation, certain properties of living organisms remain difficult to explain. Either these properties are ultimately to be explained in terms of the material constituents, which would mean explaining them away, or they are accepted as irreducible and underivable from matter, and thus the result of a vital force of some kind.

Both antagonists, the mechanists and the vitalists, can be interpreted as sharing a similar theory of matter. But both the emphasis on biology which resulted from Darwin’s work and the new physics of the twentieth century have undercut the basis for this presupposition. Biologists were beginning to study life historically and to recognize the gradual development of increasingly complex forms of life. At the same time physicists were significantly altering their conception of matter, describing it now in terms of energy. These kinds of developments provided an entirely new framework for the discussion of mechanism and teleology. As a consequence, the problem is framed no longer in terms of mechanism vs. vitalism, but in terms of varying complexities of organized material.10 The burning issue of a past age has been gotten over in the very sense Dewey suggested. Darwin’s influence is seen as crucial to contemporary philosophizing because he, more than any other thinker,
EXPERIMENTALISM

provided the framework in which philosophical problems, formerly thought insoluble, can be dissolved.

2.2 Specific Implications of the New View for the Question of Change and Permanence

The basic ontological question of change and permanence is not to be studied in terms of opposing, incompatible alternatives—that kind of opposition is precisely what Darwin's theory has helped philosophy to overcome—rather, the problem is to discover how these two facets of existence are related. We have seen how Dewey was anxious to emphasize change and to criticize philosophies that do not pay enough attention to it. Nonetheless, in the works that followed his lecture on Darwin, he clearly indicates that his analysis was not to disregard every kind of permanence. In Reconstruction in Philosophy, published in 1920, he argues that continuity of organization must be recognized in even the simplest forms of organisms. “Some degree of organization is indispensable to even the lowest grade of life. Even an amoeba must have some continuity in time in its activity and some adaptation to its environment in space. Its life and experience cannot possibly consist in momentary, atomic, and self-enclosed sensations” (RP 132). The Quest for Certainty echoes this, and offers an explanation of how the new philosophical outlook overcame the fixed distinctions between change and permanence: “Constants and relative invariants figure, but they are relations between changes, not the constituents of a higher realm of Being. . . . Instead of there being a fixed difference between it and something higher—rational thought—there is a difference between two kinds of experience; one which is occupied with uncontrolled change and one concerned with directed and regulated change” (QC 67).

This mention of “directed and regulated change” suggests a model which will be helpful in specifying just what Dewey's own position entails: the model of embryological development. The growth of an embryo to maturity embodies the tension between permanence and change in a manner consistent with the kind of analysis Dewey articulated. To clarify this somewhat, let us recall that Dewey wishes to reject two tenets of an antiquated vision of nature. Evolutionary theory has taught him, first of all, that natural beings are
not rigidly preprogramed to develop toward a fixed, unchangeable end. Secondly, change and process, far from being of negligible significance, are crucial to any proper understanding of nature. The embryological model satisfies both these criteria.

The growth from seed to maturity does proceed, it is true, as if directed by a certain end, but this end is no longer viewed as rigidly fixed. A series of real changes or alterations may occur during the process of maturation which will lead to the production of a variation, or even (given enough time) of a new species. Novelty is always a possibility. It is not denied on a priori grounds. Change, on this view, thus gains stature as a factor leading to very real alterations of the living creature. But on the embryological model, changes gain significance in another sense as well. An organism does not grow from within as the isolated unfolding of a prearranged plan. To develop, it must interact successfully with its surroundings, gaining sustenance from this environment while avoiding its hazards, dangers, and diseases. Because of this, changes and alterations in either the organism or its environment cannot be viewed as of little importance. Rather they are seen as crucial in both cases referred to: that of normal development, and in instances resulting in a new form. Dewey, however, has identified form with eidos, that concept which expressed the permanent and fixed features of reality so prominent in Greek thought. Since his own doctrine does not deny permanence, but rather reinterprets it, it is necessary to examine just how the concept of form in his philosophy changes accordingly. This topic will be taken up in Chapter 3.

3. Dewey: Still a Kantian?

The lecture on Darwin clearly brings out the factors that helped draw Dewey away from idealism. Many critics, however, argue that with the exception of some superficial alterations, Dewey’s position remained unchanged. The accuracy of these interpretations is not a subsidiary issue in relation to my undertaking. The kind of idealism Dewey is said to hold denies the very possibility of a descriptive ontology. He has been called a “subjectivist”\(^ {11} \) and a “subjective idealist”;\(^ {12} \) it has even been suggested that his thought can be characterized as a “solipsism.”\(^ {13} \) Each of these labels indicates a return to the earliest phase of his career, his period of Kantianism. The
criticisms claim, in effect, that although Dewey may have believed
that he had outgrown his earliest phase, he had not really done
so. My interpretation, by contrast, depends decisively on the fact
that Dewey did change his philosophical orientation. As we saw
in the previous chapter, a Kantian-type of analysis disallows the
assertion that beings are formed. Form then is not a trait of beings
themselves, but mind-dependent.\textsuperscript{14} Such an idealism can make only
negative assertions about beings as beings. It is limited to the claim
that beings are unknowable and that intelligibility must come
from some other source, conscious activity.

The position I am proposing argues, rather, that Dewey did de­
velop a descriptive ontology. This ontology asserts that, given a new
philosophical outlook, there is justifiable cause for speaking of en­
tities and situations as formed. The two approaches, the Kantian
and that of descriptive ontology, are widely divergent and incom­
patible. This incompatibility alone would make the interpretation
that Dewey is an idealist significant for the central argument of this
book. But that fact is buttressed by the prominence and quantity
of commentators willing to interpret Dewey in this manner. The
list of critics who place Dewey in the idealistic camp is impressive.
For instance, George Santayana, Benedetto Croce, and Bertrand
Russell have expressed criticisms that either suggest or claim out­
right that he is really an idealist who has restricted the real and the
knowable to the experienced.\textsuperscript{15} Other thinkers have made similar
claims. These include Stephen Pepper, Evander Bradley McGil­
vary, Harry Todd Costello, Robert Dewey, Charles Bakewell, and
John Edward Russell.\textsuperscript{16} We could add as well Richard Rorty as the
most recent interpreter to argue for a lasting kinship between
Dewey and Kant’s idealism.\textsuperscript{17}

Though each of these thinkers charges that Dewey remained an
adherent of idealism, Pepper and Croce form a sub-group interpret­
ing him as an objective idealist, while all the others contend that he
held some form of subjective idealism. The similarity of criticism
is made all the more significant because of the ideological and chron­
ological diversity among these men. Pepper, for instance, was a
pragmatist, while Croce was a neo-Hegelian. Having studied with
Dewey and Woodbridge, Costello considered himself to be a natural­
ist. McGilvary, on the other hand, attempted to develop a novel form
of realism, "perspective realism." Robert Dewey (no relation to John) was sympathetic to pragmatism but he claimed that John Dewey had not consistently maintained his own position. Rorty lists Dewey as one of his non-foundationalist heroes, but complains of certain untenable strains in his thought. Moreover, the chronology involved is not restricted to a particular stage in Deweyan scholarship. It spans the twentieth century. Bakewell and McGilvary framed their criticisms in its first decade; Rorty and Robert Dewey, in the middle of the eighth.

Because this interpretation is both prominent and a serious obstacle to my own reading of Dewey, I shall quote a few representative selections from these thinkers so that the general nature of their claim will be understood. The major focus of criticism in each case is the same: Dewey's seeming identification of existence and experience, with the consequent ambiguity about the status of beings not experienced. The three thinkers I shall cite, McGilvary, Robert Dewey, and Rorty, take up this line of argument in diverse but complementary ways.

McGilvary was perhaps the most persistent of the critics. Two Deweyan terms especially trouble him, "experience" and "objects." The problem, as McGilvary conceives it, is that for Dewey objects do not exist unless they are experienced.

The object as it existed before it was experienced, was not reality, but only a condition of reality, and the condition is not sufficient to produce reality. Only when the condition is supplemented by an experience which realizes the object does the object become real. . . . No thinker, no thought-object; no experience somewhere and somewhen, no meaningful reality anywhere and anytime. This is the truth which is contained in Professor Dewey's contention.

There are two directions in which I want to develop the analysis of this quotation. The first is historical. I shall indicate the manner in which McGilvary's interpretation in effect argues that the Deweyan position has remained unchanged since his first, Kantian, phase. The second involves the term "object," one of the foci for his remarks. The manner in which this term is understood has a direct bearing on the ontological issue I am discussing in this book.
(a) We saw in the last chapter that in his Kantian period Dewey distinguished “substance” from “mere succession of phenomena,” and argued that the guarantor of substance was the sense of abiding provided by the active mind. Substance, on this view, becomes subject-dependent, and Dewey’s position is a subjective idealism. Although McGilvary does not frame his criticism in the context of Dewey’s development, the similarity is evident to those familiar with that development. Dewey’s terminology has changed, to be sure, but McGilvary interprets those changes in a way that exactly corresponds to the earlier, Kantian, phase. Whereas Dewey had spoken of “mere phenomena,” “substance,” and “mind,” McGilvary’s interpretation deals with “condition of reality,” “object,” and “experience.” Dewey’s new terminology is being used, but the conclusion remains the same. Objects are not realized, have no reality, prior to their being experienced. In the earlier phase, Dewey’s presentation has described “substance” as mind-dependent. McGilvary argues that Dewey is now (1908) describing “objects” as experience-dependent.

(b) The nature of “objects,” the second consideration I wish to take up, can thus be recognized as important for a proper understanding of Dewey’s philosophy. McGilvary focuses here on a term that Dewey had made central and, unfortunately, ambiguous. The line of argument this critic developed is based on the assumption that “object” is synonymous with “thing” or “entity.” “Object” must be understood in the literal sense of something which “thrusts out” apart from the observing individual. When Dewey’s philosophy, according to McGilvary, makes objects dependent upon experience, it also makes the beings of the world dependent on that same experience. It is not surprising, therefore, to find McGilvary characterizing Dewey’s philosophy as a “thoroughgoing idealism, and a subjective idealism at that.”

The implications for ontology of such an interpretation are devastating. Since ontology is the subject that deals with beings insofar as they are beings, its sphere of study is, in this case, severely limited. The only permissible statement that could be made in ontology, if this interpretation were correct, would be the very one uttered by McGilvary. Of beings as such, that is, as independent of constitutive experience, one could assert only that they are “conditions of re-
ality." It certainly would not be possible to argue that beings are in some sense formed. Since objects apart from experience do not possess reality, any intelligible descriptive statement about them is effectively ruled out.

By differentiating between objects prior to experience and objects after experience, McGilvary suggests that the shadow of the first Kantian critique extends through Dewey's earliest logical works. The other two critics make the relationship to Kant even more explicit. Richard Rorty is a thinker who recognizes that much of what Dewey accomplished was anti-Kantian. He nonetheless argues that Dewey's solution to the mind–body problem seemed "like one more invocation of the transcendental ego" because in both Kant and Dewey "the model of knowledge is the same." This model is "the constitution of the knowable by the cooperation of two unknowables." An object such as a table, Rorty asserts, is for Dewey "neither an ugly brown thing whose hard edges bumped people, nor yet a swirl of particles, but something common to both—sheer potentiality, ready to be transformed in a situation."

This critic is suggesting that Dewey accepts some version of Kant's noumena. On such an interpretation Dewey is said to view the "really real," behind the common-sense and scientific views of things, as merely an undifferentiated noumenal realm. Like McGilvary, Rorty accuses Dewey of surreptitiously (by using novel terminology) reintroducing a Kantian noetic scheme. The reality beyond the common-sense and scientific views of things remains unformed, undefined, and unknowable for both Dewey and Kant. Dewey does not, Rorty admits, use the Kantian phrase "constitution of objects," but he does substitute a phrase of his own, "transaction with the environment." Rorty stops short of explicitly identifying the Deweyan "unknowable" or "sheer potentiality" with Kant's Ding-an-sich, but Robert Dewey does not hesitate to do so.

When Dewey asserts that events as such are not objects of knowing, they become his process philosophy's version of the unknown somewhats (or Kantian unknowable Ding-an-sich) constituting nature beyond the data of immediate experience. It further follows from this view that the world as it is (a system of unknown events) must be distinguished from the world as it is known (a system of objects). This distinction introduces a dualism as sharp as any which Dewey
has critiqued—a dualism which separates reality and knowledge as completely as reality and appearance are separated by the most ardent Platonist.23

Just as McGilvary and Rorty were helpful in concentrating on the constitution of objects as a problem, so Robert Dewey's analysis focuses on the term event. To understand the quotation properly, some explanation of this word is necessary.

I shall deal with this topic more thoroughly when Experience and Nature is analyzed. For the moment, I need only note that "event" is a technical term Dewey used to describe beings. It is an ontological term, one of the widest generality, applying to all beings. In this respect, Dewey is similar to other philosophers who develop an ontology and who find it necessary to employ a term that best exemplifies their interpretation of beings. For Aristotle it was ousia; for Aquinas, substantia. Leibniz used monad; Dewey preferred event. It is thus a crucial term that must be understood properly in any attempt to grasp what Dewey is saying. Robert Dewey interprets it as signifying that beings apart from experience are indeterminate, and thus unknowable. Once this is established the next significant aspect of this analysis, the relationship with Kant, follows with no difficulty. Events correspond to the Dinge-an-sich, and known objects can only be the results of the interplay of these events with experience.

These three critics provide us with a good summary of the idealistic interpretation of Dewey. First of all, the basic issue is clear: Dewey's failure to distinguish between things as existents and things as experienced.24 Secondly, such a confusion leads McGilvary to argue that, for Dewey, "objects" do not precede thought. Rorty is led to claim that prior to transactions there exists for Dewey only "sheer potentiality." Objects are results, requiring experience or transactions for full realization. Thirdly, the term in Dewey's writings used to contrast "object" as result is said to be "event" on Robert Dewey's analysis. Events represent the unknown things as merely existents. To become objects these undifferentiated, indeterminate events require the completion experience brings. These three moments—namely, the unknown somewhats, or "events" that precede knowledge, the experience of these events, and the resultant known "object"—form the skeletal framework on which the interpretation of Dewey as an idealist is constructed. Since this parallels the Dinge-
an-sich, unity of apperception, and known object of the Kantian schema, Dewey is seen specifically as not having moved beyond the position of the German thinker.25

One commentator who comes close to, but stops short of, interpreting Dewey as an idealist is Sterling Lamprecht. His interpretation helps to put the arguments of the critics mentioned above into proper perspective and indicates the approach I believe is a more accurate one. Lamprecht asserts that Dewey himself often phrases his position in such a way that an interpretation of the sort these critics developed is almost inevitable. Certain passages in which Dewey emphasizes that the object of knowledge is a result and not an antecedent especially bother Lamprecht. The language which Dewey chooses, according to Lamprecht, “suggests the strange and unusual positions that only the future, never the past, can be known, and that only the promotion of successful action, never the disclosure of theoretical truth, is the objective of cognitive operations. Dewey repudiates these positions, and it would be unjust to belabor him further along these lines.” However, a few pages later, Lamprecht exclaims, almost as if in exasperation: “Yet I confess that at times I see no possible way of so interpreting his words as to acquit him of the unsound ideas his words easily suggest to many of his critics.”26 Exclamations of this kind from a careful historian of philosophy who knew Dewey well are significant in two ways: (a) they give some credence to the idealistic interpretation; and (b) they warn the reader that, although this view of Dewey's work has many texts to fall back on for support, it is, in the end, false. I am in full accord with Lamprecht on this matter, and shall develop my criticisms of Dewey's interpreters in the following chapter.

My approach in the next chapters will be to examine Dewey's works according to the periods of his development. Chapter 3 will continue the analysis of the present one, by studying a major text of the experimental phase, *Essays in Experimental Logic*, published in 1916. The next four chapters will deal with texts from the period of naturalistic ontology. Three of these, *Experience and Nature, Art as Experience*, and *The Quest for Certainty*, published between 1925 and 1934, contain the major elements for reconstructing Dewey's philosophy as it relates to ontological issues. Because of this, I will discuss these books in a systematic rather than a chronological manner. They will be analyzed in three chapters, each of
which will deal with the appropriate sections of all three books. Finally, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, published in 1938, will be discussed in Chapter 7.

4. SUMMARY

Chapter 2 begins the examination of two topics that will be continued in later chapters: the impact of Darwin’s theory on Dewey’s thought, and the recurring criticism that Dewey had not really turned his back on a Kantian-type of idealism. The first issue is significant because Dewey’s constructive ontological syntheses are influenced by evolutionary theory; the second, because, if the critics are correct, Dewey could not, except in a severely restricted sense, have articulated a descriptive naturalistic metaphysics.

We saw in this chapter that Darwin had a threefold impact on Dewey. 

(a) The greatest result of Darwin’s theory of evolution was to bring the fact of process, flux, or change into prominence. 

(b) Grasping the significance of this doctrine immediately, Dewey used it to criticize classical metaphysics as not sufficiently sensitive to the pervasiveness of change. He singled out the term eidos as the distillation of a philosophical attitude that emphasized the fixed and permanent at the expense of the fluid and aleatory. 

(c) Evolutionary thought also helped reveal the manner in which philosophical problems could be overcome by being dissolved rather than solved. This means that for certain fundamental issues such as change and permanence or unity and multiplicity the very way of phrasing the problematic would have to be altered. No longer should these problems be framed in terms of such incompatibilities as change vs. permanence or unity vs. multiplicity. The new way of formulating the issues asks in what ways these dimensions mutually interpenetrate each other. Finally, this chapter surveyed a prominent line of criticism in Deweyan scholarship: interpreters who claim that Dewey’s post-idealistic writings retain a Kantian distinction between unknowable somewhats and an object-constituting subject.

NOTES

1. See chap. 1 for the influence of Trendelenburg. Morris’ intellectual biographer describes Darwin’s influence on Morris in this way: “Morris
began his mature thinking under the impact of these widely ramifying influences. He had acquired a new responsibility with the Johns Hopkins opening, and he found the intellectual world considerably changed from the general aspect familiar to him in 1874, when the Ueberweg translation and the Trendelenburg article were completed. He was confronted now by a revivified Hegelianism, which had come forward to complement the Darwinian ferment and which comprised a fresh and highly alive body of thought” (Jones, Morris, pp. 241-42).

2. On the European continent, the undisputed leader of this movement was Henri Bergson. He explained succinctly the significance of this attitude toward change in a lecture “The Perception of Change” delivered at Oxford in 1911: “I have chosen it [the topic of change] because I consider it to be fundamental, and because I believe that, if we are convinced of the reality of change and if we make an effort to grasp it, everything would be simplified. Some philosophical difficulties which we now consider insurmountable would be overcome” (“La perception du changement,” in Oeuvres [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959], p. 1366). Dewey, as we shall see, is in complete agreement that the real significance of the new emphasis on change is the pathway it opens for reformulating traditional philosophical difficulties.


5. The Kantian threat to metaphysics is well described by Copleston: “The cognitive function of the categories lies in their application to objects as given in sense intuition, that is, to phenomena. Things-in-themselves are not, and cannot be, phenomena. And we possess no faculty of intellectual intuition which could supply objects for a meta-phenomenal application of the categories. Hence metaphysics of the classical type is excluded, when it is considered as a possible source of objective knowledge” (Frederick Copleston, s.j., A History of Philosophy. VI. Wolff to Kant [London: Burns & Oates, 1960], p. 277).

6. Dewey’s date of birth is October 20, 1859, and the Origin was published on November 27 of the same year.

7. “And since ‘nature’ means two things, the matter and the form, of which the latter is the end, and since all the rest is for the sake of the end, the form must be the cause in the sense of ‘that for the sake of which’” (Physics 199A30–33, in The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon [New York: Random House, 1941], p. 250).

9. In his autobiography, Dewey suggests the fruitfulness of a "'Back to Plato' movement" in philosophy. This kind of revival would be especially helpful, he states, if it focused on the early and middle dialogues, in which the "highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn" (LW V 155). What Dewey says about Plato in this context is equally true of Dewey himself.

10. George Gaylord Simpson, for example, has argued that although biology requires "compositionist" (in essence teleological) as well as "reductionist" (physico-chemical, mechanical) types of explanation, this does not imply a return to vitalism. "Here I should briefly clarify a point of possible confusion. Insistence that the study of organisms requires principles additional to those of the physical sciences does not imply a dualistic or vitalistic view of nature" ("Biology and the Nature of Science," Science, January 11, 1963, p. 87). Ernst Mayr argues similarly and concludes: "Vitalism as a possible theory of biology has been dead for some 40 or 50 years, as has been the entire argument of mechanism versus vitalism" (Evolution and the Diversity of Life: Selected Essays [Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1976], p. 374).


14. See chap. 1, sect. 2.1 as well as the quotation from Copleston in note 5 above.


17. "There is obviously some sense in which Dewey agrees with Kant that only the transcendental idealist can be an empirical realist" (CP 83).

18. Besides the article cited in note 12, McGilvary's criticisms of Dewey can be found in the following writings: "Pure Experience and Reality," *The Philosophical Review*, 16 (1907), 266-84; "Pure Experience and Reality: A Reassertion," ibid., 422-24; and "Professor Dewey's 'Brief Studies in Realism,'" *The Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (1912), 344-49.


20. CP 85.

21. CP 84.

22. CP 84.


24. Another commentator who knew Dewey well, Harry Todd Costello, argues that it is this very failure which leads Dewey to be criticized as a subjectivist. Costello says that Dewey is "surprised when people interpret him in subjectivist terms. Yet one who fails to distinguish between what is and what he experiences, has no reason to be surprised at such an interpretation" ("Professor Dewey's 'Judgments of Practice,'" 449-50).

25. Those thinkers who interpret Dewey as still under the influence of Kant are probably thinking of selections such as the following from the first version of the transcendental deduction of the categories. "What then is to be understood when we speak of an object corresponding to, and consequently also distinct from, our knowledge? It is easily seen that this object must be thought only as something in general = x, since outside our knowledge we have nothing which could be set over against this knowledge as corresponding to it. . . . But it is clear that, since we have to deal only with the manifold of our representations and since that x (the object) which corresponds to them is nothing to us—being, as it is, something that has to be distinct from all our representations—the unity that the object makes necessary can be nothing else than the formal unity of consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of representations. It is only when we have thus produced synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition that we are in a position to say that we know the object" (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith [London: Macmillan, 1929], pp. 134, 136).

These citations contain all the main elements on which Dewey's critics have built their interpretation of him as an idealist. There is, to begin with, an environment which is a manifold of representations, in other words, an "x," beyond or outside of our knowledge. Secondly, there is the possibility that this manifold may be synthesized by the
unity of consciousness. This results, thirdly, in a known object. In Deweyan terminology these three moments become: (a) unknown subject matter, (b) the activity of inquiry, and (c) the object of knowledge.