

Differences that make a difference.

Dewey, cognitive science, and the spirit of the experimental method

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Perhaps more than any other philosopher, John Dewey insisted that the question of the relations between the mind and the body was *not* a speculative question. Be it right or wrong-headed, the distinction at the core of this question is basically a distinction with social, political and ethical roots and consequences, so that any attempt to (dis)solve this question must be assessed with reference to its consequences in ethics, education and social philosophy. The recent rediscovery of the importance of pragmatism for cognitive science has naturally led scholars to discuss and to refine the scope of Dewey's ideas on consciousness, meaning, experience, inquiry or conduct, and to contrast Dewey's ideas on the body/mind distinction with contemporary theories in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. So far, so good. But if we follow Dewey's conception of the role of philosophy in culture, we must *also* consider how the 'pragmatist turn' in cognitive science might lead to the reconsideration of broader questions, going beyond academic disputes in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. In this paper, I will explore two interrelated paths:

1) I will first summarize how the adverbial conception of mindedness put forward by Dewey in various works aims¹ at ultimately redefining *intelligence* by getting rid of the classical divide between the practical (the realm of material means) and the theoretical (the realm of ends, spirit, values and necessary principles). According to Dewey, Greek philosophy emerged as a reflection and justification of a cultural and social distinction between theory (knowledge, thinking) and practice (action, doing)². This distinction is maintained and reinforced during the modern era: the successes and the expansion of modern science (in technology, engineering, medicine, etc.) forced philosophers to argue that there are domains which are immune to the experimental attitude proper to science, since these domains are made of fixed, necessary and immutable principles, values and necessities. As Dewey made it clear in his recently published manuscript *Unmodern and Modern Philosophy*, the mind-body problem appeared in the 17th century when 'mind' was created as a deposit of what could not be integrated into the framework of mechanicism, and was also seen as the seat of the alleged 'intellectual' powers that would have fostered modern science. Traditional theories of mind, thought and knowledge are derived from the basic dualism between theory and practice. Revising these theories is thus a requirement if one wants to get rid of the larger dualism between theory and practice. More precisely: *in order to dissolve the mind-body problem, one*

¹ In papers such as 'What are states of mind?' (1912), 'Body and mind' (1928), 'How is mind to be known?' (1945), and in chapters of books such as *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*.

² See *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and *The Quest for Certainty*.

must notably describe its historical and non-philosophical origins. These origins are not only the causes of this problem; their overcoming must also be the aim of this dissolution. This overcoming ends at a new conception of intelligence, beyond the theory vs. practice dualism: intelligence is not a mental faculty, but an activity (exemplified in inquiry) including reasoning, observation, manipulation and imagination.

2) For Dewey, this new conception of intelligence must lead us to reconsider how intelligence can be at work in domains such as morals, education and politics. Any attempt to reflect on, and to develop Dewey's work in "philosophy of mind" must therefore face and discuss Dewey's hope that intelligence in ethics, art, and politics becomes *experimental*. Intelligence in these domains cannot be a matter of ends, principles and values that would be independent from the experimental attitudes at work in other domains of our culture. In the background here, there is Dewey's presupposition that the experimental dimension of intelligence is best seen at work in the scientific method. Let us put aside the idea that there would be something as *the* scientific method. Even if there is one, is the scientific method mostly a matter of *experimentation*? Is science (modern or contemporary) the paradigm of what Dewey meant by "experimental method" (or inquiry)? Dewey's meliorism relies on a faith in science³. Because of his fallibilism and of his anti-representationalism, Dewey's meliorism is not a form of scientism or positivism. Still, one may question the historical standpoint from which he conceived experimentalism and the melioristic virtues of science, and from which he interpreted history of science.

Dewey's insistence on, and development of, the practical, pedagogical and political stakes of any theory of mind seems to be a real difference in comparison with contemporary philosophies of mind and cognition (be they intellectualist or "pragmatist"). But how much can we endorse and exploit Dewey's considerations on mindedness and their consequences for social philosophy independently of his views on the experimental method in science? How much would this difference between Dewey and us make a difference for the way one could develop the practical consequences of a pragmatist turn in cognitive science today?

³ See for instance his "What I believe", 1931, and "Science and Society", 1931.