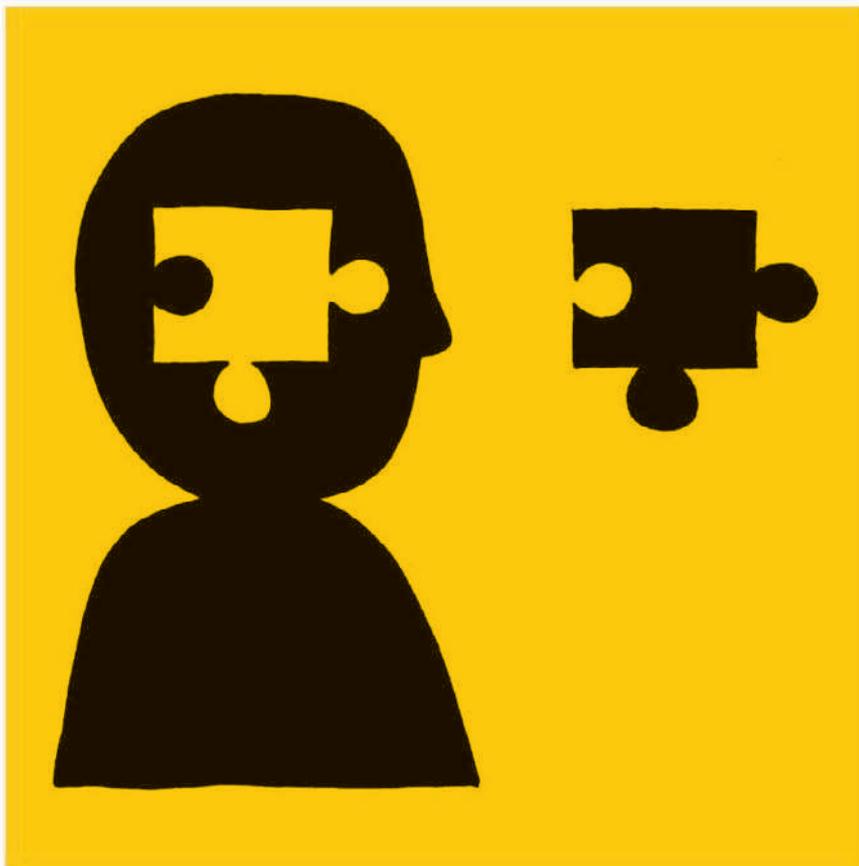


WE ONLY THINK WHEN WE ARE CONFRONTED WITH PROBLEMS

JOHN DEWEY (1859–1952)



IN CONTEXT

BRANCH

Epistemology

APPROACH

Pragmatism

BEFORE

1859 Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* puts human beings in a new, naturalistic perspective.

1878 Charles Sanders Peirce's essay *How to Make our Ideas Clear* lays the foundations of the pragmatist movement.

1907 William James publishes *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, popularizing the philosophical term "pragmatism."

AFTER

From 1970 Jürgen Habermas applies pragmatic principles to social theory.

1979 Richard Rorty combines pragmatism with analytic philosophy in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

John Dewey belongs to the philosophical school known as pragmatism, which arose in the US in the late 19th century. The founder is generally considered to be the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who wrote a groundbreaking essay in 1878 called *How to Make our Ideas Clear*.

Pragmatism starts from the position that the purpose of philosophy, or "thinking", is not to provide us with a true picture of the world, but to help us to act more effectively within it. If we are taking a pragmatic perspective, we should not be asking "is this the

See also: Heraclitus 40 ■ Charles Sanders Peirce 205 ■ William James 206–09 ■ Jürgen Habermas 306–07 ■ Richard Rorty 314–19



way things are?” but rather, “what are the practical implications of adopting this perspective?”

For Dewey, philosophical problems are not abstract problems divorced from people’s lives. He sees them as problems that occur because humans are living beings trying to make sense of their world, struggling to decide how best to act within it. Philosophy starts from our everyday human hopes and aspirations, and from the problems that arise in the course of our lives. This being the case, Dewey thinks that philosophy should also be a way of finding

practical responses to these problems. He believes that philosophizing is not about being a “spectator” who looks at the world from afar, but about actively engaging in the problems of life.

Evolving creatures

Dewey was strongly influenced by the evolutionary thought of the naturalist Charles Darwin, who published *On The Origin of Species* in 1859. Darwin described humans as living creatures who are a part of the natural world. Like the other animals, humans have evolved in response to their changing »



John Dewey

John Dewey was born in Vermont, USA, in 1859. He studied at the University of Vermont, and then worked as a schoolteacher for three years before returning to undertake further study in psychology and philosophy. He taught at various leading universities for the remainder of his life, and wrote extensively on a broad range of topics, from education to democracy, psychology, and art. In addition to his work as a scholar, he set up an educational institution—the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools—which put into practice his educational philosophy of learning by doing. This institution is still running today. Dewey’s broad range of interests, and his abilities as a communicator, allowed his influence on American public life to extend far beyond the Laboratory Schools. He wrote about philosophy and social issues until he died in 1952 at the age of 92.

Key works

1910 *How We Think*
1925 *Experience and Nature*
1929 *The Quest for Certainty*
1934 *Art as Experience*

environments. For Dewey, one of the implications of Darwin's thought is that it requires us to think of human beings not as fixed essences created by God, but instead as natural beings. We are not souls who belong in some other, non-material world, but evolved organisms who are trying to do our best to survive in a world of which we are inescapably a part.

Everything changes

Dewey also takes from Darwin the idea that nature as a whole is a system that is in a constant state of change; an idea that itself echoes the philosophy of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. When Dewey comes to think about what philosophical problems are, and how they arise, he takes this insight as a starting point.

Dewey discusses the idea that we only think when confronted with problems in an essay entitled *Kant and the Philosophic Method* (1884). We are, he says, organisms that find ourselves having to respond to a world that is subject to constant change and flux. Existence is a risk, or a gamble, and the world is fundamentally unstable. We depend upon our environment to be able to survive and thrive, but

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We do not solve philosophical problems, we get over them.

John Dewey

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the many environments in which we find ourselves are themselves always changing. Not only this, but these environments do not change in a predictable fashion. For several years there may be a good crop of wheat, for instance, but then the harvest fails. A sailor may set sail under fine weather, only to find that a storm suddenly blows up out of nowhere. We are healthy for years, and then disease strikes us when we least expect it.

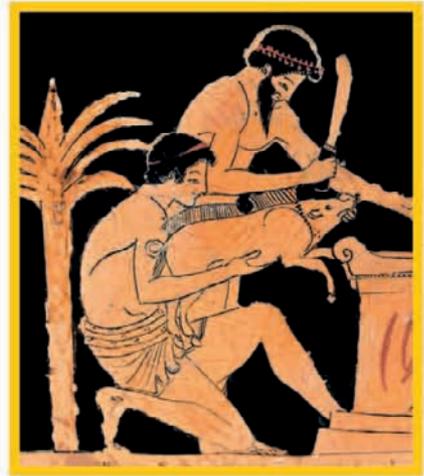
In the face of this uncertainty, Dewey says that there are two different strategies we can adopt. We can either appeal to higher beings and hidden forces in the universe for help, or we can seek to understand the world and gain control of our environment.

Appeasing the gods

The first of these strategies involves attempting to affect the world by means of magical rites, ceremonies, and sacrifices. This approach to the uncertainty of the world, Dewey believes, forms the basis of both religion and ethics.

In the story that Dewey tells, our ancestors worshipped gods and spirits as a way of trying to ally themselves with the “powers that dispense fortune.” This scenario is played out in stories from around the world, in myths and legends such as those about unfortunate seafarers who pray to gods or saints to calm the storm, and thereby survive. In the same way, Dewey believes, ethics arises out of the attempts our ancestors made to appease hidden forces; but where they made sacrifices, we strike bargains with the gods, promising to be good if they spare us from harm.

The alternative response to the uncertainties of our changing world is to develop various techniques of mastering the world, so that we



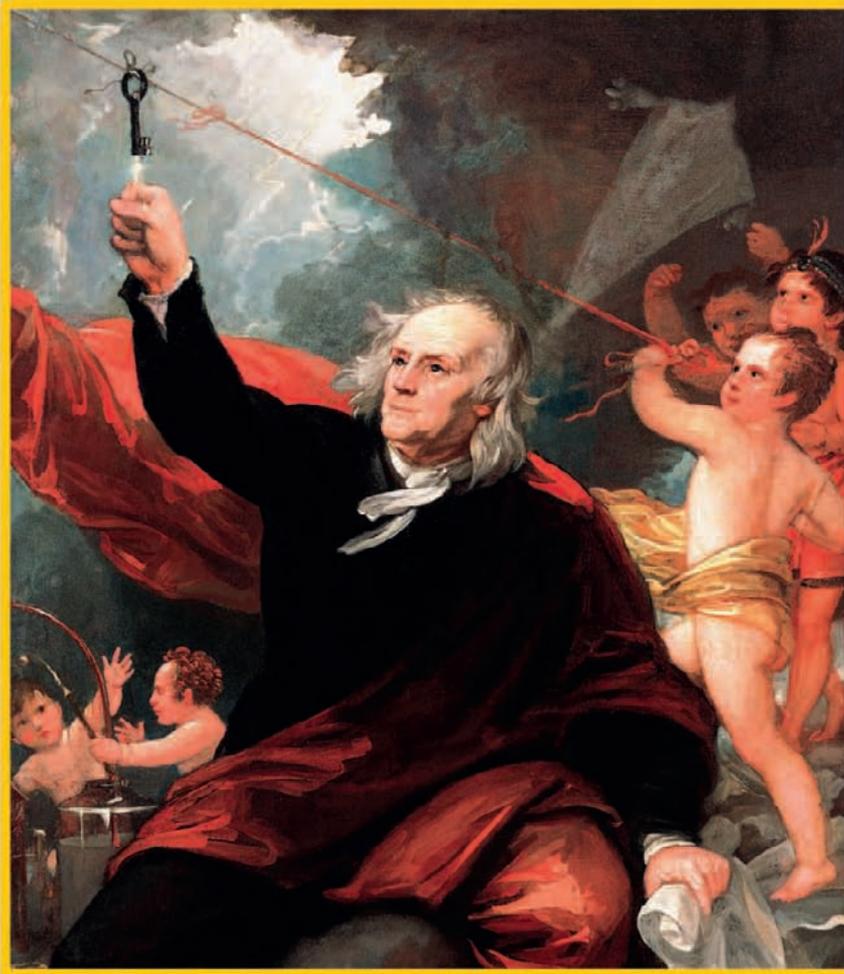
We no longer employ sacrifice as a way to ask for help from the gods, but many people find themselves offering up a silent promise to be good in return for help from some higher being.

can live in it more easily. We can learn the art of forecasting the weather, and build houses to shelter ourselves from its extremes, and so on. Rather than attempting to ally ourselves with the hidden powers of the universe, this strategy involves finding ways of revealing how our environment works, and then working out how to transform it to our benefit.

Dewey points out that it is important to realize that we can never completely control our environment or transform it to such an extent that we can drive out all uncertainty. At best, he says, we can modify the risky, uncertain nature of the world in which we find ourselves. But life is inescapably risky.

A luminous philosophy

For much of human history, Dewey writes, these two approaches to dealing with the riskiness of life have existed in tension with each other, and they have given rise to two different kinds of knowledge:



on the one hand, ethics and religion; and on the other hand, arts and technologies. Or, more simply, tradition and science. Philosophy, in Dewey's view, is the process by means of which we try to work through the contradictions between these two different kinds of response to the problems in our lives. These contradictions are not just theoretical; they are also practical. For example, I may have inherited innumerable traditional beliefs about ethics, meaning, and what constitutes a "good life", but I may find that these beliefs are in tension with the knowledge and understanding that I have gained

from studying the sciences. In this context philosophy can be seen as the art of finding both theoretical and practical responses to these problems and contradictions.

There are two ways in which to judge whether a form of philosophy is successful. First, we should ask whether it has made the world more intelligible. Does this particular philosophical theory make our experience "more luminous", Dewey asks, or does it make it "more opaque"? Here Dewey is agreeing with Peirce that philosophy's purpose is to make our ideas and our everyday experience clearer and easier to understand.

Scientific experiments, such as those performed by Benjamin Franklin in the 1740s, help us gain control over the world. Dewey thought philosophical theories should be equally useful.

He is critical of any philosophical approaches that ultimately make our experience more puzzling, or the world more mysterious. Second, he thinks we should judge a philosophical theory by asking to what extent it succeeds in addressing the problems of living. Is it useful to us, in our everyday lives? Does it, for instance, "yield the enrichment and increase of power" that we have come to expect from new scientific theories?

A practical influence

A number of philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell, have criticized pragmatism by claiming that it has simply given up on the long philosophical quest for truth. Nevertheless, Dewey's philosophy has been enormously influential in America. Given that Dewey places such an overriding emphasis on responding to the practical problems of life, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of his influence has been in practical realms, such as in education and in politics. ■

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Education is not an affair of telling and being told, but an active and constructive process.

John Dewey

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