

Seeing Together: Mind, Matter, and the Experimental Outlook of John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley

Frank X. Ryan. Great Barrington: American Institute for Economic Research, 2011.

In the past twenty years, scholarly interest in John Dewey's later writings has surged. While later works such as *Art as Experience* (1934), *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), and *Freedom and Culture* (1939) have received considerable attention, *Knowing and the Known* (1949), Dewey's late-in-life collaboration with Arthur F. Bentley, has been largely neglected. A common bias among Dewey scholars is that this work, instead of developing Dewey's *Logic*, departs from its spirit, reflects the overbearing influence of Bentley on Dewey (who was at the time an octogenarian), and, therefore, merits little serious scholarly consideration. However, Dewey and Bentley engaged in an extended correspondence, collected in *John Dewey and Arthur Bentley: A Philosophical Correspondence, 1932–1951* (1964), the result of which was no less than a watershed moment in Dewey's thinking on the experimental method of inquiry. The *Logic* was improved in ways that incorporated the insights of Charles Sanders Peirce's logic and developed Dewey's earlier work in a direction expressly intended by the aging pragmatist. Indeed, Dewey writes in correspondence with his co-author: "You [Bentley] shouldn't lean too heavily on the [1938] *Logic*; it wasn't a bad job at the time, but I could do better now [with *Knowing and the Known*]; largely through association with you and getting the courage to see my thing [logical theory] through without compromise" (*Correspondence*, 4:595; see also 184, 420, 481, 483–84).

One of the few scholars of American pragmatism to acknowledge that *Knowing and the Known* was a watershed development in Dewey's thinking is Frank X. Ryan, author of an exciting new book, *Seeing Together: Mind, Matter, and the Experimental Outlook of John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley*, that clearly and concisely presents the revolutionary method developed in *Knowing and the Known*: the transactional approach. However, as the author notes in the Preface, the book does more than offer a "mere summary or exposition" (ii). It also argues that the transactional method can help philosophers generally, and philosophical pragmatists specifically; reconceive their role as interdisciplinary specialists, assisting natural and social scientists in breaking through previous barriers and bringing progress to their separate fields of inquiry. The book is organized into seven main sections: (1) an introduction; (2) an initial chapter devoted to reconstructing the history of Western philosophy

along transactional lines; (3) another on Dewey's groundbreaking method of inquiry; (4) one on the vital relationship between self-action, interaction, and transaction; (5) another on the implications of transaction for an expansive theory of experience; (6) a penultimate chapter on how transaction illuminates communicative behavior; and (7) a final chapter about the treating the transactional approach as a theory of valuation.

Reminding the reader of Bentley's declaration (in his 1908 work *The Process of Government*) that "THIS BOOK IS AN ATTEMPT TO FASHION A TOOL," Ryan begins with the simple, though pregnant, notion that philosophy is an instrument: "The philosophy introduced in these pages, *transaction*, is a radical extension of this idea [that philosophy is a tool] . . . [for] transaction 'sees together' as dynamically interdependent what we know and how we come to know" (i). The tool of philosophy has a long history of use, punctuated by two competing views: *rationalism*, the metaphysical-epistemological position that objects in our world, in Ryan's words, "conform to mind," and empiricism, the opposite view that "Mind conforms to objects" (8). Rationalists, such as Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, espoused the notion that reality comes to us already infused with intellectual content (whether Plato's forms, Descartes's clear and distinct ideas, or God's infinite mind). In contrast, empiricists, such as Locke and Hume, insist that what is experienced, at least initially, are not conceptual forms, ideas, or infinite mind, but sensible-particulars directly perceived in a raw physical world. But how can we be assured of the existence of real (or really-real) objects if all we are familiar with are their sensible or intellectual representations? For all we know, our experience could be illusory—a product of, for instance, Descartes's evil genius, or artificially stimulated brains-in-vats. The impasse between rationalism and empiricism appeared interminable, until two thinkers, Kant and Hegel, attempted to reconcile them in grand philosophical systems. For Kant's system of transcendental idealism, the two views are synthesized in a functional understanding of mind as the intellectual and sensible conditions for experiencing an object in the world. In Hegel's dialectic of self-consciousness, history progressively liberates intellect or spirit from our conflicted sensible reality, so that "the world makes us, and we remake the world" (17) (or in Hegel's oft-repeated words, "the real is the rational and the rational is real"). Although this reconstruction of philosophical history is admittedly synoptic (and perhaps not entirely accurate, according to the nitpicky philosophical historian), one should appreciate it in light of Ryan's presumption that philosophy is a tool—in this case, one designed to disclose the value of the transactional approach to philosophers and non-philosophers alike.

In chapter 3, “Dewey’s Circuit of Inquiry,” Ryan demonstrates that John Dewey’s logic or theory of inquiry can resolve the problematic tension between empiricism and rationalism without building a grand philosophical system or invoking odd supra-natural entities (in Kant’s case, the *das Ding an sich* and, in Hegel’s, the Absolute). Influenced by Charles Sanders Peirce’s doubt-inquiry process, Dewey’s method of inquiry begins with non-cognitive experience, the sense of doubt or feeling of discomfort when things are awry; it proceeds to the definition of the problem; then to the deployment of suggested solutions or hypotheses as well as tools and information; and finally to an experiment that specifies a solution to the problem, and the return to non-cognitive experience, now enriched by the products of inquiry (26–28). Dewey’s circuit of inquiry, from doubt to resolution and back again, is transactional because it “sees together” two views previously separated into rational and empiricist camps or intellectual and sensible conditions for experience. Here, the rational and intellectual become functional hypotheses, while the empiricist and sensible become instruments and data for use in inquiry. Ryan extrapolates the two key implications of Dewey’s method of inquiry: first, that philosophy is pluralistic since “[t]here are as many ‘reals’ as the unlimited number of problems, inquiries, and achieved solutions through which these may be ‘realized’”; and, second, transaction is functional insofar as “[w]hat is real or objective is never independent of how it may be realized as an outcome of problem-solving activity” (27). Although not a grand philosophical system on the order of Kant’s transcendental idealism or Hegel’s dialectic of self-consciousness, Dewey and Bentley would develop Dewey’s method of inquiry systematically, bringing together the “whats” (or reals of ordinary experience) and “hows” (or procedures of problem-solving) into a single notion: transaction.

Chapter 4, “Self-Action, Interaction and Transaction,” Ryan outlines the trifecta of notions that make the transactional approach a good bet for creative problem solving. According to advocates of self-action, an activating force resides behind every action, impelling or causing it to happen. According to Bentley and Dewey, “[s]elf-action,” means “[p]re-scientific presentation in terms of presumptively independent ‘actors,’ ‘souls,’ ‘minds,’ ‘selves’ or ‘forces,’ taken as activating events” (*Collected Works*, LW 16:70). A person’s understanding of an object results wholly from his or her will to contemplate or know. For a tree, growth occurs because of a Liebnizian entelechy or an Aristotelian telos. The sophistication of inter-action far eclipses that of self-action. Given an inter-actional view, the person who understands an object does so because a discrete environment-independent

thinker and a separate thinker-independent environment come into contact. Also in inter-actional terms, the tree grows as a result of connections between internal factors (e.g., cells, roots, trunk, branches, and leaves) and external factors (e.g., earth, water, sunlight, carbon dioxide, and wind). But for Dewey and Bentley, we must not accept the attribution of a force—whether causal, spiritual, motivational or other—to the actions of a single agent or conceive understanding and growth in terms of the interactivity of two discrete entities, without looking to the broader system of activity, the situational conditions and the communicated meanings that actions, understandings, and growth give rise to. According to Ryan, “[w]here self-action and interaction look at a whole as the sum of its parts, transaction sees the parts as determined by the whole” (35). How then does this holistic approach to problem solving overcome the rationalist-empiricist impasse? Whereas the rationalist “champions the self-actional inner light of mind or soul,” the empiricist insists that “external materials interact with our appearances via perception” (40). Both self-actional rationalism and interactional empiricism generate rifts between mind and matter, subject and object, self and world, and knowing and known. As undergoing inquiry, mind-matter, subject-object, self-world, and knowing-known become functional distinctions, not dualistic categories, and thus harmonize better with our experience of objects not as “mind-independent existences[s]” but as “attained *objectives* of inquiry” (41).

The last three chapters of *Seeing Together* cover the more technical aspects of the transactional approach as it applies to experience, language, and valuation, respectively. In chapter 5, “Experience and Cosmos,” the “how” and “what” of experience are transactionally unified, converting objects into objectives of inquiry as well as facts of science and common sense into public facts in the social and natural world. I have previously taken issue with Ryan’s phenomenological reading of Dewey’s theory of experience (see my “John Dewey ‘on the side of the angels’”). However, Ryan here endorses Dewey and Bentley’s more fact-driven account of daily doings and understandings. They reconceptualize experience as the “cosmos of fact,” a highly inclusive account of all the ‘hows’ and ‘whats,’ the ‘knowings’ and ‘knowns,’ that bring order to our experience of a chaotic world. In Chapter 6, “Transaction and Sign-Behavior,” Ryan addresses Dewey and Bentley’s treatment of human sign-using behavior or communication. The difference between scientific and everyday communication, in the words of Dewey and Bentley, is that “science uses its technical names efficiently. . . . The efficiency lies in

the ability given the worker to hold such names steady—to know what she properly names with them—first at different stages of her own procedure and then in interchange with her associates” (*Collected Works*, LW 16:46). So, the difference is that inquirers in scientific—including social scientific—communities tend to search for more precise and technical meanings that will more effectively guide inquiry toward successful outcomes. Dewey and Bentley term this the process of progressively scrutinizing and refining terminology—as well as discarding terms unsuited for use in effective inquiry and unambiguous communication—“a passage from loose to firm namings” (*Collected Works*, LW 16:46). In chapter 7, “Life Transactions,” the circuit of inquiry is transformed into a “circuit of valuation,” a method of moral problem solving whereby habit-engrained values are critically analyzed, deliberately tested, and transactionally reconstructed (65). Once transaction encompasses valuation, then it can be successfully extended to the behavioral sciences, particularly economics.

Although the book is published by the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), the reader has little reason to worry that *Seeing Together* is the manifesto for an ideologically conservative think tank or movement in the field of economics. In full disclosure, I participated in a workshop on the transactional approach hosted by AIER in the summer of 2002. It was run by the Behavioral Research Council, a division of AIER dedicated to exploring the transactional approach’s potential for guiding research in behavioral economics—a project that the organization’s founder E. C. Harwood also dedicated himself to. A motley group of scholars, of various ideological persuasions and diverse disciplinary trainings, took part in the workshop, including some very Left-leaning Dewey scholars as well as Right-leaning economists. Ryan taught one section of the workshop, showing a special sensitivity to the broad range of philosophical and political views expressed by participants. If anything, this experience coupled with reading Ryan’s book has persuaded me that the transactional approach, or “seeing together” what is conventionally divided into “irreconcilable separates” is largely a method, not an ideological perspective—that while it can be freighted with political content, it is, at least in its native form, mostly free from such ideological moorings; and while it is not a value-neutral tool in the way that positivists see science, it is nevertheless well suited for rigorous inquiry in the humanities, behavioral sciences, and natural sciences. Thus, Ryan’s *Seeing Together* is a significant contribution to the literature on American pragmatism, a desperately needed treatment of Dewey and Bentley’s neglected work *Know-*

ing and the Known, and for the interdisciplinary pragmatist, an invitation to rethink the relationship between pragmatist theory and practice, along transactional lines.

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John Dewey’s Philosophy of Spirit

John R. Shook and James A. Good. New York: Fordham UP, 2010.

The recent publication of Dewey’s seminar lectures on Hegel’s philosophy of spirit, which he delivered in Chicago in 1897, contributes significantly to the ongoing task of more accurately appreciating the confluence of historical influences that shaped the trajectory of classical American philosophy. Dewey’s 1897 Hegel lectures are situated within their philosophical context by two seminal essays describing the relevance of recent scholarship to the philosophical or historical question of Dewey’s ambivalent indebtedness to Hegel. In their essays, Shook and Good emphasize the positive roles that certain Hegelian themes played in Dewey’s mature thought—that is, in texts produced many years after Dewey’s alleged break from Hegel (or neo-Hegelianism)—and they also suggest how certain formative influences on Dewey might plausibly if not compellingly explain why these Hegelian themes first became so convincing and why they remained influential throughout Dewey’s career as a philosopher and public intellectual.

Shook’s introductory essay explores Dewey’s philosophy of religion in general and his inheritance from Hegel’s philosophy of spirit in particular.