ON REALITY, EXPERIENCE, AND TRUTH: JOHN WATSON’S UNPUBLISHED NOTES ON JOHN DEWEY

JAMES SCOTT JOHNSTON (Memorial University) & SARAH MESSER (Memorial University)

John Watson of Queen’s University Canada is one of three individuals John Shook has identified as improving Dewey’s nascent theory of sensations. Dewey felt himself indebted to Watson in regards to his early absolutism of self/mind. In the Watson fonds at Queen’s University, Canada, there are unpublished hand-written notes by Watson on Dewey’s 1905 “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” and 1906’s “Reality, Truth, and Experience.” In the context of these unpublished notes, we investigate Watson’s claims against Pragmatism generally, and focus on reality, truth, and experience specifically. A brief introduction to Dewey’s theories of reality, truth, and experience precedes a fuller discussion of Watson’s chief criticisms, and an analysis of the strength of Watson’s arguments follows. We claim throughout that what is at stake here are not two rival conceptions of philosophy, one realist and the other idealist, but rather two rival understandings of Idealism, one naturalized and the other Absolute.
That the neo-Idealism of the latter half of the 19th century influenced the development of American Classical Pragmatism few would today deny.\(^1\) There has been a resurgence of interest in the relationship of one to the other; a resurgence that has led to the conclusion that John Dewey’s early philosophy of psychology and logic was influenced most profoundly by G.W.F. Hegel and the Scottish neo-Hegelians John and Edward Caird and Canadian John Watson, himself close to Edward Caird.\(^2\) Indeed, it has been said Dewey’s early absolutism of self is explicitly indebted to Watson, among others.\(^3\)

This would change, of course, as the development of Dewey’s functional theory of organism and environment gradually pushed aside the neo-Idealist tropes of absolute, mind, and spirit.\(^4\) By the turn of the century Dewey is often said to have abandoned Hegelian garb in favour of a Jamesian, Darwinian psychology and theory of knowledge in which adaptation and evolution took centre stage:\(^5\)

---


4 James Good, Rereading Dewey’s “Permanent Hegelian Deposit,” in John Shook and James Good, *John Dewey’s Philosophy of Spirit, with the 1897 Lecture on Hegel*, (New York: Fordham Press, 2010), p. 58. Good characterizes the “Absolute Knowing” at the end of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* as “Knowledge that does not seek to go beyond itself in order to ground itself.” Attempts to do this—attempts to cultivate a “transcendent absolute,” were the reason for Dewey’s abandonment of the British neo-Hegelians, according to Good. For they offered a “dogmatic posit” that neither Hegel, nor Dewey, would accept.

5 For example, Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca:
imposing neo-Hegelian edifice of Absolute Spirit as erected by neo-Idealists in the latter half of the 19th century is, by the turn of the century, absent. Yet, Dewey himself has said that a “Hegelian bacillus” remained in his thought (LW 5.153). In contrast, Watson never shed his allegiance to Hegel: indeed, he became further committed to moving Hegel’s heterodox account of Christianity to an orthodox conclusion. By 1906, the year of Dewey’s allegiance to “immediate empiricism,” Watson was in the process of developing what would become a novel (though neo-Hegelian) philosophy of religion.⁶

Dewey and Watson had the opportunity to correspond several times between the late 1880’s and the early 1890’s. Much of this correspondence is no longer extant. However, we know from Dewey’s letters that he had at least some contact with Watson.⁷ Watson kept himself apprised of Dewey’s work, as is evident from an unpublished collection of notes on Dewey’s pragmatism written circa 1907-1908. In what follows, we will examine these notes and discuss the particular findings of Watson in bringing attention to problems in Dewey’s treatment of central issues. These issues we will call 1) the problem of Reality 2) the problem of Experience, and finally 3) the problem of Truth. However, before we begin this, we want to discuss Dewey’s uses of these terms as they appear in the chief articles that Watson is examining: “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism” (1905), and “Reality, Truth, and Experience (1906). It will be our claim in the final section of the paper that, though both Idealists in the broadest sense of the term, Watson misses the move

⁷ Dewey and Watson corresponded on occasion during the late 1880’s and early 1890’s. However, and for reasons yet unknown, Dewey and Watson ceased corresponding after this time. It may well be that Dewey’s turn from neo-Idealism to functionalism and evolutionary naturalism played a role. On Dewey’s contact with Watson, see for example Dewey’s letter to Alice Chipman Dewey (1907 04 16) in John Dewey, The Correspondence of John Dewey Vol 1, edited by L. Hickman (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003). Dewey discussed attending a lecture by Watson at the Brooklyn Institute in New York City.
Dewey makes to describe in functional language what are Hegelian concepts of the real, of truth, and of the phenomenology of experiencing and in missing these, charges Dewey (wrongly, in our estimation) with what are insoluble problems from Watson's Objective Idealist standpoint.  

**Part I: Dewey on Reality, Experience, and Truth circa 1905-1906.**

Dewey had spent the previous 10 years of study in familiar/comfortable collegial circumstances, for he was head of a philosophy department that had become known for its characteristic blend of pragmatism and social thought. This 'Chicago School,' as William James labelled it, would continue on despite Dewey's departure for Columbia University in 1904. In his new setting, Dewey encountered realism unvarnished, owing chiefly to the influence of the Aristotelian F.W. Woodbridge and the "critical realist" J.P. Montague.  

This had a profound impact on the tenor of the articles Dewey would write; they became more apologetic of

---

8 By Objective Idealist, we mean an account of the relationship of mind, consciousness, or thought that grasps the world such that everything we can say about the world is a matter of and for, thought. This does not discount an account of reality as beyond thought, though it does inhibit the account from having features or properties that can operate as predicates in propositions or claims. In the naturalized version of Idealism, suspension, negation, and sublation are rendered into naturalist metaphors of adaptation and evolution, while Reality remains thoroughgoing in respect of nature and experience. In the spiritualized version of Idealism, the Absolute takes on theological connotations and Reality is bifurcated into natural and metaphysical realms. The former may be seen in John Dewey, *John Dewey's Philosophy of Spirit, with the 1897 Lecture on Hegel*; the latter in John Watson, *The Philosophical Basis of Religion* (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1907). See also James Scott Johnston, *John Dewey's Earlier Logical Theory* (Albany, Ny: SUNY Press, 2014) for more on Hegel's naturalism and Dewey's further naturalization of Hegel.

Dewey Studies

Pragmatism and Instrumentalism and critical of epistemology, Idealism, and classical Empiricism. Reality, Experience, and Truth were topics of mutual concern to Dewey and his critics. Indeed, these were the very topics in dispute, as we will see in regards to Watson. Here, we wish to discuss what Dewey's understandings of Reality, Experience, and Truth circa 1905-1906 were in broad outlines. We will note where he disagreed with both realist and idealist understandings as we proceed. We will also demonstrate that the concepts Dewey was working with were in fact not alien to Idealism—at least a naturalized and functional version of it. It is this naturalization of Idealism that Watson misses in his criticism of Dewey's Idealism and it is these understandings that we wish to capture in the final section of the paper. We will draw upon two of Dewey's articles here; "Reality as Experience" and "the Postulate of Immediate Empiricism."\(^{11}\)

**Dewey on Reality**

Dewey begins the essay, “Reality as Experience” by stating his belief that traits of experience are always “in transition towards the state of affairs in which they are experienced.”\(^ {12}\) Objectors to this, Dewey claims, create a dualism where no dualism exists. Specifically, they place a “soul-substance, a mind, or even a consciousness” between reality and experience. Such a conception, Dewey says, is not compatible with the idea that earlier temporal situations are

---


\(^{11}\) We choose these articles because Watson read these and commented upon them directly in his handwritten notes.

identifiable with reality (MW 2.102). Reality, whatever else it is, must include mind and consciousness as well as “the scientifically warranted early dated world” (MW 2.102). The question of the reality of experience for the objector is the question of an earlier reality contrasted to a later one (MW 2.102-103) and this cannot be correct. Dewey explains that it would be wrong to say “an earlier reality versus a later reality because this denies the salient point of transition toward” (MW 2.103). He explains that the later form of reality is the better index for philosophy because the earlier form does not take the property of transition-towards, which Dewey claims is as objectively real as any property but “is realized in experience”(MW 2.103).

Dewey supposes that an early “theoretically adequate cognition” of the earlier reality (which he claims is prior to the existence of conscious beings) can be isolated and calls this “O” and contrasts this with “R” as reality (MW 2.104). Objectors whom Dewey claims follow the ‘evolutionary method’ must agree that “O” with its properties (A, B, C, D) is in “qualitative transformation towards experience” (MW 2, 104). Where is the locus of this recognition? Dewey asks. The answer is in the present experience. It is only in present experience that the transformation toward experience is realized, meaning that that which is scientifically known is contained in an experience in which “O” as an object cannot be exhaustively presented (MW 2.104). The motive and basis for formulating “R” as “O,” Dewey claims, is found in the features of experience that are not formulated; these can only be formulated in a further experience. “What is omitted from reality in the O is always restored in the experience in which O is present. The O is thus really taken as what it is—a condition of reality as experience” (MW 2.105). The upshot is that every experience holds knowledge of the “entire object-world” within. And this goes for any experience in which “cognition enters” (MW 2.105). Reality is never

---

13 The broad outlines of Hegel are in evidence, here. Present experience suspends prior reality yet prior reality continues to have a relationship (temporal in nature) with present experience. One can think of Hegel’s understanding of sublation, here.
“just and exclusively what it is or would be to an all-competent knower; or even that it is, relatively to a finite and partial knower”.  

Rather, knowing is but one mode of experiencing and reality is dependent upon experience.

**Dewey on Experience**

In “Reality and Experience” we see experience play the role of consummate gatherer; experience into which cognition enters “suspends” the particular object and its properties (the “object-world”) and in so doing, makes possible the articulation of its features. But this reality borne of experience and its “object-world” is then taken up and suspended in a further experience which, to judge by Dewey’s claims, should result in the further elucidation of features of the “object-world” (MW 2.105-106). In “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” Dewey has more to say about the role and scope of experience. Here things are what they are experienced as (MW 2.158). When one wishes “to describe anything truly,” one articulates what the thing is experienced as being (MW 2.158). The interesting question is not that when one describes something one is describing it as experienced, but “what sort of experience is denoted or indicated” (MW 2.159). From the standpoint of knowledge, there can be no metaphysical claims for the absoluteness of reality and everything in it because experience and reality are dynamic; to claim otherwise, Dewey thinks, “is the root of all philosophic evil” (MW 2.160).

Dewey then gives us the example of one frightened by noise. As a response to criticisms insisting that one who was frightened by a noise knew that one was frightened by a noise, or else there would have been no experience at all, Dewey distinguishes between “I-know-I-am-frightened” and “I-am-frightened” (MW 2.161). Insisting that the distinction is not merely verbal, Dewey explains that he has no reason to claim that the experience must be described by a phrase including “I know” (MW 2.162). Dewey explains that there is no

---

reason to believe that the experience is not simply an experience of fright-at-the-noise. Knowing that one is frightened at the noise is, according to Dewey a different experience—a different thing. If a critic insists that there is no reason to believe that the person must have really known that he was frightened, Dewey's reply to the critic would be that the critic is changing the question. The critic may be right that one knows that one is frightened, but Dewey claims that this is “only because the “really” is not concretely experienced” (MW 2.162) and the critic is departing from the immediate empiricist viewpoint that Dewey wishes to defend. Experience for Dewey, then, is always of “thats” (MW 2.164). Like C.S. Peirce before him, Dewey thinks the actuality one faces when one immediately experiences is brute; as yet unconditioned by cognition.

**Dewey on Truth**

Dewey speaks of truth in the context of the empiricist account of knowledge in “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism.” Objective reality, which is claimed and justified only in present experience, counts for Dewey as “describing anything truly” (MW 2.158). But beyond this, nothing is said of truth, and it remains a mystery why Watson made much of Dewey's view of truth given the paucity of an account of it in the two essays upon which he focuses heavily. Nevertheless, Dewey does have some telling claims about truth, though these are found not in “Reality as Experience” or “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism,” rather “The Experimental Theory of Knowledge.”

---

15 The sort of Empiricism Dewey has in mind is Locke's. Dewey seems to think that Locke admits a theory of sense-perception in which qualities or features of an experience are assembled into ideas that are then utilized in judging. While strictly speaking correct of infants, Dewey's criticism overlooks Locke's insistence that immediate perceptions are in children and adults themselves ideas or representations, and are already committed to the faculty of mind or thought. See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 183.

16 Watson likely read this as well, given the circulation of *Mind* amongst philosophers in the early 20th century.
“truth is the experienced relation of things,” and has “no meaning outside that relation.”17 Truth is not a property of a thing simpliciter rather it is a property of a thing in which a problematic issue regarding its assertion is experienced (MW 2.118). Indeed, Dewey would prefer we drop the term, truth and replace it with the adverb, truly—at least until the problematic situation or issue is ameliorated (MW 2.118). In this respect, it becomes the summary of “a quality presented by specific affairs in their own specific way” (MW 2.118).18

By way of summary, we note that Dewey was not critical of all Idealisms; only those that bifurcated reality into two, with thought or experience on one side and reality or things in themselves on the other. For Dewey, this bifurcation or dualism infected Realisms and Idealisms equally. While realists were convinced that the world and everything in it was ‘real,’ and idealists maintained that the world and everything in it could be captured in thought, realists made the world and idealists made thought into a fixed and final entity or process. The intrinsic dynamism of the world and thought were thus neglected in favour of an a priori account of one or the other. This conclusion and the account that rejected it were consistent with Dewey’s own accounting of experience—an experience that consists in both “brute facts” and thought. Dewey does not reach for a metaphysical argument or claim in grounding experience; rather, experience constitutes the environment (In Experience and Nature, Dewey will call this, “nature” which we

---

18 Dewey’s target in this essay is epistemology—what Dewey sees as an attempt to claim foundations for theories of knowledge. “Epistemology starts from the assumption that certain conditions lie back of knowledge. The mystery would be great enough if knowledge were constituted by non-natural conditions back of knowledge, but the mystery is increased by the fact that the conditions are defined as to be incompatible with knowledge. Hence the primary problem of epistemology is: How is knowledge überhaupt, knowledge at large, possible...A second problem arises: How is knowledge in general, knowledge überhaupt, valid? (MW 2, 119). Dewey invokes the entire rationalist and empiricist tradition common to modern philosophy in his encapsulation of epistemology.
inhabit, and which we have and undergo. What takes place within nature does so through evolution and (on our part) adaptation and habit-formation—of both thoughts and things. There is a ceaseless dynamism to thought and things in experience; in this regard Dewey comes closest to naturalized accounts of Hegel currently finding favour in contemporary Hegel scholarship.

**Part II: Watson on Dewey**

In 1906, John Watson was the pre-eminent philosopher in Canada, carrying forward British neo-Idealism in the tradition of Edward Caird and F.H. Bradley. The question we wish to raise and answer here is: what was the impetus behind Watson’s exegesis and criticism of Dewey. However, it will do to first discuss the context in which Watson responded to Dewey. In 1907-1908 Watson had already published his works on Comte, Mill and Spencer, Hellenism, and Christianity and Idealism. In 1907-1908 he published *The Philosophy of Kant Explained* and *The Philosophical Basis of Religion*. These two topics may have been at the forefront of Watson’s mind while entertaining Dewey’s essays. As well, F.H. Bradley features prominently in the notes: Bradley is often used to elaborate an idea in juxtaposition to Dewey’s claims. On occasion, Watson seems to

---


21 John Watson, *Comte, Mill and Spencer: An Outline of Philosophy* (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1895); *Hedonistic Theories from Aristippus to Spencer*. (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1895); *Christianity and Idealism* (New York: Macmillan, 1896); Watson, *The Philosophical Basis of Religion*; John Watson, *The Philosophy of Kant Explained* (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1908).

22 Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* seems to be the chief text Watson had in mind when responding to Dewey. It is also noteworthy that Bradley and William James had been in correspondence for approximately 10 years prior to Watson’s note-taking and that Bradley had been writing on pragmatism at the very time Watson likely read Dewey’s essays. Bradley had written “On the Ambiguity of Pragmatism” in 1908 and “On our Knowledge of Immediate Experience” in 1909. Both of these
think Bradley is Dewey’s target and wields Bradley against Dewey. We will follow Part I in using the categories of Reality, Experience, and Truth.

**Reality**

Watson has trouble with Dewey’s supposed conflation of experience and reality; unlike Dewey, Watson does not believe reality can be identified *simpliciter*. Watson claims “surely there was ‘reality’ before there was experience. We thus seem to be confronted with the alternative: either ‘experience’ is not identical with ‘reality,’ or the ‘prior’ facts of science are simply fictitious.” Watson claims that science is on his side, as the world can be said to have actually existed prior “to the advent of life and consciousness.” Watson seems to think that Dewey cannot confer reality on past events, as reality can only be identified with the present experience. Watson wrestles with Dewey’s claim that the world is “on its way to experience.” And he

---

Watson, John Watson Fonds, 1. What we have extant are two sets of handwritten notes totalling 76 pages. The pages are numbered, presumably by an archivist. They are located in the archives of Queen’s University and are labelled “John Watson fonds, 1069.1 Box 6, File 2—Pragmatism.” The first 36 pages are written on lined paper and single-spaced. The remaining are written on lined paper and double-spaced. The first page is entitled “Dewey’s “Reality as Experience.” The notes seem complete, to judge by the flow of the text and the text is complete enough to withstand detailed analysis and yield fruitful results. Watson’s handwriting is, however, difficult to decipher. There is no date for these notes, but they were undoubtedly written after Dewey published “Reality as Experience” in 1906. We can surmise they were written shortly after Dewey’s publication was extant—perhaps 1 or 2 years later, putting the date between 1907-1908. The notes were collected by R. Bruno-Jofre of the Faculty of Education at Queen’s University from the archives in Kingston, Ontario, Canada in 2009. We don’t follow the pagination of the original material in the extant text as this is inconsistently applied; rather, we paginate according to the actual pages extant.

---

Watson, John Watson Fonds, 1.
seems to think Dewey claims that there is a distinction between the thought of reality and reality as experienced. If this is the case, Watson thinks, skepticism is introduced.

Watson thinks another problem confronts Dewey. If reality is experience, and experiences differ amongst people, then what is real for me is not real for others. And this invites the prospect of “two reals.” Watson thinks the pragmatist will reject this, claiming that experimentation will settle the question. However this invites an infinite regress. Watson concludes that reality cannot contradict itself, whereas the pragmatist seems to suggest that it can. For Dewey in particular, only thought cannot contradict itself, but reality, it seems, can. This violates Bradley’s injunction that thought cannot accept a contradiction. And only a thought that is self-consistent is absolute. But for Dewey, thought “has [actually] been declared to be internally self-contradictory”, which means the postulate of thought itself must be self-contradictory. Dewey cannot have it both ways. Dewey, Watson says, challenges Bradley on the question of the Absolute, claiming that Bradley “passes from the thought that reality is self-consistent to the proposition that reality is self-consistent”. But, Watson avers, for Bradley only reality as Absolute is self-consistent, as the world of appearance is not. Watson then offers

26 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 2.
27 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 2. Watson invokes Bradley at this point—that an idea is predicated of (a) reality—a “feature of content” (Bradley, in Watson, John Watson Fonds, 4). The content applied to reality has no genuine existence of its own. And ultimate reality cannot contradict itself (Watson, in John Watson Fonds, 4).
28 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 2.
29 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 3. For Bradley, according to Watson, this only shows that thought cannot be realized, and that it points beyond itself (Watson, John Watson Fonds, 5).
31 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 4.
this thought-experiment. Suppose, he says, that real objects are actually opposed in value and that thought is the means through which humans overcome this opposition. Thought creates a conditional inference (what would the world be like if it were harmonious?). In this way, thought “forms a plan of action by which this order may be worked out; and it is formed to be successful”. Watson believes can handle the seeming self-contradictions of thought, while Dewey wants to have it both ways.

Watson views Dewey’s account of reality as incomplete because, unlike the British Empiricists, to whom Dewey is often compared, Dewey avoids transcending experience. Unable to answer metaphysical questions of experience, Dewey does not attempt to prove or disprove the existence of the real. Watson criticizes Dewey’s use of the word real, insisting that Reality cannot be experienced completely. Reality to Dewey corresponds with F.H. Bradley’s account of appearance. To Bradley, an appearance is anything which comes short when compared to Reality. To Bradley, while every appearance has truth and “is a necessary factor in the Absolute”, that does not mean that one appearance cannot be ranked higher, or more real, than another. Bradley’s “appearances” cannot be without reality, but equally, “reality without appearance would be nothing, for there certainly is nothing outside appearances”. Reality to Bradley, however, “is not the sum of things”. Reality is the unity in which all things come together and are transmuted. To Watson, Dewey cannot get to Reality without an Absolute, which would require some speculative move. For Watson, without an Absolute, experience is incomplete and, for the case of Dewey, cannot be called real.

It will do to summarize Watson’s challenges to Dewey before

---

32 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 5.
33 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 5.
35 Bradley, Appearance and Reality, p. 431.
36 Bradley, Appearance and Reality, p. 432.
37 Bradley, Appearance and Reality, p. 432.
38 Bradley, Appearance and Reality, p. 432.
proceeding to the next section. Watson charges Dewey with creating a distinction between past reality and present experience. Reality for Dewey, according to Watson, is so inextricably bound up in experience that it cannot be said to exist outside of experience. There is no transmutation of appearances (as experiences, for Dewey) and therefore, no reality that can be called real. Furthermore, only present reality in a present experience can count as genuine reality. Dewey encounters another problem: reality seems to create two or more “reals,” suggesting that reality contradicts itself. And claiming that thought alone cannot contradict itself is no escape from the problem for Dewey, because Dewey also claims that thought is inherently self-contradictory, leading to Dewey being of two minds about the unity of thought.

**Experience**

Watson deals most fully with Dewey’s notion of experience in his comments on “The Immediate Postulate of Empiricism.” Watson claims that Dewey denies “there is anything beyond the ‘experiences’ of the individual that experiences”. 39 Dewey “must deny that there is any ‘Reality’ corresponding to the ‘experience’ of any abstract ‘horse-jockey’: all experiences are individual; but there is no experience over and above the sum of experience of men, or at least of finite experiencing of subjects”. 40 But if this is the case, we are committed to claiming that each individual experience is real. And that seems a tautology as it suggests that “What I experience I do experience: my real experience is really experience”. 41 And this invites skepticism that we “cannot be certain we are ‘experiencing’ anything”. 42 To refute this skepticism requires that “every possible intelligence who is aware of what I am experiencing at this moment must grant that I

---

39 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 27. Watson’s example here is that of the horse-trader who has a different experience of reality and as reality from the jockey, the family man, and the judge.
40 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 26.
41 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 26.
42 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 26.
am actually having this experience". Otherwise I may and may not experience precisely the same thing. The upshot for Watson is that Dewey confuses the concreteness of the universe and the concreteness of sensible experience. For Watson, thought does not create aspects of objects of thought into ideas; it rather "makes a particular aspect of thought an object". In Watson’s opinion, Dewey talks as if the sensible particulars were by necessity left outside of thought and operate in thought merely as abstractions. Another way to put the point (as Watson does) is that Dewey over-idealizes sensible particulars, which are not merely ideas but ‘real’ aspects of thought.

A related concern is the concreteness of the particulars in Dewey’s account of experience. For Watson, it seems Dewey is claiming that each individual "is shut up to the reality of his own experience" and no “universal judgment whatever is possible". Does this mean that experience is merely “concrete”? Certainly, this is correct. But, Watson asks, is “its concreteness a denial of possible agreement between any number of ‘experiencing’ subjects? If so, what is meant by ‘experience’ and ‘real’"? If individuals mean something different when pointing to and articulating concrete experiences, how can agreement be possible? Certainly, Dewey cannot mean that each subject means something different with respect to each concrete experience. Yet, by maintaining that the concrete is nothing more than the idea, Dewey is open to just this charge. Watson canvasses Dewey’s own statements on the matter and finds him wanting. For Dewey claims that things “are only and just what they are known to be or that things are, or Reality is, what it is for a [conscious] knower” Ultimately, Watson claims, Dewey

---

43 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 26.
44 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 26.
45 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 26.
46 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 26.
47 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 27.
48 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 27.
49 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 27.
50 Dewey, in Watson, John Watson Fonds, 27. Watson is quoting from “The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism.” The context for this passage of Dewey’s is a
is confused on experience.

Another related concern is evidenced by the following claim of Dewey’s: “By our postulate, things are what they are experienced to be; and, unless knowing is the sole and genuine mode of experiencing, it is fallacious to say that Reality is just and exclusively what it is or would be to an all-competent knower”. For Watson, this seems to suggest that real experiences are nothing other than “experiences accompanied by certain beliefs or interpretation of its meaning”. And this seems to confuse the reality of believing with the reality of what is believed. For Dewey, Watson concludes, “Real experience [is] confused with real experience of the real”.

For Watson then, Dewey has no place for the particulars, or those aspects of the real that thought grasps. These are left outside of thought and in thought exist and function as abstractions. Furthermore, without these particulars as aspects of the real, individuals can point only to abstractions of their own thoughts and this invites the prospect of disagreement on the existence of objects, not to say their settled-upon meaning or interpretation. Finally, Dewey drains the reality out of experiences through claiming that things are only what they are experienced to be. This seems to invite confusion between what is really believed and the reality of the belief.

Truth

The question of the understanding and use of truth is raised throughout Watson’s analysis and description of Dewey’s accounts of reality and experience. It is first raised in conjunction with the defense of the notion of immediate empiricism, which Watson is at pains to critique. Watson takes Dewey’s defense to be a criticism of Objective Idealism, which he defends (Watson, John Watson Fonds, 26). Watson likely has Dewey’s criticism of Objective Idealism as stated in “Experience and Objective Idealism” in mind. It is noteworthy that the criticism of Idealism presented there is not Hegel’s, but Kant’s. See John Dewey, “Experience and Objective Idealism.”

51 Dewey, in Watson, John Watson Fonds, 27.
52 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 27.
53 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 27.
question of reality. Watson cites Dewey, claiming “truth is the comprehension of some aspect of reality by thought.”

This invites the criticism that there is no difference between what is real in itself and what is real for the subject. This is compounded by Pragmatism’s insistence that the truth is “what works or gives satisfaction.” For, if we differ, are both “reals” true? And if not, how do we determine what ought to give satisfaction? If the Pragmatist responds with “experimentation,” the response seems infinitely regressive.

Watson here again juxtaposes Bradley with Dewey. For Dewey, truth “is the object of thinking, and the aim of truth is to qualify existence ideally.” But this claim “is foredoomed to failure,” for in order to realize its end, it must employ self-contradictory means. Watson quotes Bradley in this regard. Thought can never completely grasp and exhaust reality; the predicate (of a subject) must always remain an ideal. We might say that for Watson, Dewey’s ‘reach’ in regards to experience goes too far, in that it does not allow for reality to exist on its own, outside of and beyond experience or thought. And while the existence of a reality beyond thought’s grasp may be a lamentable conclusion for an Objective idealist, it ensures that reality itself is something separate and distinct from the grasping thought and preserves the realist feature of an account of experience.

---

54 Dewey, in Watson, John Watson Fonds, 1.
56 James, in Watson, John Watson Fonds, 1.
57 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 1.
58 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 2.
59 Bradley, Appearance and Reality, in Watson, John Watson Fonds, 2. “And because the given reality is never consistent, though it is compelled to take the road of indefinite expansion. If thought were successful, it would have a predicate consistent in itself and agreeing entirely with the subject. But, on the other hand, the predicate must be always ideal. It must, that is, be a ”what” not in unity with its own ”that”, and therefore in and by itself, devoid of existence. Hence, so far as in thought this alienation is not made good, thought can never be more than merely ideal.” (Italics mine).
60 Hegel, too, laments the concept’s inability to completely grasp nature in a
Watson also points up a fault with Pragmatism’s account of truth more generally. Quoting again from William James’s entry on Pragmatism in Baldwin’s Dictionary, he notes “A tree, e.g. has all the colours that, in any particular light… are contained in it; and likewise all the shapes that form any point of view, it presents.” Pragmatists generally, and Dewey in particular makes the truth of a tree consonant with its experience, such that the truth of a tree is what it is experienced to be. Furthermore, for Pragmatists “That which is successful in securing well-being, is true.” But this, Watson claims, presupposes the notion of a world self-subsistent and the “legitimacy of a desire for well-being.” And this in turn implies that the world and individuals within “have a certain fixed nature, without which the end of well-being, and even the reasonableness of the end, cannot be exhibited”. Therefore, individuals can only secure their well-beings if they are able to comprehend “the actual nature of things,” and this cannot be realized if nature is not a real and true separate from ideals and thoughts.

In Watson’s opinion, Dewey falters in defining truth as the comprehension of some aspect of reality by thought. For this not only presumes there is no reality outside of thought, but makes it difficult to adjudicate the truth amongst competing thoughts. Furthermore, tying truth to satisfaction raises the question of a tenable account of satisfaction. Dewey’s seeming denial of reality to things outside of experience or thought seems to push Dewey in the direction of totalizing monism in which thought engulfs all. Finally, Dewey cannot fruitfully speak of truth as the securing of well-being, because well-being requires a nature solid and robust enough to withstand the machinations of thinking, and Dewey’s account does

manner similar to Bradley’s claim that thought only presents us with an ideal of the thing. See Hegel, Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline, trans. by Steven Taubeneck (New York: Continuum Press, 1991), # 194.

61 James, in Watson, John Watson Fonds, 1.
62 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 1.
63 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 43.
64 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 43.
65 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 43.
66 Watson, John Watson Fonds, 43.
not provide for this.

Final Thoughts

Watson levels several robust criticisms at Dewey’s accounts of Reality, Experience, and Truth. In isolation these are perhaps resolvable on close textual analysis of Dewey’s essays and books; together they are forceful. Watson’ analysis seems to have revealed fundamental inconsistencies in Dewey’s accounts that would remain until at least 1922, with the publication of *Human Nature and Conduct* (which gives a full account of satisfaction and character) and 1925, with *Experience and Nature* (which gives a full treatment of experience). In the former, both satisfaction and character will be set in the context of a continuum of means-ends-in-view, so that any fixed and final account of them is immediately discounted. Further, ends will be re-cast as “directive stimuli” that inform present choices (MW 14.157). In the latter, experience will be distinguished into the functional distinctions of ‘gross’ and ‘refined,’ with ‘gross’ articulating the immediate qualitative features of an experience had, and ‘refined’ with consciousness, thinking, and self (LW 1.17). While things will remain within experience, Dewey will insist they are not tantamount to thoughts. Thoughts refine things into ‘logical objects,’ but the world as it exists in its brute capacity to affect remains, and is only appreciated through its qualities or what Dewey will call the ‘generic traits of existence’ (LW 1.308). Indeed, reality turns out to be double-barrelled: there is on the one hand a gross experience that is immediately had and undergone, to which the epithet ‘real’ is certainly attributable. But there are refined objects that embody real relations (through logical inferences and temporal succession, in turn made possible by the generic trait of continuity) that also qualify as real. Reality is a shared feature of both.

Though the criticisms levelled at Dewey are vigorous, they do reveal Watson’s inability to see a functionalist and naturalist

---

understanding of Idealism on display. While it is certainly the case that Dewey did not bridge the gap between reality and experience in a manner that would placate his critics, he was, nevertheless, well on his way to spanning the gap. For the accounts of experience and reality here discussed already suggested the means to span the gulf and obviate the concern that thought ‘invents’ reality. Dewey already had an account of experience as ‘brute fact,’ which would later be transformed into the “gross” and “macroscopic” experience of Experience and Nature (LW 1.17). And Dewey had already insisted that the distinction between thought and things was a functional one within experience, that we had no access to things as they were in themselves, yet this should not be a concern because it is a fact of the matter that we do experience brute facts (later, traits of existence) and that these facts are themselves facts of the matter. Dewey's naturalized and functional Idealism is one in which reality is not bifurcated; it is the transaction of nature and experience, rather than nature, experience, and a spiritual sphere or realm metaphysically apart, that constitutes the chief ingredients of his naturalistic philosophy. It remains a matter for further historical scholarship to discern if Watson's own more spiritual and religious account of Idealism inhibited him from seeing a naturalized account as tenable, though this is certainly our suspicion, and it is likely that Watson's absolutist account of Reality forecloses the possibility of a functional ontology of experience, with Dewey.

There is much in these notes that concerns Pragmatism more generally as well as further specific questions regarding Dewey's account. They also shed light on the role Bradley plays for both Watson and Dewey, and the nature of the Absolute in regards Reality, Experience, and Truth. It remains an open question whether and how Dewey would have responded had Watson sent him his notes, or had them published. Our best guess is that he may very well have come to the conclusions he presented in Human Nature and Conduct and Experience and Nature that much sooner. Unfortunately, Watson's notes on Dewey and Pragmatism didn't see the light of day. There can be no question, though, that these notes now deserve publication.
Bibliography


—. *Hedonistic Theories from Aristippus to Spencer*. Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1895.


—. *The Philosophical Basis of Religion*. Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1907.

—. *The Philosophy of Kant Explained*. Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1908.