

Dewey and the Question of Realism

Peter Godfrey-Smith

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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An interpretation is given of John Dewey's views about "realism" in metaphysics, and of how these views relate to contemporary debates. Dewey rejected standard formulations of realism as a general metaphysical position, and interpreters have often been taken him to be sympathetic to some form of verificationism or constructivism. I argue that these interpretations are mistaken, as Dewey's unease with standard formulations of realism comes from his philosophical emphasis on intelligent *control* of events, by means of ordinary action. Because of his views about relations, Dewey's views in this area do risk collapsing into an overly holistic position. I discuss how these problems might be avoided, and consider also how Dewey's views about naturalism and realism might usefully inform ongoing work.

1. Introduction

In discussions of realism about the external world, John Dewey is not usually taken to be on the realist's side.¹ There is no consensus about exactly whose side he *is* on, but there is some agreement about the overall spirit of his views. He is seen as having a view which, by current standards, is some sort of moderate anti-realist position, perhaps one showing relevant continuities with neo-Kantian and "social constructivist" positions. I will argue that Dewey's view is different from, and more interesting than, the positions usually attributed to him. It does not share significant structure or motivation with contemporary forms of opposition to realist or "metaphysical realist" views. Indeed, some of Dewey's criticisms of rival positions of his own day can be applied also to recent anti-realist philosophies. Dewey does diverge from familiar modern formulations of realism, but the divergences differ from those that have been the focus of recent discussion. The

divergences have to do with the status of intelligent *control* of events in the world, and with the relation between realist and naturalist commitments in philosophy. These questions about realism and naturalism, and the tensions that Dewey encountered in developing his view, have philosophical interest beyond the interpretive issues about Dewey's own work.

The claims I will make about Dewey are restricted in three ways. First, my reading of Dewey's metaphysics applies to Dewey's later work. Some critics distinguish three phases to Dewey's career: an "idealist" phase between 1882 and about 1903, an "experimentalist" phase from about 1903 to 1925, and a "naturalistic" phase from 1925 onwards (Boisvert 1988). Accepting this rough breakdown, my interpretation is specific to Dewey's later, naturalistic phase, and much of it is based on the work that is often taken to initiate that period, *Experience and Nature* (1925, revised edition 1929), though at one point I make use of an important passage from a few years earlier.² Second, this paper will not discuss questions usually discussed under the topic of "scientific realism," such as the status of unobservable posits and the appropriate epistemic attitude to take to well-supported scientific theories. Roughly speaking, this paper is concerned with debates about the status of ordinary physical objects, and their properties and distribution in the world; it is about what Devitt and others call "common-sense realism," as opposed to scientific realism (Devitt 1991).³ Third, I won't discuss correspondence theories of truth, even though these views are often closely associated with realism. Dewey rejected correspondence views of truth, but one can reject such views without rejecting realism (Horwich 1990, Devitt 1991).

The next section outlines some standard oppositions between realist and anti-realist views, discusses how Dewey has been taken by other writers to relate to those oppositions, and gives a first statement of my alternative interpretation. The following section discusses Dewey's position in more detail and introduces some tensions that arise within it. The final section looks briefly at how these ideas might inform contemporary discussion of realism.

2. Realism

What do realists believe, that opponents of realism do not believe? It is famously hard to say. The realist might start by saying something like this: we all inhabit a common reality which has a definite and objective structure. This world contains objects of various kinds, which exist independently of what anyone thinks about them (Devitt 1991). We humans can perceive and know about only a limited portion of reality, but things we don't have contact with are just as real as things we do have contact with.

One common source of unease with this view stems from our limited access to the world. Some have held that our contact with any external reality through the senses must be so tenuous that our everyday knowledge could not possibly be knowledge of mind-independent external objects. The world we know could only be a world that is dependent, at least to some extent, on our own thoughts, theories or sensations. Perhaps the whole idea of a fact that exists independently of any possibility of verification is confused. According to Alan Ryan's biography, Dewey held a view like this. Ryan, who thinks that Dewey's basic philosophical position was stable from about 1916 onwards, claims that "Dewey's pragmatism went a long way towards asserting that the world only exists for, and as far as it is known by, the community of intellectually active human beings" (1995, p. 83).

A second source of dissatisfaction with the realist view is a set of ideas about *categorization*. There are many ways of organizing experience, many ways of grouping things into like and unlike. Different languages and cultural traditions provide a glimpse into the diversity of possible ways of carving things up. People with radically different ways of organizing their experience live, in some important sense, in different worlds. Through creating languages, theories and conceptual schemes, people construct reality itself.

This second form of opposition to realism is sometimes labeled "constructivist" or "social constructivist." Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) defends a subtle and elusive social constructivist view. Nelson Goodman, in *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), defends a more forthright one. Another example is Woolgar (1988). To distinguish this sort of view from milder claims about "construction," I will use the term "metaphysical constructivism" for views in this family. According to Ian Hacking, Dewey held a view of this kind. Hacking says in *Representing and Intervening* that "the

world, and our representation of it, seems to become at the hands of Dewey very much a social construct" (1983, pp. 61-62). More recently, Philip Kitcher has claimed that to the extent that Dewey departs from a strongly realist view, this is due to claims about the mind-dependence of categories and hence the world's structure: "Although James and Dewey are both adamant that there is an independent reality to which our thoughts and actions respond... they insist that this independent reality is not *independently structured*: it doesn't come pre-divided into privileged objects and kinds of objects" (2012, p. 136).

There are other sources of opposition to realism beside the two I have mentioned, and along with arguments against realist views, there are attempts to overcome the opposition or make the issue evaporate. Dewey is sometimes associated, along with Wittgenstein, with these movements as well. This is how Richard Rorty, Dewey's most influential recent defender, presents him (Rorty 1979, 1982).⁴

None of the issues mentioned so far is central to Dewey's concern about realism. As a naturalistic philosopher, Dewey held that we constantly engage and interact with pre-existing external things in our activities as knowers, just as we engage with pre-existing external things in eating, drinking, and breathing (1925, Chapter 2). And though Dewey did sometimes talk of "overcoming" metaphysical debates, he had a positive view, outlined especially in *Experience and Nature*, and did not hold that metaphysical theorizing is always a pathological form of inquiry, though he thought it often can be.

It might seem harder to dissociate Dewey from the constructivist movement. If Dewey has no kinship with metaphysical constructivism, what can we make of the dozens of passages in which he insists that the activity of knowing does not leave things as they are but transforms them? What can we make of his decisive rejection of the idea that "the true and valid object of knowledge is that which has being prior to and independent of the operations of knowing" (1929, p. 157)? Goodman in *Ways of Worldmaking* said that "knowledge is as much remaking as reporting" (p. 22). That quote could have come straight from Dewey.

Although Dewey held that thought has a crucial role in the transformation of the world, he did not mean this in Goodman's sense, or the sense of other recent metaphysical discussions. Dewey meant this in, roughly speaking, an *everyday* sense – a sense involving ordinary causal impacts that people and their actions have on the world. When Dewey talks of the role of thought and knowledge in the world, the unit he has in mind is

a "wider," more extended one, than other philosophers assume. It includes the agent's interaction with a problem-posing situation in their environment, reasoning and decision-making, and lastly the expression of these thoughts in action which has effects on the agent's environment. Once this conception of cognition is taken into account, and it is seen that intelligence has a role in producing some actions rather than others, and hence some environmental changes rather than others, it is evident that much of what goes on in the world *depends* on how people think and what they know.

How does a view like this relate to standard formulations of realism? Realist philosophers in recent discussions usually have little to say about this familiar way in which things in the world depend on what people think. The aim of the realist is to deny strange, metaphysical dependence relations that the world might be said to have on thought or language. Sometimes this can lead to blanket statements about reality existing *completely independently* of thought. But those statements are meant to be loose ones, and are quickly qualified when the issue of the causal role of thought, via action, is put on the table.

An example is Alexander Miller's article on "Realism" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012). Like Devitt (1991), Miller recognizes an "existence dimension" and an "independence dimension" to realist claims. The realist about Xs thinks that Xs exist, and also thinks that the existence (and usually the nature) of Xs is independent of what people think and say. "The fact that the moon exists and is spherical is independent of anything anyone happens to say or think about the matter." Miller then notes that this independence can be harmlessly violated in some everyday cases:

[A]lthough there is a clear sense in which the table's being square is dependent on us (it was designed and constructed by human beings after all), this is not the type of dependence that the realist wishes to deny. The realist wishes to claim that apart from the mundane sort of empirical dependence of objects and their properties familiar to us from everyday life, there is no *further* sense in which everyday objects and their properties can be said to be dependent on anyone's linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, or whatever.

So although realists have not much to say about ordinary causal relations of dependence between thought and the external world, and have occasionally made over-strong

assertions about the "independence" of the world from thought for reasons of brevity, they would not dream of *denying* such relations.⁵ Realists will say that the changes made by thought, by means of action, to the world outside the thinker are part of the objective order of things. These relations exist, for example, whether *other* thinkers recognize them or not. Modern realists will say this without feeling that they have made a concession or said something of metaphysical importance. The language that Miller uses above (and elsewhere in his article) is telling. Miller calls such dependence relations "mundane." That is, they are not of significant philosophical interest, at least in the context of discussions of realism. This is why realists are willing to sometimes write as if they are not there.

Dewey, on the other hand, takes these relationships between mind and world very seriously. This is the first and primary point of contrast between Dewey and most contemporary realists. Dewey thinks that the causal role of mind on the world, running through the channel of action, is in no way philosophically insignificant, even in the context of basic metaphysics.

When I introduced the difference between Dewey's claims and the claims made by writers such as Goodman, I said that Dewey intends his claim that thought affects the world in, roughly speaking, an everyday sense, one involving familiar causal relations. But it would be a mistake to say he meant it in *exactly* the everyday causal sense. For Dewey, the way that thought changes external things is through the channel of action. But because of Dewey's views about that nature of relations, these changes can occur quicker than you might think. New knowledge of things sets up new possibilities for action and manipulation – most would agree with this. But in establishing these new possibilities, new knowledge sets up new relations between external things, and between external things and minds. Because of the establishment of these relations, changes are made to objects by thought *even before any new actions have been performed*. This part of Dewey's view makes things more complicated.

I look at this issue in detail in the next section, but before moving on to those complications I will emphasize one feature that is particularly helpful in distinguishing Dewey's position from other views. For Dewey, the role of thought in transforming the world has a "before-and-after" character. Before the activities of the thinker, there is a definite state the world is in. After the discovery of a new idea, the world is in a new

state. The claim is not that the world *lacks* a definite structure prior to the inquiry, or that "we can make no sense" of the idea of a mind-independent state of the world. Rather, the world *was* one way and *now* it is another.

Recent writers often talk of "construction" of reality while Dewey's preferred term is "reconstruction."⁶ If this is the key relationship, then the external things *must* have had a definite prior state. Dewey's epistemology includes a first step to the cycle of inquiry, a step in which environmental conditions prompt and motivate thought. Many of these prior conditions are products of earlier episodes of inquiry and action, but they need not be. Further, the environmental conditions that prompt inquiry are of some kinds and not others. This is one reason why I think Kitcher's account of the partial divergence between Dewey and standard forms of realism is off the mark. Kitcher says that for Dewey, although there is an independent reality, "this independent reality is not *independently structured*" (2012, p. 136); insofar as Dewey moves towards a view that is not a realist one in the usual sense, the direction of compromise is towards a view in which the notion of mind-independent structure is problematic. But it is part of Dewey's theory that some worldly conditions prompt thought and investigation, and do so because of their structure, while others do not: "The ultimate evidence of genuine hazard, contingency, irregularity and indeterminateness in nature is thus found in the existence of thinking" (1925, p. 69).

For Dewey there is no once-and-for-all sense in which the structure of things depends upon a world version, linguistic framework, or conceptual scheme. There is also nothing incoherent about the idea of real things carrying on their activities independent of thought; the world does not "ask leave from thought to exist" (1929, p. 236). The fact that the reconstructive role of thought has this essential connection to time – the fact that it works by "overt acts having a temporal quality" – differentiates Dewey from later forms of opposition to, and compromises on, realism.⁷ If the notion of structure existing independent of a conceptual scheme is problematic, that is not a temporal matter; if the notion of an unknowable world is problematic, that problem has no connection to before-and-after relations. On the Deweyan approach as I see it, philosophical arguments about "made" worlds versus "found" worlds are resolved not by compromise, but by a reference to time: we find the world in one condition and leave it in another.

3. Thought, Action, and Relations

In this section I go through the points sketched above in more detail, and look closely at tensions within Dewey's own view. I'll structure these points with the aid of a hypothetical dialogue or back-and-forth between Dewey and a present-day realist.⁸

We begin with a crude formulation from the realist: there is a real world whose structure and contents are independent of what people think.

Dewey objects: given that thought is *part* of the natural world, it cannot be that the world's structure is *independent* of thought. Thought might be only a small part of the natural order, but not an unreal one.

Clearly, this will not give the realist any headaches. "Of course," says the realist. The realist meant that *most* of the world, the part not identical with thought, has a real structure independent of thought.⁹

Which part of the world *is* the mental part? Where are the boundaries between the mental and non-mental? To simplify the discussion, I assume a conception of the location of thought that is favorable to a conventional realist view. Thoughts will be treated as internal episodes and states of human agents. Individual instances of beliefs, plans, memories, and so on, are identified with particular brain states and processes. So the mental part of the world is scattered, but everywhere sealed inside human skin. Many, including Dewey, will regard this as a very crude picture of how mind is located in the physical world, especially in its neglect of the role of social interaction. But the central points of this section can be made most clearly within a simpler and more individualistic set of assumptions about minds and bodies.

Dewey's second objection is based, not on part-whole relationships, but on causal relationships. The mental part of the world might be small, but it is a part with unusual causal powers. By means of their expression in action, ideas have impact on much of the non-mental world.

According to Dewey, to ignore or downplay this fact is to head towards a family of philosophical errors. Dewey holds that the role of thought in human life is to take the world down certain paths and not others. A new idea which allowed the world to continue exactly as if it had never been, an idea which allowed the rest of nature to exhibit "independence" from it, would be an idea which failed to perform thought's distinctive role.

Again I envisage no argument from the realist. The causal action of mind on the world is not something that realists have been at pains to accommodate, but it is hardly something they would deny, and certainly not *qua* realist. So the realist concurs with Dewey; a causal dependence of some parts of the world on minds is real and objective. What the realist denies is the existence of *other* types of dependence of reality on the mind – non-causal relations of construction or "constitution," for example. The realist rejects relations in which the mind creates objects without this influence going via the channel of action.

For a realist, talk about "dependence" in this context must attend to the role of time. At any particular time the part of the world that is external to thought exists and has its structure independently of thought. Thoughts existing at time *t* can affect only events later than *t*, and must do so in the time it takes for causal processes to occur.

So far we have seen very little conflict between Dewey and the realist. The realist will have no quarrel, for example, with the following passage from *Experience and Nature*.

[I]t is not thought as idealism defines thought which exercises the reconstructive function. Only action, interaction, can change or remake objects. The analogy of the skilled artist still holds. His intelligence is a factor in forming new objects which mark a fulfillment. But this is because intelligence is incarnate in overt action, using things as means to affect other things. (1925, p. 126)

In Dewey's intellectual environment, an important family of alternatives to realism were "absolute idealist" views, influenced by Hegel. For Dewey, these views combine an insight with a mistake. The insight is that thought is not an idle onlooker but a force in the world. Somewhat like Karl Marx, Dewey regretted the fact that realist and materialist philosophies have neglected this aspect of the mind, resulting in a situation where "the active side was left to idealism" (Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845). The mistake in idealism is to try to hold onto this idea within a view of the role of thought that truncates the full cycle of inquiry, omitting action and its consequences. This omission is what results in assertions of strange non-causal connections by which thought constructs external things, not by means of "practical overt acts having a temporal quality, but by some occult internal operation" (1929, p. 159).

With all these observations a contemporary realist can concur. So the realist's next move might be to formulate their view in a way that makes explicit use of a distinction between causal and non-causal relations, and use this to exclude non-causal, "occult" relations of dependence between thought and the rest of the world. The result might run as follows: there is a common reality we all inhabit, containing both minds and non-mental things. Some of the non-mental parts of the world are causally influenced, from time to time, by what goes on inside minds. But there is no *other* sense in which any non-mental part of the world is dependent for its existence or nature on what people do or could think.

Dewey, however, will not accept a formulation like this. He is committed to one more dependence relation between thought and the world.

Suppose you are engaged in some practical project which, when completed, will result in the transformation of some objects in the world – your aim is to crack a shell to eat the nut inside. But the means for achieving the goal have, so far, been unknown to you. Then suddenly you work out a way to solve the problem. Once you have taken these steps, you will be able to make the change you have been aiming at. In fact, even *before* you have done anything about it, while the solution is still buzzing in your head, there has been a change to external things. The food inside the shell is now *accessible* to you. The shell is no longer *impassible*. Your finding the solution creates new channels of possible causal influence, linking you to those objects and the objects to each other.

A passage from *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) is useful here. It notes in its first sentence the causal role of thought that Dewey and the realist agreed on a moment ago, and then in the second sentence the new factor is added:

Perception of things as they are is but a stage in the process of making them different. They have already begun to be different in being known, for by that fact they enter into a different context, a context of foresight and judgment of better and worse. (1922, p. 206)

He follows up the point:

A fact when it is known enters into a new environment. Without ceasing to belong to the physical environment it enters also into a medium of human

activities, of desires and aversions, habits and instincts. It thereby gains new potencies, new capacities. (1922, p. 206)

What should the realist think of this? On the one hand, Dewey claims that there is an instantaneous, action-at-a-distance relationship whereby thought can change external things. That seems bad, even "occult". On the other hand, the channel linking thought to object is one that goes *via* action and depends for its existence on the possibility of causal influence. That seems OK.

Above I introduced cases where the establishment of a new causal channel makes an external object itself liable to undergo further changes. Dewey also emphasizes cases where new knowledge changes the *role* of an object within our own lives. The discovery of America by Europeans, for example, was a cognitive event that not only affected the future of the physical America and its contents, but also affected European societies (1925, p. 125). As if to make things as difficult as possible, Dewey uses the term "meaning" to describe all these other connections. If we gain new knowledge about an object that establishes new possible actions for the knowers, the "meaning" of the object has changed. Meaning, for Dewey, consists in the total pattern of potentialities for interaction with human activity that an object has. In one sense the sun is unchanged as a human society adopts and then rejects sun-worship. In another sense the sun changes each time; it changes its role in patterns of human activity.

Most modern realists do not claim that meaning, in this broad sense of significance to human activity, exists independently of the mental. Properties like significance, for many philosophers, are "projected" onto objects by human agents. Dewey, in contrast, does not regard this kind of meaning as a dubious property, fit only to be projected rather than found. The relations and propensities that constitute an object's meaning are part of the natural order along with the rest.

In sum then, Dewey's third move in the dialogue is to claim that thought makes changes to external things even before action has ensued. The connections, the "potencies and capacities," and the meanings of the external objects are changed.

More recent metaphysical views provide ways for the realist to accommodate Dewey's third move. The realist can accept that thought produces changes in objects in advance of action, while adding that there is a difference between these second-rate

changes to potentialities and "meanings," on the one hand, and changes made to the intrinsic nature of objects, on the other. Many philosophers would adopt here a distinction between "real changes" and "Cambridge changes." The term "Cambridge change" was coined by Peter Geach, to refer to "changes" to an object that involve no more than a change in the predicates true of it. One of his examples was "becoming an object of envy to Edith" (1972, p. 322) – something that one can become without doing anything, and without any rearrangement of one's physical structure. Geach chose the term "Cambridge change" because, he said, many philosophical works coming out of Cambridge (England) in the early 20th century agreed on a minimal, inclusive conception of change. An example of such a view, and one which embraces the consequences, is found in John McTaggart's *The Nature of Existence* (1927): "The fall of a sand-castle on the English coast changes the nature of the Great Pyramid" (pp. 11-12). Though McTaggart is happy to say this, many philosophers are not; hence the desire to restrict the category of "real changes."

Though often expressed in terms of predicates, a central motivation for the distinction between real and Cambridge changes is the idea that changes that affect only the relational or "extrinsic" properties of a object are not real changes to that object. "Real" changes are changes to intrinsic properties. The notion of an intrinsic property is itself controversial. I will assume here that some analysis along a commonly attempted line is feasible: intrinsic properties are properties an object has which do not require, or rule out, the existence of anything other than that object (Langton and Lewis 1998, Weatherson and Marshall 2013). Extrinsic properties are those that are not intrinsic.

The distinction between real and Cambridge changes provides the realist with a response to Dewey's third move. The response is as follows: "real changes" to an object are changes to its intrinsic properties. Once action occurs as a result of thought, and parts of external nature have their intrinsic properties affected, those are real changes to objects as a result of thought. But in cases where only the extrinsic properties of things have been affected by a change in someone's mind, the objects have only undergone Cambridge changes. So (the realist says) the "dependence" of the world on the mind introduced by Dewey in the preceding of the dialogue is a mere Cambridge dependence.

Dewey will not accept this solution, and despite my modern formulation, he would recognize some of the issues. The status of relations was a battle-ground during

Dewey's day. One point much discussed was whether relations "condition," "constitute," or "penetrate" the nature of their "terms." Idealists claimed that relations do "penetrate" the objects. This provides a quick road to the view that reality is dependent on the mental; the relations involved in knowledge condition the objects known, so one can never have knowledge of something "as it really is" (as it is independent of the knowledge itself). Many realists, on the other side, defended an "external" view of relations, according to which relations never penetrate or constitute their objects (Holt et al. 1910).¹⁰

Dewey opposed both sides of this debate. He thought there was much wrong with idealism (see the passage quoted above, 1925 p. 126), but he also rejected the claims realists were making about relations (Dewey 1910). Dewey denied that the nature of an object is just a matter of its intrinsic, disconnected properties. On the contrary, the connections that link it to other things, and its capacities for interaction, are just as real and in many contexts as important as the intrinsic make-up. Dewey would not accept any view designed to give second-class status to changes to relations, and the "real versus Cambridge change" distinction is a distinction of that type.

Earlier I said that in this paper I will treat mental states as inner episodes, localized inside agents' skins, even though Dewey saw this as a misleading way to develop a philosophy of mind. If mind is anywhere, it is spread though a linguistic community. Given this view of Dewey's, it is instructive to note some connections between Dewey's points about relational properties of ideas and other cases of highly salient relations.

It is a feature of highly organized social life that tiny changes in one place can have massive ramifications elsewhere – not just eventually, but – arguably – right away. Consider what happens when a piece of land has its zoning changed from residential to industrial. A stroke of a pen, occurring perhaps a long way from the land in question, instantaneously changes an important property of the land. Consequently, its value changes dramatically. Someone might die in Tasmania and suddenly make you, in Poland, the heir to a fortune. Many would not want to say that the death *caused* a change in you; they may even want to call this a mere Cambridge change (Kim 1974). But there is no denying the *importance* of these connections and channels in contemporary life. If you doubt it, wait until something happens to your credit rating. For Dewey, mind is a characteristic of organized social activity, and this activity is of a kind in which

connections and correlations are constantly being made and broken. The task of intelligence is to form and secure channels that agents can use to achieve their goals. The deep rooting and long reach of the channels linking agents with natural events is a distinctive feature of those parts of the universe in which mind is at work. So it is a mistake to leave these connections out of any a theory of the place mind has in the universe.

At this point many realists will think that Dewey has gone too far. If some distinction between real and Cambridge changes is not made, the consequences are severe. Many external things will be dependent on mind, in a sense, but everything will also be dependent on sand castles, sea anemones and everything else. Dewey wants to stress the ways in which new knowledge can set up new connections between things that run along a particular kind of channel – a channel comprising perception, deliberation and action. But Dewey seems to have no way of distinguishing these connections from a multitude of other ones, which have nothing to do with links between thought and action. When you change what you think about the Golden Gate Bridge, for example, in one sense the Golden Gate Bridge has changed. It is related differently to the contents of your mind. In this same sense, though, whenever you change what you think about the Golden Gate Bridge, the Eiffel Tower changes also. The Eiffel Tower is related differently to the contents of your mind when you change your Golden Gate thoughts. So the idea that there is a special class of changes that mind can induce in objects even prior to action disappears into triviality. And worse, the idea that some objects are under our control while others are outside that control disappears. The price of not recognizing the degenerate nature of Cambridge changes is a holistic metaphysics which trivializes the concepts of control, efficacy and dependence.

These are bad consequences for Dewey, for whom the concept of control is of enormous importance. How can Dewey retain the idea, crucial to his critique of idealism, that mind has a genuine causal role in the world, but a role which is local, contingent and constrained by other natural factors?

I am not sure about the likely form of Dewey's reply, and do not have a key quote to offer on his behalf as I did at other stages. I suggest that his reply will derive from his conception of the naturalistic outlook in philosophy. What we need at this point is not a metaphysical distinction between different kinds of properties; instead, the required

distinctions are empirical ones that need no general philosophical backing. Among all the connections and relations that exist in the world, the connections that link objects to human thought and action are, as a matter of empirical fact, particularly important in determining the course taken by certain parts of the world. In the parts of the world where intelligent agents are found, natural changes tend to take a certain route, a route with empirical differences from the routes taken by nature when intelligence is absent.

When something becomes a resource, or a protected species, or an object of worship, this makes a difference to its path through the world. In contrast, when something comes into a new relation with McTaggart's sand castle at Brighton, this, in almost every case, does not make an empirically important difference to its path through the world. For Dewey, it is a mistake to seek a metaphysical distinction to second-guess which properties can have causal and predictive importance. We just need to apply ordinary empirical distinctions. When we do this, we will find that a trivializing holism is avoided. The potentialities embedded in the radiating maze of causal channels around human agents are empirically important. Many other relational properties are not.

In the final section I will discuss this possible reply in more detail, though I'll do so in a way that goes beyond anything in Dewey and a way that makes use of ideas that Dewey did not embrace. In the present section, where the focus is Dewey himself, I offer this as the general form of Dewey's reply. Dewey emphasizes, for example, that the relational properties of objects can have a causal role: "A discovered America was a factor interacting with Europe and Asia to produce consequences previously impossible." A discovered America – America with new relational properties – was "an agency of new events and fruitions" (1925, p. 125).

So Dewey may have resources with which to avoid a view that trivializes the concepts of change and control. However, in his writing on this topic Dewey certainly sails close to the wind. He is so determined not to *understate* the extent of the mind's efficacy that he risks leaving the reader with an interpretation that is an overstatement. It is easy to come away from Dewey's work thinking that thoughts have such far-reaching effects on the world that either the view is not realist or (and this is the more appropriate reaction) the concept of "effect" loses much of its meaning. In any case, the dialogue ends with Dewey accepting the realist's concerns about the trivialization of concepts of change, control and efficacy, but trying to deal with them with empirical rather than

philosophical distinctions. The move I make on Dewey's behalf at this last stage is more conjectural than the other moves, and this stage of the dialogue is a response to significant tensions within Dewey's philosophy.

In working out where Dewey has ended up, two options remain on the table. One is the view I see as Dewey's goal – a fully naturalistic account of the contingent efficacy of mind, a view in which mind has a definite role in reconstructing the world, but a role that is local and restricted by the nature of human behavioral capacities and technologies. That is Dewey's goal, but the question remains whether Dewey's claims about relations have the effect of undermining parts of his position, leading to an excessively holistic view, in which everything depends on mind, and on everything else, too. It might be argued that though this view is holistic, it is not *excessively* holistic – perhaps that is just how things are. Jonathan Schaffer (2010), for example, argues that the power of absolute idealist arguments about the "interrelatedness of all things" have been underestimated in recent decades.¹¹ But for Dewey, at least, a conclusion of this kind is very problematic, because if dependence is ubiquitous in this way, it is impossible to give a theory of the partial character, and the growth, of intelligent control. As Dewey put it late in his career, in his reply to contributors to the "Library of Living Philosophers" volume on his work: "The need... is to find a viable alternative to an atomism which logically involves a denial of connections and to an absolutistic block monism which, on behalf of the reality of relations, leaves no place for the discrete, for plurality, and for individuals" (1939, p. 544).

This dialectic is not, however, one which finds Dewey approaching contemporary anti-realism or constructivism. Those views are not found anywhere in the options that remain. A crucial difference is that the apparently problematic view that remains on the table, the holistic view, is not pluralist or relativist. It does not give any special place to "perspectives" peculiar to individuals, groups, language games or traditions. Within this view, there is no sense in which inventing new theories or languages creates new worlds that are *specific to* those theories or languages. Instead, if the holistic view was right, there would be just one world, a world tangled up tighter than we had thought. We would each be constantly making changes to it, in cooperation and in conflict. But the changes *you* made would create new parts of *my* world just as much as the changes *I* made.

4. Realism and Control

The primary aim of this paper is to make clear the relationship between Dewey's philosophy and a range of debates about realism. The issues that matter here area concern intelligent control, not epistemic access or the contingency of categorization. Dewey's distancing himself from familiar formulations of realism comes not from worries about our not having *enough* connection to the world, but more from our having *too much*. And far from finding problematic the idea of mind-independent structure in the world, Dewey relied on such structure in his account of the transformative role played by intelligence; any "before and after" story needs a genuine "before." The paper could then conclude by suggesting that the intellectual context of Dewey's work was more different from that of more recent discussions than some have realized. Philosophers have read into Dewey a set of late 20th century concerns with justification and conceptual diversity, where Dewey's work is informed instead by the legacy of 19th century preoccupations with change and development, especially with the role of mind in the course taken by the world. Dewey's aim was to give a secular and naturalistic treatment of that role.

Having noted these things, we might then decide that Dewey's work is not very relevant to ongoing discussion of realism in metaphysics, as the issues that matter now are very different. But we can also ask: could Dewey be right that the role of intelligence in the control of events has not been well handled by recent philosophy? Is there something to learn here?

Thoughts guide actions which transform our environment – just about any philosopher will agree with that. As a result, much of what happens in the world is causally dependent on what people think. Everyone reading these words is in an environment whose structure is at least partly due to human activity. Dewey holds that given that the very *point* of thought is to make events in the world depend on what is sought by intelligent agents, it is perverse to express a view in basic metaphysics by saying that the world exists independently of what anyone might think about it.

I think this critique should be taken seriously. In developing a response to it, though, it may well be useful to draw on metaphysical distinctions between different kinds of properties and dependence relations. Dewey argues that in regions of the world where intelligent agents exist, distinctive patterns of dependence between events are found, and understanding these patterns requires taking seriously the importance of

changes to relations. Not all changes to relations are important, but some are. I saw Dewey as seeking to make the distinction he needs here empirical grounds: some changes to relations have further consequences for an object and some do not. However, this idea of "further consequences" for an object itself involves a distinction between significant and trivial changes to things. When the fall of McTaggart's sand-castle trivially changes all objects, it changes later states of those objects as well as present ones, and when the sand-castle's fall changes all objects at time t , those changes have consequences (of the same trivial kind) for all objects at $t+1$. So, again, why are changes to relations that involve thought consequential in a way that is not seen in other changes to relations?¹² Here is one possible solution. When an object comes into new relations that involve being thought about, later later changes to its intrinsic properties are more likely than they would otherwise have been. Changes to relations brought about by mental activity at one time tend to give rise to changes to intrinsic properties later. The same potency is seen in changes to social, institutional relations that depend on mental states, such as the zoning of land. If you have to predict which of three blocks of land is most likely to undergo intrinsic changes, and you are told that one has been re-zoned, or is one is being thought about while others are not, that is the one you should predict is more likely to change.

This relation is far from invariant; in some cases, the fact that something is thought about will lead to it changing *less* in its intrinsic properties later than it might have, because the thoughts in question involve a plan for preservation. A re-zoning might include the creation of a new national park. Cases like this might be dealt with by arguing that the thoughts directed on those objects were still a difference-maker. Or cases like this, like cases of pure contemplation that has no behavioral upshot, might be seen as derivative on more basic phenomena in which thought about an object is a precursor to behavior affecting that object. A weak correlation between changes to relations now and changes to intrinsic properties later is sufficient to do the job here; the contrast being drawn is with the great mass of wholly unimportant changes to relations exemplified by, for example, what happens to you when someone topples a sand-castle far away.

Changes to relations that involve being thought about are not the only changes to relations that have this kind of empirical importance – not the only ones that tend to precede changes to intrinsic properties. The physical sciences also describe facts about

which relations are consequential for an object and which are not. For an object of a certain mass, being close enough to the earth to be subject to gravitational attraction is a consequential relational property. Parts of physics describe which changes to relational properties imply changes to intrinsic properties later; parts of psychology, sociology, and economics do too.

Later change to intrinsic properties is used here as a litmus test for the empirical importance of a change to relations. This might not be the only possible test. Alternative approaches would be particularly important if arguments from modern physics show that a standard intrinsic/extrinsic distinction cannot be used here, because no properties of physical objects smaller than the universe are intrinsic (for discussion see Ladyman and Ross 2007 and Ney 2010). Setting this possibility aside, though, and assuming that an intrinsic/extrinsic distinction is useable, the result is a view like this: by means of action, thought can affect both the intrinsic and extrinsic properties of external things. Even before action has occurred, changes to what is believed and known change some extrinsic properties of the objects concerned. These changes to relations also occur when people use cultural devices to change social facts, as when land is zoned or someone is appointed to an office. These consequential changes to relations can be distinguished from inconsequential ones by the fact that changes to relations of this kind tend to bring changes to intrinsic properties in their train. But at any particular time, objects external to thought have their intrinsic properties (and many of their other extrinsic properties) independently of what anyone thinks.

Once the view has been laid out, there is no point in worrying too much about whether the label "realist" applies or not, though I think this view is within the realist family by current lights. Some might want to say that this view counts as realist because the relationships that obtain between thought and the world that I have just described *themselves* exist independently of what anyone thinks about them. That is right in a sense, but if misconstrued it can also contain an interesting error. As philosophers, we take as our subject matter (among other things) the relations that exist between thought and the rest of the world. Different accounts of these very relations have consequences for how people behave, how they inquire and how they educate each other. If the view I am describing is right, it should be applied to itself. And so it can, without paradox. An

improved understanding of the links between thought and its objects may itself be, in Dewey's words, "an agency of new events and fruitions."

These issues about connectedness and control are far from the ones that have been central to philosophical discussion of mind and world in recent decades. They are not alien to contemporary culture itself, though, where connections between people and events, social and economic, become ever more extensive and elaborate as a consequence of the internet and other communication media. Technological change is a means by which connectedness and the efficacy of the mental – central concerns of idealist philosophies, treated naturalistically by Dewey – may become philosophically pressing once again.

Notes

¹ This paper benefitted from discussions at colloquium presentations at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. I am grateful to Jonathan Schaffer for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

² See Shook (1995) for discussion of Dewey's interaction with avowedly realist philosophers in the first decade of the 20th century, and Hildebrand (2003) for both this decade and the years following. For Hildebrand, over Dewey's career he consistently aimed to "undercut" standard positions in debates about realism.

³ Dewey's relationship to questions now associated with "scientific realism" is discussed in Godfrey-Smith (2002), a paper which leaves some interpretive questions unresolved.

⁴ Rorty (1982) allows that Dewey occasionally lapses into doing the metaphysics that he generally and effectively criticizes.

⁵ See Devitt (1991): "[I]n asserting the existence and objectivity of the world, the realist does not mean to deny certain familiar causal relations involving minds. Beliefs, desires, sensations, and so forth cause behavior which affects external reality, even creating some items (offspring). And reality acts on minds, causing beliefs, desires, sensations, and so on. These relations, long noted by folk theory and studied by science, pose no threat to realism" (p. 16).

⁶ See Dewey (1925) p. 126 for explicit comparison of the terms "construct" and "reconstruct" in this connection. And from *The Quest for Certainty*: "[K]nowing is an act which modifies what previously existed" (1929, p. 195).

⁷ The quoted phrase is from *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), p. 159.

⁸ In what follows, I use the word "object" with its ordinary loose, non-technical meaning – an object is just a thing. Dewey often used "object" in a technical sense, but I will not follow his usage here (see Dewey 1929 p. 80, Boisvert 1988)

⁹ Miller (2010) makes a point along these lines: "clearly Jones' believing that Cardiff is in Wales is not independent of facts about belief: trivially, it is dependent on the fact that Jones believes that Cardiff is in Wales. However, such trivial dependencies are not what are at issue in debates between realists and non-realists about the mental and the intentional. A non-realist who objected to the independence dimension of realism about the mental would claim that Jones' believing that Cardiff is in Wales depends in some *non-trivial* sense on facts about beliefs, etc." Devitt (1991, p. 16) says that he will "ignore the problem" of the inclusion of animals with minds, like ourselves, in the realist's "mind-independent" nature.

¹⁰ Holt et al. (1910) p. 395: "In the proposition, 'the term *a* is in the relation *R* to the term *b*,' *aR* in no degree constitutes *b*, nor does *Rb* constitute *a*, nor does *R* constitute either *a* or *b*."

¹¹ In note 2 I cited John Shook's treatment of discussions of realism in Dewey's earlier work, such as Dewey (1906). I suggest that Dewey's position at this earlier time might be seen as a partial embrace of the position that I view – and take Dewey later to view – as an excessively holistic position.

¹² A version of this objection to Dewey was raised by Tim Maudlin (in a colloquium discussion), and the solution outlined in this paragraph was suggested by Jonathan Schaffer (personal correspondence).

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