

## Really Living in Space-time

Craig A. Cunningham  
*Northeastern Illinois University*

### INTRODUCTION

Professor McCarthy has written a very thought-provoking paper. She has made some controversial claims, and has backed them up with considerable evidence from Peirce's and Dewey's writings. Those of us who are interested in better understanding the thinking of these men should be thankful for her efforts. However, I think her attempt to reconstruct pragmatism as compatible with absolutism is destined to fail.

My response consists of three criticisms: First, I find that she has confounded Peirce and Dewey, creating a hybrid philosophy which neither man would support. Second, Dewey would never accept McCarthy's description of the "grounding" of knowledge claims in a mind-independent reality. Third, nothing is gained by labeling some knowledge claims as absolute, or by faith that some claims will turn out to be absolutely true.

### MC CARTHY HAS CONFOUNDED PEIRCE AND DEWEY

In this paper, McCarthy has woven together the ideas of Peirce and Dewey as if "classical pragmatism" were one position and Peirce and Dewey were just two sides of the same coin. In the section "What, Pragmatically, is Real?" McCarthy relies exclusively on Peirce's writings, and in the section "What, Pragmatically, is Known?" she relies exclusively on Dewey's writings. Yet these two men had some very serious disagreements, and the particular issues which McCarthy writes about are among the most contentious areas. By failing to distinguish Peirce's and Dewey's thought, McCarthy creates a hybrid which is not true to either man, and which provides McCarthy with the opportunity for ascribing unpragmatic conclusions to both philosophers.

We can see McCarthy's mistake by considering the structure of McCarthy's argument, which consists of two "givens," and one "QED." The first "given" is that mind-independent reality provides the ultimate test of the truth of a belief. This McCarthy gets from Peirce, and his doctrine of synechism. The second "given" is that the object of knowledge is not things-in-themselves, but rather connections between events. This McCarthy gets from Dewey, who claimed that we can never "know" a thing immediately, but only upon reflection. McCarthy then, in her "QED," uses Peirce's mind-independent reality to argue that Dewey's objects of knowledge are "grounded" in some absolute sense in mind-independent reality. McCarthy has constructed a theoretical position actually held by no one. Her creation of a "position-held-by-no-one" is symptomatic of a bigger problem lurking in McCarthy's paper. She wants to claim the absoluteness of some knowledge claims, but her method for ascertaining which claims are absolute is itself only possible from the "view from nowhere."

Let me be more specific. McCarthy describes the "ontological realism" of Charles Peirce, whose "synechism" held that certain ideas are "destined" to be

believed. Unfortunately, it is not accurate to ascribe this form of realism to Dewey. Because McCarthy does not discuss Dewey's own ontology, she failed to acknowledge that he emphatically rejects the idea that there exists an "external permanency," upon "which our thinking has no effect," which becomes the content of "eventual knowledge" and provides the ultimate test of a belief.<sup>1</sup> Dewey never believed, as did Peirce, that given enough time, inquiry will inevitably come to "the one True conclusion" about any given situation or set of facts.<sup>2</sup>

Dewey rejects this because for him, reality is not in any sense "complete" or "finished" or "destined" to be such and such; rather, "reality is...dynamic or self-evolving" and thus "there is no reasonable standard of truth...except through reference to the specific offices which knowing is called upon to perform in adjusting and expanding the means and ends of life."<sup>3</sup> Knowledge claims are evaluated by their usefulness in specific circumstances, not by reference to a hypothetical "end-point" of inquiry, in which all doubt theoretically ceases. For Dewey, there will be no such end-point, because each judgment *alters* what is "real." There simply *is* nothing in Dewey's ontology which is "thoroughly independent" of "any individual's, or group's, beliefs." What is "real" is ever-changing, precisely because inquiry is *real*.

Thus, Dewey's reality can never serve as what McCarthy calls the "ultimate recourse" or "final grounding of knowledge claims." There is no view from nowhere, no knower who is "outside the world to be known."<sup>4</sup> Dewey's pragmatism does not try to "grasp...eternal and universal Reality"; rather, it uses "the methods and conclusions of our best knowledge, that called scientific," to solve problems which arise.<sup>5</sup> Absolutes have no role in the creation of this knowledge.

#### WE HAVE NO ACCESS TO "MIND-INDEPENDENT" REALITY

McCarthy's description of Dewey's "object of knowledge" is accurate. We cannot know that which we experience immediately — what Dewey would call "brute events." Rather, we "know" the connections between events and their possible consequences or meanings. When an object is "known," we take a given event or set of events as a "sign" that certain consequences are likely. Thus, these objects can be useful for the success of subsequent inquiries.

Where McCarthy goes wrong is in her claim that when we "know" an object, we have "discovered" relationships which exist prior to our knowing them. This interpretation falls into the dualism which Dewey's theory of knowing was meant to overcome. Knowledge claims, for Dewey, are "determined" in the process of inquiry. Objects of knowledge are *real*, but they are not "mind-independent" entities waiting to be, as McCarthy would have it, "discovered," "learned," or "identified." Objects of knowledge are not discovered; they are "determined."<sup>6</sup> This word has a dual meaning, of course, as in the following two sentences: "The doctor determined that the cause of her pain was a tumor"; and, "The boys were determined not to be fooled again." The former sentence seems to imply that the "cause" of the pain was there, objectively to be discovered, while the latter sentence highlights the boys' own decision. Dewey sees the determination of objects as a consequence of interactions or transactions between organisms and their environment. As Dewey

writes in *Experience and Nature*, “the business of reflection is to take events which brutally occur and brutally affect us, to *convert them into objects* by means of inference as to their probable consequences. These are the meanings *imputed to the events under consideration*.”<sup>7</sup> He continues:

Knowledge or science, as a work of art, like any other work of art, confers upon things traits and potentialities which did not *previously* belong to them. [It]... is an act which confers upon non-cognitive material traits which *did* not belong to it. It marks a change by which physical events exhibiting properties of mechanical energy, connected by relations of push and pull, hitting, rebounding, splitting and consolidating, realize characters, meanings and relations of meaning *hitherto* not possessed by them.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, by engaging with brute events in the process of inquiry, inquirers *alter reality* by conferring attributes upon events which were not previously there. Reality is not “mind-independent”; rather, mind and reality are intricately interwoven, which is why Dewey prefers to talk about *experience*, not reality, as the substratum of inquiry. Given this, we must abandon the attempt to test knowledge against a mind-independent reality. We therefore lose any possibility of judging whether a specific knowledge claim is “absolutely” true.

Let’s assume for a moment that a given knowledge claim *would* apply “across the board, in every relevantly similar problem situation,” and would “never...be overturned, in any circumstance.” Such a claim would be, on McCarthy’s view, absolute. But how would we *know* it was absolute? McCarthy describes “a practicable method of performing the required tests of belief with respect to the criteria of knowledge” that lets us “evaluate knowledge-claims non-arbitrarily.” I must admit that I am completely dumbfounded by this claim. How would we perform such a supposedly practicable test? We would have to “try out” the claim in every conceivable circumstance. Surely this is impossible. We are *always* in the circumstances we are in, and we can never be in circumstances that we are not in. We are always in our own place in space and time. We can never test a knowledge claim except in the actual circumstances that define the boundaries of our lives. This leads me to a third criticism.

#### NOTHING IS GAINED BY APPEAL TO ABSOLUTES

At the end of her paper, McCarthy raises some “implications” of her position. She wants to use the possibility of absolute knowledge to justify the attitudes of the critical thinker. Critical thinkers, she writes, should place high valuation on discordant ideas that might lead to doubt. They should continually reconstruct their “hypotheses as to what really is the case.” Critical thinkers should make a difference in the real world. Finally, they should know that “there is a point to” their “discourse,” because, “ultimately, there are answers which are real and objective and, because of that, are equally accessible to all.”

Do we need absoluteness to justify these principles of critical thinking? I can only imagine that *some* people, for example those who are required to do critical thinking as part of an educational program, need to have some kind of faith that what they are doing has a point. But when people are really involved in inquiry, they really *have* doubt, and revision of their hypotheses is what they *do* if they are truly interested in finding a solution. Such persons, Dewey writes, must “be genuinely

thoughtful, [and] willing to sustain and protract that state of doubt which is the stimulus to thorough inquiry, so as not to accept an idea or make positive assertion of a belief until justifying reasons have been found.”<sup>9</sup> To seek justification for our assertions is the essence of inquiry which seeks for real *solutions*. The search for solutions in real situations involving doubt needs no justification. And it does not require that we step out of where we are to try to attain a point-of-view from where we will never be.

- 
1. See Ralph W. Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).
  2. Even Peirce, however, admits that we can never attain absolute knowledge: “On the whole, then, we can never reach perfect certitude nor exactitude. We can never be absolutely sure of anything.” “People cannot attain absolute certainty concerning questions of fact.” See “The Scientific Attitude and Fallibilism” (1896-99), in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 58-59.
  3. John Dewey, *Studies in Logical Theory*, in *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, vol. 2, ed Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1899-1924), 296.
  4. See John Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy,” in *The Middle Works*, vol. 10, 23-24.
  5. John Dewey, “Introduction to *Problems of Men*,” in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 15, ed Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925-1953), 161.
  6. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 1, 110; see also 126.
  7. *Ibid.*, 245; emphasis added. See also “The Superstition of Necessity,” where Dewey writes: “objects, as known, are not independent of the process of knowing, but are the content of our judgments” in *John Dewey: The Early Works*, vol. 4, ed Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1882-1898), 21.
  8. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 1, 285-86.
  9. Dewey, *How We Think*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 8, 24.