

Escape from Peril

0.1 Two methods of gaining security

Dewey characterizes human beings in a world of danger and on a quest to seek security from that danger. There have been two primary methods for seeking security.

The **first** method is **changing the self in emotion and idea**. Concerning this method, Dewey writes:

[People] began with an attempt to propitiate the powers which environ him and determine his destiny (LW4:3).

In other words, individuals have tried to do things that please the gods or cosmos through (i) sacrifice, rituals, cult-like customs and later (ii) through devotion, reference, penance, prayer, a contrite heart. **One gains security by changing one's self.**

The **second** method is by **changing the world through action**. Concerning this method, Dewey writes:

The other course is to invent arts and by their means turn the powers of nature to account; man constructs a fortress out of the very conditions and forces which threaten him (LW4:3).

Here individuals seek security from harm by harnessing and controlling nature:

1. building shelters
2. creating garments
3. wielding fire
4. developing technology

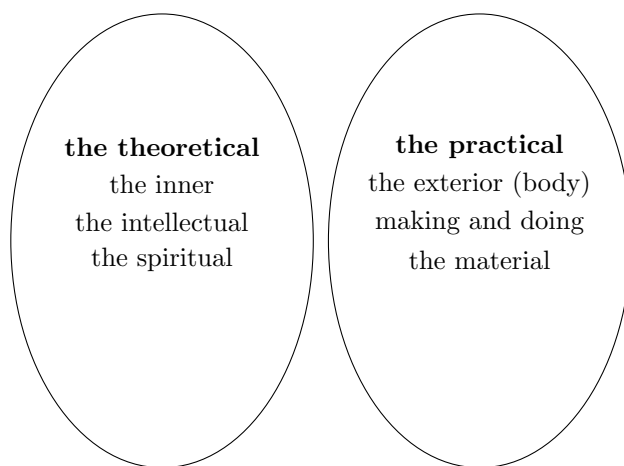
Example 1 *We can think of a really modern example of the two methods by way of thinking about two approaches to character development. Suppose Tek is depressed or wishes to change some aspect of his personality. Tek might undertake the **method of morals** by using traditional character-development tools like praise, blame, ritual, etc. in order to increase his ability to control his own behavior. In contrast, he might use the method of medicine which would involve taking drugs / medicine to control behaviors he takes to be problematic.*

0.2 Bias against changing the world

With respect to the method that seeks to gain security by changing one's self, Dewey writes that there is a **bias** or **prejudice** against the **method of action** or **practice**. This method, while producing something extraordinary, is conceived with distrust since it is:

1. a violation of the prerogatives of the gods
2. doing something unnatural
3. an expression of the dangerous pride of humans
4. not really addressing the more serious perils of human life
5. dealing with only the base aspects of life rather than the more important ("spiritual") aspects

Dewey conceives the contrast of the two methods as involving a division between **theory** (the inner, the intellectual, the spiritual) and **practice** (the body, work, the material).



The theoretical is said to be *more important* in the quest for security and escape from harm than the practical. This is asserted (at least initially) because the theoretical deals with the **higher self** while the practical deals with the **lower self**.

0.3 The pure intellect and the quest for certainty

One question then concerns why there is a kind of privileging of theory over practice. Dewey conjectures that one historical reason for is that the **theoretical is taken to be more secure** than the practical.

- **the practical with the probable:** every action you take comes with a certain amount of uncertainty or peril
- **the intellectual with the certain:** pure intellect with the "quest for a certainty which shall be absolute and unshakeable" (LW4:5).

First, let's consider the connection of the practical with the probable. Generally, practical action (making-and-doing) involve a degree of uncertainty and potential harm. Various proverbs and cliches remind us that "the best laid plans of mice

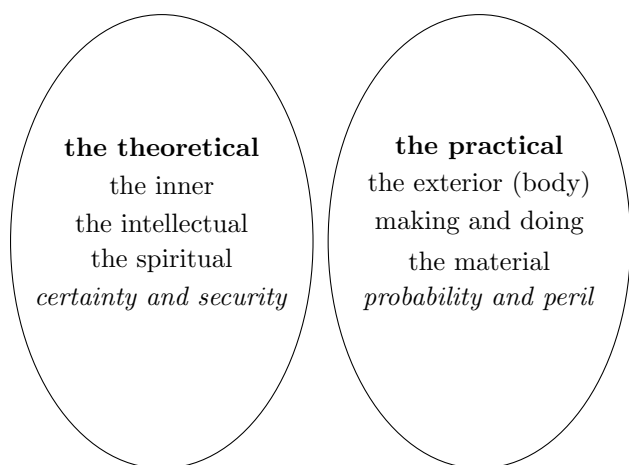
and men often go awry”, that you cannot predict the future, that there are always unforeseeable circumstances. The practical then is associated with some degree of risk.

Example 2 Suppose Tek loves Liz. He doesn't know if she will love him back. Nor does he know if she does love him, that they will get married. Nor does he know if they get married, if they will have a happy marriage. His decision to approach her is beset with uncertainty and risk.

Example 3 Liz has to choose a future career. She has many options available to her but she doesn't know which will make her the happiest. She could be a doctor but isn't sure if she wishes to work long hours or will enjoy working with patients. She could be an artist, a lawyer, a scientist. Her decision is an important practical one and is beset with uncertainty and risk.

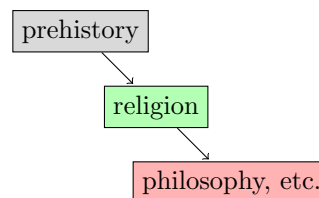
Second, in contrast, the **theoretical is seen as a way to escape or avoid risk and uncertainty**. If somehow human beings could “get beyond and above” themselves to some sort of fixed and immutable truth, they could avoid the risks associated with the practical. If they could access a realm for which there were no external consequences, they could avoid peril. On this approach, the theoretical is connected to a kind of purely inner activity, a kind of mental theorizing, a self-sufficiency of the mind, and a quest for obtaining absolute certainty.

In short, there is a connection drawn between the theoretical and that which is certain and secure and a connection between the practical and that which is probable and perilous.



0.4 Origin and development of the bias

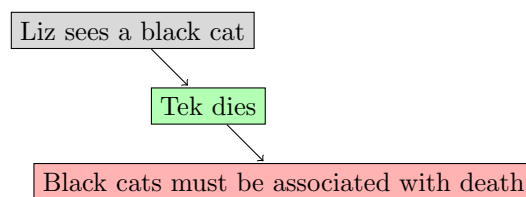
The next main points that Dewey discusses is the origin of the **historical-intellectual development** of the bias against the practical. Here he charts the development of this bias first beginning in prehistoric times, through the development of religion, and finally into the origin of philosophy, empirical science, and mathematics.



0.4.1 The prehistoric

The characterization of **prehistoric humans** are as living extraordinarily close to peril as they were concerned with basic survival. Since prehistoric humans lacked the knowledge to trace good events back to their causal origin, fortuitous and unfortunate events were shrouded in mystery. In addition, they reasoned in an *associative* way in that events simply connected to good and bad events were harbingers of good or omens of evil (see LW4:8). Thus associative reasoning gave rise to things like:

1. omens
2. irrelevant practices associated with forecasting and prognostication
3. ritualistic ceremonies, e.g. reaping a harvest, making a weapon, etc.
4. magic



The prehistoric individual's practical quest for security through making and doing (e.g. weapons, making clothes, etc.) involved a **theoretical component**. That is, it was caught up in a quasi-religious or mythical belief-system that was thought to play a more substantial role.

Example 4 It was not sufficient to make a knife (purely practical). A ritual had to accompany the knife-making process in order for the knife to work properly.

Example 5 It was not sufficient to grow food (purely practical). A ritual had to accompany the harvest in order for future harvests to work.

Dewey's claim then is that even in the prehistoric era where human beings might be said to be *wholly practical*, these individuals at least had a **feeling** that there was a higher, more theoretical power at work that was more important than the practice itself.

0.4.2 The religious

Both prehistoric and religious individuals made use of narrative and myth in their theoretical explanations of the world. The movement from the prehistoric to the religious, however, came with two key distinctions.

First, the distinction between (i) the **holy** and the **lucky**.

- holy objects: something non-concrete, more potent in its power, something associated with rites, purification, fasting, prayer, subjection of the self, non-disposable, approached with awe, involved a degree of unfamiliarity or mystery
- lucky objects: concrete and tangible, disposable, used, practical, matter of fact, involves a kind of matter of fact relation to and having a colloquial nature

Second, the related distinction between objects in one's everyday control (**normal objects**) and objects that are beyond our control but on which we depend (**superior objects**).

- Objects that are in our everyday control are objects that are familiar to us, subject to human manipulation, and because of this they have a kind of **equality with us** or are regarded as below us (objects to be used). In short, objects manipulated by practice, use, and are common to everyday life are regarded as inferior.
- Objects that are taken to be beyond our control, supernatural, immutable, and mysterious to us are thus taken to be superior to us. Gods, angels, sacred entities, etc.

For Dewey, the religious period seems to mark an increased privileging of the theoretical. The practical was associated with lucky objects and those in our everyday control, while the theoretical was associated with holy objects and those superior to us.

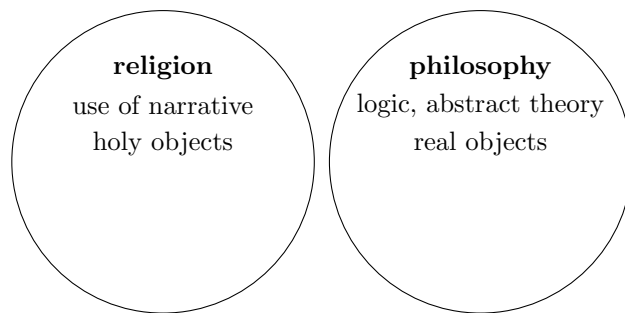
0.4.3 The philosophical

The final step in Dewey's reconstruction is the transition from religious thought to a **philosophical-scientific understanding of the world**. Here Dewey makes a few points summarizing what he takes to be the central tenets of the theoretical position.

First, he contends that philosophy emerged not out of pure theorizing but out of the prehistorical and religious history. In short, philosophy emerged out of a state of culture that has been outlined above, particularly that of religion. Thus, it emerges out of a growing trend to favor the theoretical over the practical.

Second, the shift religion to philosophy, Dewey regards as significant yet continuous.

- explanations given in the form of imaginative, emotional stories were transformed into rational discourse connected to logic.
- despite the difference, there remained an important similarity between the two disciplines is that both characterized the **object of their discussion** as something higher than the merely practical. That is, just as religious took to explain the holy or immutable, mysterious, and higher objects, philosophy took itself to be the highest of all disciplines. Whereas religious addressed the divine, philosophy addressed the real.



Third, the shift away from religion was also accompanied by developments in mathematics and science. This marked a **further detachment** from the practical. One could have an understanding of the **real** without even needing to consult with aspects of the natural world. The object of inquiry thus became purely ideal, something invariant or unchanging, and one of theoretical investigation, stripped away from any human component.

Fourth, Dewey even goes so far as to suggest that the exaltation of the theoretical and denigration of the practical could take the form of an ontological proof (that is, by merely thinking about our idea of things, we could prove that the theoretical is more important). His proof reads:

The realm of the practical is the region of change, and change is always contingent; it has in it an element of chance that cannot be eliminated. If a thing changes, its alternation is convincing evidence of its lack of true or complete Being. What *is*, in the full and pregnant sense of the word, is always, eternally. It is self-contradictory for that which *is* to alter. If it had no defect or imperfection in it how could it change? That which becomes merely *comes* to be, never truly is. It is infected with non-being; with privation of Being in the perfect sense. The world of generation is the world of decay and destruction. Wherever one thing comes into being something else passes out of being (LW4:16)

The basic idea here is that if something can change, then it can go from being one way to being another, which is contradictory. And, if it is contradictory in nature, then it cannot be real.

Finally, there is a division drawn between different types of knowledge: (i) there is certain knowledge which can only be about things that are fixed, permanent, an invariant and (ii) there is belief which is connected with change, probability, and variation. In short, there is an equation of knowledge with certainty and the contention that we can only have certainty about objects of a theoretical nature.

In sum, Dewey contends that while the prehistorical person may have had a **feeling** that there is something fixed, immutable, and permanent, the philosophical tradition ultimately articulates this idea and associates it with (i) the true nature of reality and contends (ii) that it can only be known through a theoretical, purely rational way of knowing.

Discussion 1 *The overarching claim of "Escape from Peril" is that we have come to place a greater importance on rational, ab-*

stract, interior thought (over the practical, tangible, and artful) for resolving the more important problems in life. This is not to say that the practical has no importance or relevance, only that the type of problems it resolves deals with our more basic (lower) selves. That is, the practical concerns issues relating around survival.

1. What do you think of Dewey's account of the development of this idea from the prehistoric through the religious and leading to modern day science and philosophy?
2. Do you think that the more important problems of your life (those dealing with your higher, ultimate self) are problems that can only be resolved through rational reflection rather than through practical engagement?

0.5 Central tenets of the theoretical position

The last step in Dewey's discussion in "Escape from Peril" is that the basic exaltation of the theoretical, its treatment of reality as immutable, permanent, fixed, and with associating knowledge with certainty involves several philosophical consequences.

First, it entails a correspondence between **knowledge as certainty** and **reality**. The significance of this is that it implies that **objects of a mostly practical nature are not real**. Since the things that you desire or things that you value or your purpose in life can change, and what counts as knowledge is that which is fixed, permanent, and theoretical, the things are not real. In short, the quest for certainty and the escape from peril has structured what types of things we take to be real (our metaphysics).

There are a whole host of objects about which you might have practical knowledge but not have theoretical certainty concerning.

Example 6 *You might desire love or believe yourself to be in love, but if you couldn't be certain about the reality of love, it would not be real. Other things like truth, social constructions, e.g. families, or idealities, e.g. honor.*

Second, the objects of knowledge exist before we do since they are eternal. Thus we play no participatory role in their construction. That is, things are how they are regardless of what we think, how we approach, or what we do. These objects have a total independence from us. This sort of belief takes a few different forms:

- empiricist approach: ultimate test of knowledge can be traced back to experience which we **passively** observe; reality is forced upon us and we play no role in the construction of this experience.
- realistic approach: reality is independent of all thought or experience
- rationalist approach: reality is independent of all thought or experience but can be discovered through abstract theorizing (the synthetic intellect)

Discussion 2 *Dewey contends that society has come to equate knowledge with certainty.*

1. Is this how you use the term "know"? That is, do you say that someone knows something if and only if they are certain about it?
2. If one does equate knowledge with certainty, what does this imply for the types of things that are real? That is, if we can only know certain scientific, mathematical, and philosophical entities and laws (since these are the only things that are real), what is lost in all of this? Do you agree that the objects of our desire, or objects of hope, or objects of belief lack reality?

0.6 Key points

There are a couple key points to remember about the essay:

- Dewey thinks there is a bias against the practical. He thinks that, over time, people have come to think the theoretical is more important than the practical
- He thinks that this bias has become more extreme or codified throughout time (prehistoric individuals had a feeling that theory was more important than practice while philosophers have ingrained it into their view of reality)
- He thinks the general reason for this is connected to a desire for security and so individuals connect (i) the certainty of theoretical knowledge with security and (ii) the uncertainty of practical knowledge with potential insecurity

Discussion 3 *If the essay had to be distilled down to one key point it is that **people have come to increasingly think that theoretical knowledge (knowing that) is more important than practical knowledge (knowing how)**. Some examples:*

- *it is more important for you as an individual to know that meat should be cooked to a certain degree to avoid food poisoning than knowing how to cook meat to a certain degree.*
- *it is more important for you to know that a painting is beautiful than to know how to create a painting*
- *it is more important for you to have an understanding of the fundamental nature of reality (e.g. atoms, their relations, God) than to know how to do things like build a house*

Who is the audience for this essay? Can you think of individuals who do not hold the above view? Can you think of individuals that do? If it is not more important to have theoretical knowledge, what do you think Dewey is suggesting to those who hold the above bias?