Jennifer Welchman

From Absolute Idealism to Instrumentalism: The Problem of Dewey's Early Philosophy

I

One of the great unsolved mysteries of Dewey scholarship is the date of Dewey's rejection of absolute idealism. The earliest explicit indication that a break *had* occurred appeared in the 1903 *Studies in Logical Theory*. Presumably, Dewey had converted from idealism to instrumentalism sometime prior to 1903. However, none of Dewey's earlier publications publicly announce his conversion, nor did Dewey provide a date in his later autobiographical writings. Dating Dewey's rejection of idealism is further complicated by the fact that Dewey continued to use the technical vocabulary of absolute idealism in his early instrumentalist texts. The continuity of Dewey's language effectively disguises the changes that occurred in his thinking prior to 1903.

Since most students of American pragmatism are, as a rule, unfamiliar with absolute idealism and its obsolete vocabulary, it is not surprising that few have been willing to tackle this problem specifically. With a writer as prolific as Dewey, the task of examining the publications of almost twenty-years for veiled hints of discontent with idealism is daunting – particularly when the hints are expressed in a philosophical terminology no longer common or readily comprehensible. Thus it was with considerable gratitude that scholars received Morton White's ground-breaking essay, *The Origin of Dewey's Instrumentalism* in 1943.[1] White's strategy for determining the nature and depth of Dewey's absolute idealism was comparative analysis – reading selected texts from Dewey's early years against the related texts of a few influential idealist contemporaries. In effect, White used these latter texts as a standard by which to gauge Dewey's agreement with or divergence from the main tenets of absolute idealism. Since the idealist text most frequently discussed at

length in Dewey's nineteenth century writings was T. H. Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics,*[2] White focused his analysis on the relation of Dewey's idealism to that of T. H. Green.

By this means, White divided Dewey's early career into three fairly distinct phases. Dewey is said to have been in close agreement with and dependent on Green's doctrines, that is, a committed idealist, from his graduation in 1884 to 1889. In 1890, Dewey published a review of Caird's *Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*[3] in which, according to White, Dewey expressed his first serious criticisms of Green's ethics – specifically the charges that Green's ethics were neo-kantian rather than neo-hegelian and that Green had failed to understand Hegel's criticisms of transcendental idealism. From 1890 to 1894, Dewey frequently repeated these charges, accompanying his attacks with increasingly radical proposals for revising absolute idealist theories of mind and ethics. White reads these criticisms and proposals as indicating a growing divergence between the philosophy of Dewey and Green, and accordingly, labels Dewey's philosophy in this period, 'transitional'. According to White, the period of transition ended in 1894, when Dewey announced a new doctrine; "experimental idealism." What exactly 'experimental idealism' meant Dewey did not explain, but since idealists like Green used the term 'experimental' as a metaphysically neutral synonym for 'empirical' or 'observable', White judges that Dewey was signalling his rejection of absolute idealism for some species of empiricism. In calling himself an experimental idealist, Dewey presumably only meant to indicate that he was not an empirical realist. After 1894, Dewey discontinued his attacks on Green's doctrines. By 1895, according to White, Dewey's break with idealism was substantially complete and his philosophy to all intents and purposes instrumentalist.

The simplicity and economy of White's method of analyzing Dewey's early idealist texts appeared so powerful that it has been almost universally adopted. Recent studies touching upon Dewey's early philosophy have sometimes challenged White's reading of particular texts, but none have taken issue with his overall analysis.[4]

This is unfortunate, because White's analysis relies on a series of assumptions for the most part undefended and almost certainly false.

II

White's method of analysis requires that each of the following assumptions should be accepted. First, anglo-american absolute idealism was a monolithic body of doctrines based on a very few original texts. Second, Green's *Prolegomena* was one of these original texts. Third, Dewey's philosophy was based upon Green's and not a variant of 'heretical' idealist text. The acceptability of each of these assumptions is crucial. For only if absolute idealism was a monolithic movement, based on few original texts, could agreement with one of these texts be construed as indicating agreement with absolute idealism per se. Only if Green's was one of these original texts could agreement with the *Prolegomena* serve as such an indicator. Finally, only if Dewey's idealism was derived from Green (or one of his imitators), not some other source, could Dewey's attitude towards Green be indicative of his attitude towards absolute idealism.

That absolute idealism could not have been as monolithic as White's analysis requires hardly seems to warrant argument. Who, on reflection, would suppose it possible that any association of philosophers having more than one member would be in complete agreement on even the main points of their 'common' doctrine? For those who have not much studied absolute idealism, a remark of F. C. S. Schiller may be revealing. In an article of 1905, when absolute idealism was still flourishing, Schiller complained that he had had to give up using the term 'idealist'

> as being too equivocal to be useful. There are too many idealisms on the market, many of them more essentially opposed to each other than to views classified as realism.[5]

Further, the absolute idealists were not of one mind in their assessments of Green's contributions to the movement. The publication of Green's *Prolegomena* was followed by a steady stream of criticisms,

objections, and opposing positions by such notables in the movement as Bernard Bosanquet, A. E. Taylor, Josiah Royce, and John Dewey.

But even if most absolute idealists were as unoriginal as White's analysis requires, it would still be doubtful whether the *Prolegomena* could be considered one of their ur-texts. Green could claim to have produced one such text. His critical introduction to the 1874 Green and Grose edition of Hume's philosophy was an early, influential statement of neo-hegelian criticisms of British empiricism. However, the first important discussion of neo-hegelian ethical theory and the dialectics of human moral development was not Green's *Prolegomena,* but F. H. Bradley's *Ethical Studies.*[6]

It is often forgotten that the younger of the two great Oxford idealists was the senior ethical theorist. The first edition of Bradley's *Ethical Studies* appeared in 1876. Green first turned his attention to working out his own theory of ethics in 1877, the year he was appointed Whyte's Professor of Moral Philosophy. Portions of the unfinished text of the *Prolegomena* were published as a series of articles in *Mind* in 1882. The extant, unfinished text appeared posthumously in 1883.[7] For Dewey and his contemporaries, Bradley's earlier work would have been the ur-text on the ethics of self-realization. This audience would have read the *Prolegomena* as Green's attempt to surmount the technical problems involved, problems Bradley had raised almost a decade earlier.

White's first two assumptions, as stated above, are simply not plausible. However, it might be argued that White himself was (or could have been) employing a weaker pair of assumptions. Rather than supposing the first two assumptions were true as a matter of historical fact, White might instead have supposed only that they truly reflected the misconceptions of a naive, provincial, young Dewey of the 1880's. If so, White would only be claiming that *for Dewey* absolute idealism was summed up in a very few texts and that Green's *Prolegomena* was one of those texts. Leaving aside the problem of proof, let us grant, for the sake of argument, that the weaker versions of the first two assumptions could be correct. This would allow

us to proceed to White's third, and most interesting assumption, that Dewey's idealism was originally derived from Green's work, especially Green's *Prolegomena.*

None of White's assumptions are explicity defended in his text. However, White does cite particular examples from Dewey's writings as illustrative of Dewey's 'greenism'. Since there are only four such illustrations, we can briefly review them before considering whether or not they tend to support White's third assumption.[8] The earliest of the four is a two-part series of articles in *Mind* of 1886, Dewey's first important professional publication. The articles were, in White's words, "heavily laden with what Dewey had learned from Thomas Hill Green, 'of whom the writer [Dewey] would not speak without expressing his deep, almost reverential gratitude.'"[9] The second example White offers is Dewey's *Psychology* of 1887, in which Dewey stated his belief in the existence of a universal consciousness: universal consciousness being, of course, the essence of Green's Absolute. White's third example is a 1889 syllabus of Dewey's ethics seminar, which appeared in a series on the teaching of ethics in the *Ethical Record.* According to the syllabus, the conclusion of the course was that man's summum bonum is personal-realization. White writes, "This, we know, was the keystone of Green's ethical theory."[10] Finally, White cites an 1889 paper on Green's philosophy, in which, as White stresses, Dewey offered no criticisms of any of Green's doctrines.

As evidence of Dewey's early commitment to Green's absolute idealism, White's examples vary considerably. At best, the second and third are circumstantial. Dewey's *Psychology* and the syllabus White cites undoubtedly advocate some sort of absolute idealism. But in neither are presentation of the issues or the positions taken sufficiently similar to Green's to conclude with any certainty that the idealism advocated is his. Some peculiarities of the fourth instance White cites, Dewey's 1889 paper on Green's philosophy, would support an alternate reading. Dewey says in the paper that he had written it in response to the year's best-selling novel, *Robert Elsmere,* which contained an important character based on Green. The paper

is purely descriptive, and while it contains no criticisms, it offers no endorsements of Green's views. The language used is nontechnical. Moreover, the journal in which it appears is not a professional philosophical journal. While Dewey may have written the paper in support of Green's views, it seems just as likely that he simply meant to explain those views to an audience interested and puzzled by their presentation in the novel. The paper certainly proves that Dewey had *read* Green, but not that he shared Green's views. So of White's four examples, only the first, the papers of 1886, would seem to give direct evidence that Dewey owed some or all of his idealism to Green.

Since so much rides on the papers of 1886, in particular to Dewey's statement of gratitude to Green, it is unfortunate that White did not discover precisely what Dewey was grateful for. The answer can be found in the opening remarks to the first of the two papers, "The Psychological Standpoint." Dewey wrote:

> [I]t is only within the past ten years that what is vaguely called Transcendentalism has shown to the Engligh reading world just why it holds what it does, and just what are its objections to the methods most characteristically associated with English thinking. Assertion of its results, accompanied with attacks upon the results of empiricism, we have had before: but it is only recently that the grounds, the reasons, the method have been stated. . . . English philosophy cannot now be what it would have been if, (to name only one of the writers) the late Professor Green had not written.[11]

What English philosophy could no longer be was the empiricism of Locke, Hume, or Mill. Green's contribution was that he not only rejected the conclusions of British empiricism, but in his detailed, systematic critique of Hume's philosophy, gave a philosophically respectable explanation and defense of idealism's objections. Dewey's arguments against empiricism in "The Psychological Standpoint,"

most particularly the mode of attack he uses, strongly resemble the criticisms and argument-strategy Green had employed in his introduction to Hume and repeated in the opening sections of his *Prolegomena.* Very briefly, this strategy ran as follows.

The conclusions of British empiricism – which, depending on the argument, would be specified as their theories regarding the mind, our knowledge of universal truths, or the nature of relations – all proceed from the empiricists' fundamental error of fallaciously drawing metaphysical conclusions from the failures of observational data. Merely because they cannot establish by observation alone the universality of consciousness [or knowledge of universal truths or internal relations], they fallaciously conclude that it does not exist. Worse, the empiricists are inconsistent in their conclusions. While they can no more observe the universal operations of causal forces in nature than they can observe the universality of consciousness [or knowledge or internal relations], they accept the existence of the one with no more reason than they deny the existence of the other. By 1886, this form of argument was commonly used by absolute idealists. Green, however, was one of its pioneers, so Dewey was ultimately indebted to Green for his use of it.

But in his second paper, "Psychology as Philosophic Method," Dewey turned his guns on the same 'transcendentalism,' now referred to as 'post-kantianism,' whose critique of empiricism he had earlier praised. In the same paragraph from which White quoted Dewey's expression of gratitude to Green, Dewey went on to indicate that his gratitude did not extend to Green's conceptions of the Absolute or of the value of speculative philosophizing. Dewey charged that although Green claimed in his *Prolegomena* to be following Hegel's dialectical method, he in fact followed Kant's method of transcendental investigation. And further, Dewey says, "[Green] in following out Kant's work from its logical side hardly escaped Kant's negative results."[12] What Dewey means is that Green's results were, *practically* speaking, identical to Kant's, for the practical outcome of any speculative inquiry into necessary conditions of a thing's existence (here, Green's Absolute), is that the thing itself

(the Absolute) remains unexplored and unknown. Dewey concludes that Green's Absolute is just Kant's noumenon in Hegelian clothing.

According to Dewey, post-kantians, such as Green, had failed to understand the lessons of Hegel's philosophy. In Dewey's words, "The work of Hegel consisted essentially in showing that Kant's logical standard was erroneous."[13] Transcendental investigations never tell us anything about the entities whose existence they attempt to explain or establish. The post-kantians fail to grasp this fact because they themselves unknowingly commit the fallacy of empiricism. They draw metaphysical conclusions from a failure of observation. Because observation of the empirical manifestations of the Absolute is alone insufficient to demonstrate its existence or universality, Green and the rest mistakenly conclude that the Absolute is something other than its manifestations and can only be studied by non-empirical means. Hence their refusal to consider empirical data as an aid to understanding Absolute or human self-consciousness and their insistence on what Dewey calls a purely logical, that is speculative, mode of inquiry.

Dewey argues that such a notion of the Absolute is nonsensical and non-hegelian. Absolute self-consciousness is a concrete universal, a system of parts which is real only in so far as its parts are real. And trying to separate the Absolute from its real particular components is as absurd as trying to separate a whole from its parts. The Absolute can only be an object of study if its particulars are made objects of study; its particulars being the individual worlds of conscious experience in which we each live. Thus if we mean to investigate the Absolute we must turn our attention to human self-consciousness. As Dewey put it, "philosophy can treat of absolute self-consciousness only in so far as it has become in a being like man, for otherwise it is not material for philosophy at all."[14] And as those worlds of experience are not purely logical, but also sensual, emotional, and moral, purely logical, speculative inquiry will be inadequate to the task. The introspective investigations of reason must be supplemented by empirical psychological methods.

I do not propose to evaluate Dewey's criticisms of post-kantian

idealism or his alternative conceptions. It is enough for my purposes that these criticisms and proposals exist. As far as it goes Dewey's characterization of Green's idealism as Kantian is correct. But more importantly, this characterization, coupled with Dewey's assertion that the Absolute is not noumenal and his insistence on the value of empirical psychology to philosophic understanding of mind clearly indicate that in 1886, the fundamental conceptions of Dewey's idealism were significantly different from Green's. Had White rigorously applied his own principles, he ought to have concluded that Dewey had abandoned absolute idealism by 1886. He might then have asked himself whether Dewey had *ever* been an absolute idealist at all.

III

The question could well have proved fruitful, for it would have forced White to re-examine the questions of what sort of idealism Dewey espoused and of its relation to other contemporary sources. Had he done so he would have spared later commentators the intellectual gymnastics involved in explaining why Dewey's idealist texts so frequently fail to resemble the theory to which they were supposed to be indebted. Recent critical commentary on Dewey's 1891 *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* is a good case in point.[15] Compare, for example, the interpretations of this text offered by Neil Coughlan, Andrew Reck, Morris Eames, and Michael Buxton, each of whom accepts White's central assumptions.

Faced with obvious disparities between Dewey's and Green's ethical theories, Couglan suggested that William James' 1890 *Principles of Psychology* precipitated a more rapid shift in Dewey's thought than White had supposed, so that by 1891, Dewey "had quietly moved away from neo-hegelianism and was now going about the task of establishing an ethics from a position of theological and metaphysical agnosticism."[16] Reck, however, notes that Dewey's 1891 edition of his *Psychology* gives little evidence of such a dramatic change in his thinking and so follows White in judging Dewey's ethics, appearances aside, as in essence Green's. Morris Eames suggests that Dewey's theory is apparently different from Green's because Dewey was trying

to defend self-realization on more widely acceptable empirical grounds. Buxton offers the most ingenious solution of the four. Buxton, like White and Coughlan, claims that the brief critical comments about Green in Dewey's 1890 review of Caird marks a turning point in Dewey's development. But whereas White and Coughlan read the review as signalling the beginning of a transitional phase in Dewey's thought, Buxton argues that the review signals the abrupt end of Dewey's real allegiance to idealism. Unfortunately for Dewey, this change of heart occurred when he was in the midst of writing the *Outlines*. Buxton attributes critics' confusion about the text to internal contradictions resulting from Dewey's attempt to incorporate "later functionalist thoughts in a work begun as an idealist."[17]

The confusion about Dewey's early philosophy might in part have been avoided had a suggestion of J. H. Randall, Jr., been given more serious attention.[18] Noting many points of agreement between Dewey's and Bradley's idealist doctrines, Randall suggested that Bradley rather than Green was Dewey's primary British source. But because Randall, following Schiller, took the further step of interpreting Bradley's philosophy as proto-pragmatic, a view since discredited, his ideas have been generally ignored. This seems regrettable. Although Randall's interpretation of the links between Dewey's and Bradley's work was probably mistaken, the links he pointed out certainly exist.

One of the few absolute idealists named in Dewey's 1886 papers and not criticized as a post-kantian was F. H. Bradley. Dewey may never have felt for Bradley the reverential gratitude he once claimed to feel for Green. But in his papers and books of the late 1880's and the 1890's, he not infrequently paid Bradley the more significant compliment of imitation. Years later in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, it was Bradley who received Dewey's then back-handed commendation as the "most dialectically ingenious Absolutist of our own day."[19]

Bradley's *Ethical Studies* would have been an important source for any neo-hegelian moral philosopher in the 1890's. But his influence on Dewey was not confined to that text. A reader previously acquainted with Dewey's idealist publications would find the argu-

ments and language of Bradley's *Principles of Logic* very familiar.[20] In particular he would find familiar Bradley's theory that particular ideas are used as signs for general concepts, his arguments that there is no essential distinction between factual and 'mere' ideas, his rejection of the theory that a perceiving mind is a passive spectator of external or internal events, and his claim that the intellectual processes consciously used in scientific investigations are the same processes unconsciously used in ordinary perception and pre-scientific judgments.[21]

Perhaps most strikingly familiar would be Bradley's conception of inference. Dewey's definition of inference as an 'ideal experiment' has commonly been regarded as a significant early step in Dewey's transition to instrumentalism. Yet this same definition of inference is to be found in Bradley's *Principles*. In *Principles*, book I, where Bradley gives his notorious argument that all propositional judgments, whatever their grammatical form, are hypothetical and universal, he describes the process by which judgments arise. Hypothetical judgments, he says, all begin with supposition. But in contrast to the unregulated proposals of the imagination, supposition proper, he says,

> is, in short, an ideal experiment. It is the application of a content to the real, with a tacit reservation that no actual judgment has taken place. The supposed is treated as if it were real, in order to see how the real behaves when thus qualified in a certain manner.[22]

Supposition that results in selection of an experimentally warranted result is inference. And since in the *Principles* it turns out that all judgments are hypothetical, Bradley concludes that all inference is a process of ideal experimentation.

To what precise degree Dewey was indebted to Bradley for his theories of knowledge, inference, meaning, and perception in the 1890's can not be exactly established. Both men worked from common German sources and read and reacted to the works of the same

British and American idealists. But that a debt of some kind existed is strongly supported by Dewey's idealist texts. Thus, until we determine at what point the obvious debts to Bradley as well as to Green ceased, we can not say when Dewey rejected absolute idealism or how deeply that rejection actually went.

I do not mean to imply that White's analysis of Dewey's philosophical development would have succeeded had he simply used Green's *and* Bradley's work to gauge Dewey's adherence to idealism. On the contrary, Dewey's idealism had many sources and was not so unoriginal as to be wholly traceable to any one or two. My conclusion is that if we mean to answer these questions we must first understand what the main tenets of Dewey's idealism were and why he held them. To achieve that understanding we must further come to grips with absolute idealism itself. Unless or until a thorough-going analysis of Dewey's contributions to nineteenth century idealism is performed, the problem of Dewey's early philosophy will remain unsolved.[23]

Johns Hopkins University

NOTES

1. Morton White, *The Origin of Dewey's Instrumentalism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1964).

2. Thomas Hill Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884).

3. See Dewey's review of Edward Caird's *The Critical Philosophy of Immanueal Kant* reprinted in *The Early Works of John Dewey*, vol. III, Jo Ann Boydston, ed. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: So. Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 180-184. (Henceforth Boydston's editions of Dewey's early works will be abbreviated as *EW*.)

4. See, e.g., Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature* (New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 1987); Michael Buxton, "The Influence of William James on John Dewey's Early Work," 54 *J. Hist. Ideas* (1984), 451–464; Neil Coughlan, *Young John Dewey* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975); Andrew J. Reck, "The Influence of William James on John Dewey in Psychology," 20 *Trans. Pierce Soc.* (1984),

87-118; S. Morris Eames', Introduction in *EW* III, pp. xxi-xxxviii. For a related interpretation, also identifying Green as the focal point of Dewey's idealist writings, see Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985).

5. F. C. S. Schiller, "Empiricism and the Absolute," n.s. 14 *Mind* (1905), 348-370, p. 350.

6. F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies,* 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

7. See A. C. Bradley's Preface, *Prolegomena,* pp. v-vii.

8. See Dewey's two-part series of articles "The Psychological Standpoint" and "Psychology as Philosophic Method," *EW* I, pp. 122-167; see also *Psychology, EW* II; "The Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green," *EW* 3, pp. 14-35; and "Ethics at the University of Michigan," *EW* III pp. 48-50.

9. White, p. 41.

10. White, p. 99.

11. See *EW* I, p. 122.

12. *Ibid,* p. 153.

13. *Ibid,* p. 153.

14. *Ibid,* p. 160.

15. John Dewey, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics, EW* 3, pp. 237-388.

16. Coughlan, *op. cit.,* p. 72.

17. Buxton, *op. cit.,* p. 463.

18. J. H. Randall, Jr., "F. H. Bradley and the Working-out of Absolute Idealism," in *Philosophy after Darwin* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1977).

19. See *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920), p. 107.

20. F. H. Bradley, *Principles of Logic* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1883).

21. Compare, e.g, Dewey's description of the development of the distinction between an idea and a fact in children and savages (in "The Logic of Verification" *EW* III, pp. 85-86) with Bradley's very similar account in *Principles of Logic,* chap. 1, pp. 31-33. Compare also, Dewey's theory that ideas are used as signs in "How do Concepts Arise from Percepts" (*EW* III, at pp. 142-143) and in "Knowledge as Idealization" (*EW* I, pp. 176-193) where Bradley is mentioned, with Bradley's discussions in his text,, pp. 3-7 and pp. 36-37. For Bradley's views on perception see bk. I of his text generally, pp. 1-221 and also see pp. 439-444.

22. Bradley, *op cit.,* p. 86.

23. An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1989 annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. I would like to thank the Society's members for the many useful comments I received.