

Roberto Gronda*

James Scott Johnston (2014), *John Dewey's Earlier Logical Theory*, New York, SUNY Press, 266 p.

In the last fifteen years, John Dewey's early philosophy received considerable attention. John Shook's *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality*, Jim Good's *The Search for "Unity in Diversity": the "Permanent Deposit" of Hegel in John Dewey's Philosophy*, Donald Morse's *Faith in Life: John Dewey's Early Philosophy*, on the top of many articles, critical editions, and reviews: all these texts have contributed to a better understanding of many important aspects of Dewey's early thought. The aspects with which those pieces of scholarship are concerned reflect, quite naturally, the trends of interest in contemporary pragmatist debates. It is not strange, therefore, that relatively little attention has been paid to Dewey's logical theory. James Scott Johnston's new book, significantly entitled *John Dewey's Earlier Logical Theory*, aims to fill this gap in Dewey scholarship: its goal is that of outlining the process of development of Dewey's theory of logic, from his first articles to his last great book, the *Logic: Theory of Inquiry*.

The book comprises an introduction and seven chapters. Of these, the first two – the best part of the book, in my opinion – are devoted to analyzing what the author calls 'Dewey's Logical Education,' that is, the "context of Dewey's education in logic, the institutions and settings in which Dewey developed his earliest logical ideas, as well as Dewey's association with certain individuals germane to his early logical development" (15). In particular, the first chapter deals with the issue of Dewey's indebtedness to his fellow pragmatists (Charles S. Peirce, William James, and George H. Mead) and to Charles Darwin, as well as with important moments of his philosophical development such as the so-called turn to Aristotle, his rediscovery of Peirce, his response to the attacks of realists, and his encounter with Bertrand Russell. The second chapter is explicitly dedicated to Dewey's relationship with George W. F. Hegel. In chapters 3 to 6, Johnston offers an overview of Dewey's logical texts of the period 1890-1916, 1916 being the year in which the *Essays in Experimental Logic* were published. This part of the book is mainly expository: the author presents in a detailed and clear way the various arguments that Dewey sets forth in his logical writings, with an eye to highlighting the shifts and changes, both terminological and conceptual, that led him to progressively distance from his early formulations. Finally, chapter 7 tackles the issue of the specific differences that distinguish Dewey's *Logic: Theory of Inquiry* from his earlier works. Johnston speaks of 'four pressing concerns' that are distinctive of Dewey's later logical theory: these are the turn to experience; the discovery of the biological and social-cultural matrices of inquiry; the relationship of scientific inquiry to social inquiry and to common-sense; the interrelationships amongst the tools and techniques within inquiry (198). These four concerns are interpreted by Johnston as four different problems that Dewey did not succeed in solving in his earlier logical texts, since they could be appropriately addressed only in the context of his mature philosophy.

* Università di Pisa [roberto1gronda@gmail.com].

The adjective 'earlier,' which appears in the title of the book, plays therefore a twofold function. On the one hand, it has a purely descriptive role: it defines the period which is the subject-matter of Johnston's historical reconstruction (1890-1916). On the other hand, it performs a sort of interpretative function: it indicates that Dewey's early logical theory should be interpreted in the light of his later views, with the aim to show how the latter actually came out from the former. The second function can be better formulated in terms of the couple discontinuity/continuity. Johnston's concern is that of understanding the development of Dewey's logical thought without ironing out the differences between what comes before and what comes after. In order to do that, the author adopts what may be called a 'differential' and 'incremental' method: he focuses on the problems that Dewey tries to face in his writings, and shows that Dewey's thought is constantly evolving toward more accurate accounts of logical inquiry. Such an approach relies on the idea that Dewey's later logical theory is sounder than his earlier formulations – an interpretative hypothesis which I think very few interpreters will venture to dispute. In doing so, Johnston succeeds in acknowledging the autonomy of both the earlier and the later logical theories, as well as their independence of one another.

Johnston's genetic approach has the merit of counteracting the 'marginalization' of Dewey's logical development, and of conceiving of the *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* not as 'an ahistorical document,' but rather as the results of a series of theoretical decisions that Dewey made in the course of 40 years of philosophical research. Johnston invites us to 'take Dewey at his word' when he says, in the opening pages of his *Logic*, that "[t]he present work is marked in particular by application of the earlier ideas to interpretation of the forms and formal relations that constitute the standard material of logical tradition" (LW12: 3; quoted at 221). In other words, Johnston suggests that we should read Dewey's logical development as stemming from an original, essential commitment to a set of ideas that profoundly affected the way in which he thought about logical issues. According to Johnston, this set of ideas comes from Dewey's confrontation with Hegelian philosophy.

As is well known, in his autobiographical essay "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" Dewey states that Hegel left a permanent deposit in his thought. Much has been written on this issue: Johnston takes Dewey's autobiographical sketch as a reliable historiographical hypothesis, and argues that Hegel rather than James, Peirce, Mead or Darwin should be acknowledged as the most important influence on Dewey's logical theory. I think that Johnston's argument is sound and convincing. I think he is right in remarking that the early Dewey (especially during the 1890s) attempted to naturalize Hegel, and I completely agree with him when he writes that:

the dialectic of Hegel [...] was taken by Dewey and transformed into a functional account of inquiry in which movement from a whole (an experience) results in a problem (negation) requiring reflection upon the elements of the problematic situation (the examination of the shape of Spirit's particular or moments) and reflection upon the salient elements that will make the situation different or satisfactory (the realization of its opposite as both opposite and self) resulting in a reestablished, reconstructed, qualitatively satisfactory whole. (72)

I have quoted this passage in its entirety not only because, to my knowledge, it is probably the clearest formulation of Dewey's critical appropriation of the Hegelian legacy, but also because it highlights that many themes of Dewey's philosophy, that are usually traced back to the influence exerted on him by Peirce and James are, in reality, traces of his Hegelian heritage. This is a significant result of Johnston's work, which has important consequences for the overall image of Dewey's thought: indeed, to say that the Deweyan notion of reconstruction is indebted to Hegel's account of conflict has the effect of downplaying the importance of the pragmatist tradition for the formulation of his logical theory. Johnston correctly maintains that Dewey realizes only late in his life that he and Peirce were 'fellow travelers,' and that Peirce's logical work could be a source for his own reflections on that issue, despite the former's interest in mathematical, formal logic. Similarly, Johnston argues that there is no particular contribution of James to Dewey's logic: "I submit that nothing specific from James contributed to Dewey's development of logical theory from 1890 on." Even the importance of Darwin, who is usually regarded as a major influence on Dewey, should be reassessed. As Johnston convincingly remarks, "scholars have overestimated the influence of Darwin on Dewey": even though many concepts that are central to Dewey's theory of logic are couched in Darwinian language (adaptation, adjustment, evolution, and so on) "Dewey's use of Darwin is not basic to his logical theory" since the logical movement of transformation and reconstruction is "manifestly Hegelian" (32).

Even though I do not agree with all the details in Johnston's historiographical reconstruction – I think, for instance, that something more has to be said about the influence of James on Dewey's logical theory – I believe that his attempt to find a proper place for Dewey's thought in the broader context of 19th century philosophy is worthy of serious consideration. Johnston invites us to see Dewey's philosophy in continuity with the European post-Kantian tradition, and, by stressing its Hegelian roots, he provides a general and comprehensive framework for interpretation. More clearly stated: I read Johnston's argument as a significant step towards the definition of a paradigm of historiographical research based on the assumption that, in the last decades of the 19th century, Hegel's philosophy represented a sort of *lingua franca* shared by American and European philosophers. This transatlantic philosophical community was held together by a substantive agreement on the problems to be solved and on the means to be employed. Consequently, the different logical theories that were formulated by different philosophers belonging to the idealistic tradition (Dewey, Francis H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, Hermann Lotze, Thomas H. Green, but also Benedetto Croce) could be seen as variations on a common Hegelian theme. The definition of the general framework in which Dewey's logical theory developed supplies us with more powerful analytic tools. Such an enhancement of the explanatory capacity of our historiographical account is undoubtedly a remarkable theoretical achievement.

At this point, however, some defects of Johnston's approach come to the fore. To put it boldly, it seems to me that Johnston's historiographical work is very consistent in its framing of the general issue of Dewey's logical development, but – at least in

some points – it lacks of analytical accuracy. For reasons which are not difficult to understand, Johnston seems to be very concerned with establishing the *standpoint* from which Dewey's logic can be profitably investigated (that is, the persistence of his Hegelian heritage), at the expense of the analysis of the particular moves through which Dewey concretely articulates his position. In the remaining part of the review, I will therefore highlight and discuss what I deem to be the most questionable aspects of his reconstruction of Dewey's logical theory, with the hope that my remarks could help to clarify some *particular, specific* problems that are left unexplained – or that are not adequately explained, at least from my point of view – in Johnston, *John Dewey's Earlier Logical Theory*. In order to remain as close as possible to the spirit of the book, I will focus my comments on three interrelated points, all of which revolve around the relation between Hegel and Dewey.

First of all, I think that some of the historiographical categories employed by Johnston are not wholly clear. The best example is the category of 'Hegelian influence.' In a sense, it is evident that Dewey was strongly influenced by Hegel, and that he did not abandon his Hegel-inspired approach to logical problems even when he came to reject the Hegelian garb in favor of a naturalistic language. I believe that nobody would be willing to question this thesis. However, the use of the category 'Hegelian influence' leaves open – and partially conceals – the question of which Hegel Dewey has in mind. We should not overlook the fact that the Hegel that we know and discuss is different from the Hegel that Dewey knew and discussed. Dewey read Hegel through the spectacles of *his* contemporary philosophical debate. Now, one of the greatest problems with which he was concerned was that of distancing himself from the standard version of neo-Hegelianism that was highly influential at his time. What he found untenable in that position was precisely the idea of a coincidence of logic and metaphysics. As is well known, he rejected that view in the articles "Psychology as Philosophic Method" and "The Psychological Standpoint" (1886), where he advocated that psychology rather than logic should be acknowledged as the real method of philosophy. In a sense, this is the 'prehistory' of Dewey's logic: his parting of the ways with Hegelianism took place in 1880s, four years before Dewey published his first articles on logical topics. However, since it set the stage for his later logical work, it would have been interesting if Johnston had dealt with that phase of Dewey's philosophical development in his book.

The previous remarks lead directly to another point that I consider problematic. I think that Johnston gives too much emphasis to the importance of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* for Dewey's philosophy. In many passages of his book, Johnston draws comparison between some of Dewey's logical ideas and some figures of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. So, for instance, at page 101 Johnston writes that "Dewey develops a conclusion Hegel draws in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*," and then he quotes a long passage from the essay "The Relationship of Thought and its Subject-Matter" which runs as follows: "Reflection follows so naturally upon its appropriate cue, its issue is so obvious, so practical, the entire relationship is so organic, that once [we] grasp the position that thought arises in reaction to specific demand, and there is not the particular type of thinking called logical theory because

there is not the practical demand" (MW2: 300; quoted at 101). I do not want to deny that Dewey draws heavily from Hegel in this passage, even though I must admit that, in this particular case, I cannot see the specific Hegelian contribution. This is not the point. The point is that Johnston does not provide any evidence in support of his reading. Johnston does not limit himself to stating that Dewey develops a conclusion previously drawn by Hegel; he specifies that that conclusion has been formulated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. On what grounds can he justifiably make this claim? Why the *Phenomenology* and not the *Logic* or the *Encyclopaedia*?

Johnston's argument turns out to be even more puzzling when one considers the almost complete absence of any reference, in Dewey's work, to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In his early writings Dewey discusses at length Hegel's *Lesser Logic* and the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*; on the contrary, he almost never mentions the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Even in his 1897 *Lecture on Hegel*, Dewey refers to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* only once, in the context of a discussion of Hegel's opposition to Friedrich Schelling (Dewey 2010: 111). The other two occurrences of the term 'phenomenology' (120, and 131) refer to the section of the *Encyclopaedia* bearing that name. As most of his contemporaries, Dewey was an attentive reader of the *Encyclopaedia*: he was interested less in the science of the development of consciousness than in the systematic aspect of Hegel's philosophy. This is a fact, even though a strange one: to our eyes, indeed, it is difficult to understand why Dewey did not prefer the *Phenomenology of Spirit* over the *Logic* (or the *Encyclopaedia*) since the former bears strong similarities to his own philosophical project. From *our* point of view, it would have been more natural for Dewey to adopt Hegel's phenomenological approach. However, the events did not play out as we would have expected them to; simply, we should be humble, and acknowledge that this is one of the cases in which history surprises us. Otherwise, if we decide not to respect the way in which Dewey actually read and understood Hegel, our historical reconstruction turns out to be either too impressionistic or too speculative.

The appeal to humility is also relevant in another sense. I have remarked above that I do not consider the historiographical category of 'Hegelian influence' wholly legitimate because of its lack of clearness. However, this is not the only problem that I have with the use of this category. Another problem is that its explanatory power is too strong and, in the last analysis, uncontrolled; it synthesizes too many elements under one simple concept. I will try to clarify this point with an example. I think that one of the greatest merits of Johnston's book is that of defining in an appropriate way the problem of the origin of Dewey's logic. Usually, the fact that Dewey was concerned with logical issues is taken for granted, as if it were somehow natural and necessary that he should develop a theory of logic. On the contrary, Johnston raises the question: why did Dewey start writing on logical issues in 1890? He writes:

While his [Dewey's] motives for both psychology and psychology seem plain enough, the same cannot be said of Dewey's motives for embarking on an examination of logic. For, he could have (along with Wundt) restricted himself to empirical-physiological psychology. Or he could have restricted himself to the experimental psychology of

James. But he didn't. He decided to tackle logical theory, bearing his first (written) fruits in 1890. (17)

His answers to that question is that Dewey started reflecting on logical issues when he realized that a proper understanding of the nature of logic was necessary to his theory of psychology. About the relation between psychology and logic, Johnston remarks: "I surmise it is the need for a method that concerns Dewey: a method of systematic collection and ordering of knowledge" (18). I think that this answer is substantially correct – it is correct to say that, to understand the origin of Dewey's logic, one has to take into consideration his particular conception of psychology – and I believe that if Johnston had articulated it in a more straightforwardly, his interpretation of Dewey's logical development would have been more precise and consistent. In my opinion, the unsatisfactory part of his reconstruction is that, when it comes down to explaining how Dewey concretely reshaped his conceptual apparatus to find room for his logical theory, Johnston relies on the notion of idealism and 'Hegelian influence' – he speaks of an "idealism that takes empirical psychology seriously" (18) – and, in doing so, he puts the cart before the horse. It is true that Dewey's turn to Hegel *is* the solution – actually, a great part of the solution – to the problem of the origin of his logical theory, but this implies that the writings prior to 1890 (in particular, his *Psychology*) should not be treated as genuinely Hegelian – at least for what concerns logic (in the sense in which Dewey conceives of logic). If it were so, that is if there were a strong continuity between the pre-1890 and the post-1890 texts, it would be difficult to understand why Dewey decided to abandon the 'psychological' description of the different stages of thought formulated in his *Psychology* in favor of a logical theory revolving around the idea of the reconstructive function of the activity of thinking.

This is why I think that Johnston should have paid more attention to what I have called above the 'prehistory' of Dewey's logic. Dewey's move to logical instrumentalism is more complicated than how it is commonly portrayed; it entails several minor changes on a terminological level which goes hand in hand with more general transformations of the philosophical landscape, so to say. Not all of these changes and transformations can be traced back to the unquestionable influence of Hegel on Dewey. One of these steps towards instrumentalism is the adoption of Bradley's distinction between existence and meaning in 1886; another step is the analysis of the relations between perception and conception – it is not by chance that Dewey wrote an article on this issue, entitled "How Do Concepts Arise from Percepts" (1891), and it is strange that Johnston does not discuss it in the third chapter of his book, explicitly devoted to Dewey's earliest views on logic. The distinction between perception and conception is intrinsically related to the Kantian issue of the synthesis of intuition and understanding in a judgment, as well as to the issue of the validity of James' conceptualist theory of concepts. It is only in the light of this complex net of conceptual relations that the philosophical import of Dewey's turn to Hegel becomes fully understandable. In other words, the category of 'Hegelian influence' is historiographically valuable when it is not used in a wholesale way.

As a final remark, I would like to stress that all that I have been saying about the weaknesses – or, better said, what I deem to be the weaknesses – of Johnston's approach is not intended to downplay the importance of his work. *John Dewey's Earlier Logical Theory* is an interesting and thought-provoking book that opens new pathways for understanding Dewey's philosophy. I hope that my previous considerations will be read less as a criticism than as an attempt to contribute to the clarification of the problem of the origin of Dewey's logical theory.

Bibliography

- Dewey J., (1886), "The Psychological Standpoint," in *The Early Works of J. Dewey, 1882-1898*, Vol. 1 (1882-1888), J. A. Boydston, ed., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2008, 122-143.
- (1886), "Psychology as Philosophic Method," in *The Early Works of J. Dewey, 1882-1898*, Vol. 1 (1882-1888), J. A. Boydston, ed., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2008, 144-167.
- (1891), "How Do Concepts Arise from Percepts," in *The Early Works of J. Dewey, 1882-1898*, Vol. 3 (1889-1892), J. A. Boydston, ed., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2008, 142-146.
- (1903), *Studies in Logical Theory*, in *The Middle Works of J. Dewey, 1899-1924*, Vol. 2 (1902-1903), J. A. Boydston, ed., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2008, 293-378.
- (1938), *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *The Later Works of J. Dewey, 1925-1953*, Vol. 12 (1938), J. A. Boydston, ed., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- (2010), *John Dewey's Philosophy of Spirit, with the 1897 Lecture on Hegel*, J. Shook & J. Good, eds., New York, Fordham University Press, 91-174.
- Good, J., (2006), *The Search for "Unity in Diversity": the "Permanent Deposit" of Hegel in John Dewey's Philosophy*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield.
- Morse D. J., (2011), *Faith in Life: John Dewey's Early Philosophy*, New York, Fordham University Press.
- Shook J., (2000), *Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press.