

# Philosophers' Problems: Transaction in Philosophy and Life

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Abstract: Transactional pragmatism supplants a containment paradigm dividing mind-dependence from mind-independence with an inferential alternative based upon the minding or managing of problems to solutions. Previously I've targeted defects in various forms of realism. Here I extend the critique to a broad range of interactional views, including some championed by pragmatists. A transactional phenomenology of "philosophers' problems" is compatible with intuitions about objective reality in everyday life and scientific explanation, and helps us "see together" empirical connections otherwise regarded as disparate.

**Introduction.** A few years back I differentiated "containment" from "inference" in defending a *transactional* interpretation of classical pragmatism. In separating mind-dependence from mind-independence, the containment paradigm is vulnerable to external world skepticism. The inference paradigm rejects mind-independence insofar as "mind" is regarded as the minding or managing of problems to objects/objectives showcased in John Dewey's pattern of inquiry.

Section 1 of this essay sketches skeptical challenges to containment, and the alternative posed by an inference paradigm. Section 2 supports this with a pragmatist phenomenology in service to a modest Deweyan "system." Section 3 critiques interactional world views still widely embraced by pragmatists, and advances a transactional interpretation of disputed concepts such as experience and existence, sign-behavior, and embodied consciousness. I ultimately hope to show that a transactional

approach to “philosophers’ problems” yields a “cultivated naïve realism” and a way to “see together” empirical connections otherwise regarded as opposed or disconnected.

## **1. Dewey’s Philosophical “System”: Containment, Inference, and Objectivity.**

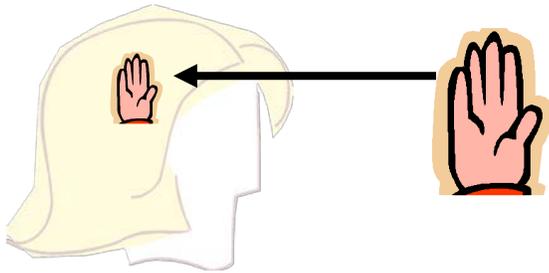
**Skepticism and the Containment Paradigm.** Dewey famously invites us to turn from “philosophers’ problems” to the real-life problems we collectively face as humans.

Following his lead, most pragmatists scoff at both the “epistemological industry” bent upon showing how subjective minds can access mind-independent reality and skeptical challenges that declare such access impossible.

Though such dismissive responses generally satisfy pragmatists, they’ve impressed few others. John Greco notes that skeptical challenges resist refutation, and the doubts they raise about knowledge and evidence are genuine.<sup>1</sup> More significantly, faulty epistemological commitments exposed by skeptical doubts invite constructive pragmatist alternatives we can’t advance if the challenge isn’t taken seriously.

Though it seems far-fetched to suggest we may be brains-in-vats or deluded by an evil genius, external world skepticism has a credible response: the primary challenge to perceptual experience is not about likelihood or plausibility, but *cognitive access*—a predicament of *location* inherent in what we dub the *containment paradigm*. Presuming what we experience is limited to or *contained within* the perceiver (the percept or neural event below on the left), how does one get *beyond* this to the mind-independent existence (the “real” hand on the right) it purportedly represents?

Figure 1. The Containment Predicament



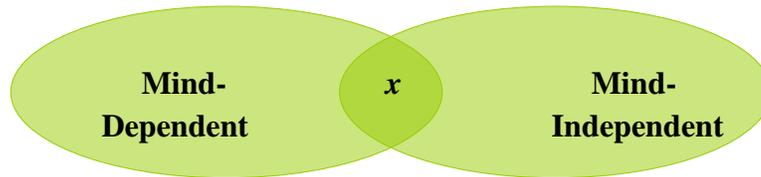
In David Hume’s famous analysis, regularities among percepts warrant no inferences to external existences as their likely causes. Good inferences of this sort, he notes, are from *like to like*. Sufficiently repeated, my perception of a hand allows me to infer future hand-percepts; inferring mind-independent counterparts, to the contrary, is a radical case of *like to unlike*:

The mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

Pragmatists join heavyweight realists in challenging Hume’s conclusion. Why, they ask, must we assume that experience is *confined* to perceptual content? We see *hands*, not hand-percepts! Experience *reaches* beyond itself to *access* objects in the external world.

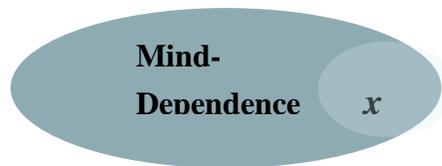
Let’s visualize this rejoinder by converting the “head and hand” illustration into a simple Venn diagram of mind-dependence and mind-independence:

Figure 2. Mind-Dependence and Mind-Independence.



The overlapping area (x) marks a confluence of mind-independent things that which is cognitively accessible. But, notes the skeptic in granting that we have no cognitive access to mind-independence per se, but only to the confluence, it is *ipso facto* limited to that realm:

Figure 3. Mind-Dependence.



With access signifying mind-dependence, what *evidence* can be summoned on behalf of mind-independence? How shall we suppose it is “reached,” “integrated” or “accessed” from the experienced sensory content? In fact, how can we claim that the lightly shaded area *is* an overlap or intersection? Again, the problem is not about bizarre scenarios or logical possibilities—but strictly one of *location*. The barrier between mind-dependence

and mind independence seems absolute, precluding not just all claims about what's "out there," but the very intelligibility of "out there" itself!

**Inference and Ontology.** Despite his disdain for it, Dewey never settled for dismissing the "epistemology industry." He exchanged dozens of essays with realists Edward Gleason Spaulding, Roy Wood Sellars, Bertrand Russell, Evander McGilvary, George Santayana, and Arthur O. Lovejoy—warning them of the skeptical consequences of trying to get from "mind" to "world." Heeding Dewey's diligence is important. In Barry Stroud's shrewd observation, if you assume you're situated in the world "in certain natural but subtly distorted ways, you will leave human beings as you describe them incapable of the very knowledge you are trying to account for."<sup>3</sup> Hume's rejoinder exposes the fundamental incoherence of the containment paradigm, for, as Dewey warns, casting the problem in terms of how a mind gets to a world creates "the intractable problem of piecing them together again." (*LW I*: 19). Our goal, accordingly, is to propose a more cohesive alternative: a paradigm of *inference*.

To build on Dewey's point, philosophy has traditionally approached the question of existence by trying to determine *what* there is: in the containment paradigm, we strive to leap beyond perceptions to grasp what *really* exists in the mind-independent world. In the inference paradigm, to the contrary, we insist that any account of *what* is real requires a suitable explanation of *how* it is accessed. We retain "real" and "mind," but recast these actively as what is *realized* in the *minding* or managing of problems-to-solutions.

Building upon Kant's suggestion that any metaphysics of *what* there is presupposes discerning *how* objective knowledge is possible, Dewey's *how* of objectivity

is a wholly experimental and scientific methodology—the “pattern of inquiry.”<sup>4</sup> Though not a system-builder tasked with an “ontology of existence,” his aim is to *convert* all the *ontological*, as prior to inquiry, into the logical as occupied wholly and solely with what takes place in the conduct of inquiry.” (*LW 16*: 316)

**A Phenomenology of Objectivity.** Dewey’s naturalism suggests that science might be the best way to redress epistemological woes. As we’ll see, recent neurophysiological discoveries” powerfully reinforce a transactional theory of situated consciousness. However, insofar as they presuppose conditions beyond consciousness, even “extended cognition” theories cannot resolve the containment predicament without begging the question. Whether we interpret “extend” or “include” as containment or inference is part of the general problem of objectivity—a distinctly philosophical problem whose solution, we suggest, begins with a pragmatist phenomenology.

Let’s first distinguish “phenomenology” in classical pragmatism from Husserl’s project of mapping the “structure of consciousness.” Preserving Peirce’s sense of phenomenology as fidelity to what’s actually experienced, Dewey simply invites us to “go to experience” and see what it is “experienced *as*.” *MW 3*: 158

So how is experience experienced? Perhaps the most important insight of modern philosophy, the “alpha and omega of all theorizing”<sup>5</sup> asserts just this: in its default mode, experience is predominantly *nonreflective* rather than *reflective*. In Dewey’s phrase, *having* is at least as significant as *knowing*. The mind is not a spotlight continuously picking out discrete properties or qualities. Instead, when all is familiar, governed by “assurance or control,” (*MW 3*: 159) experience presents itself as an unanalyzed totality, a *gestalt* or fit.

Try this yourself: in reading the previous sentence, were you consciously aware of either the individual letters f-i-t or their blackness? Or were they simply *had* and *used* in service to an actual challenge—coming to terms with having versus knowing? And if they stand out now, isn't it because I've posed them as a conceptual challenge—a *problem*?

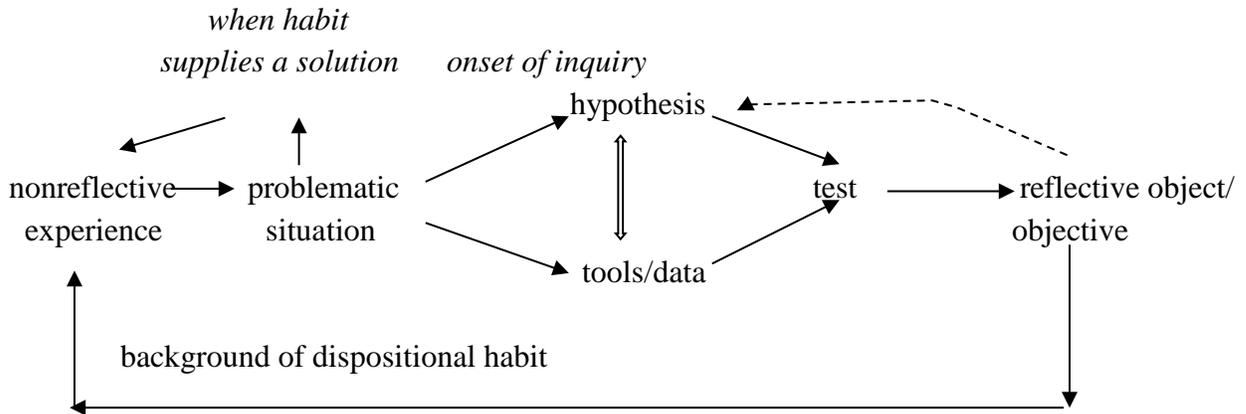
Further, doesn't this apply equally to *you* as reader? Were you consciously aware of yourself reading the letters? If not, it's clear that the subject-object relation is not inherent in nonreflective experience, but marks a cognitive discrimination from such experience in response to a specific problem, need, or purpose. A phenomenology faithful to actual experience rejects the containment paradigm at the outset. The occult metaphysical question "*what* is the *reality* experienced" thus becomes the tractable phenomenological question "*how* is this *really* experienced." (MW3: 159)

This fidelity to experience is certified by Dewey's *postulate of immediate experience*: "What *is* is what it is experienced *as*." (MW 3: 158) This doesn't mean that everything is just as I happen to experience it, such that if I experience myself as Napoleon, I am Napoleon! Instead, Dewey is saying that the characters of phenomenologically identified phases of experience are fully *real* as they are experienced to be. The postulate thus asserts that 1) nonreflective having, the shock of doubt, and the ultimate cognitive outcome are equally *real* in the conduct of inquiry, and 2) there's nothing beyond these that is *more* or *really real*.

To conclude our quick look at Dewey's system, let's see these phases of activity to work in the *pattern of inquiry*. At the outset nonreflective experience is restive, dominated by habituated familiarity. The *shock* of the onset of a *problematic situation*

disrupts this comfortable state with the realization that something is awry that requires attention. When habit supplies a solution, nonreflective experience is quickly restored, But when the problem persists without a ready solution, *inquiry* is necessary.

Figure 4. The Pattern of Inquiry



With the onset of a problematic situation, inquiry plays the double role of 1) diagnosing the problem and 2) framing a hypothesis or idea of a solution to be achieved by directed action. Both steps typically require the skilled use of empirical data, tools, and instruments.

Once successfully tested, a projected hypothesis achieves its object/objective—the dual terms enforcing the inseparability of *what* is confirmed from *how* it is confirmed. Moreover, for Dewey “mind” is not subjectively “between the ears,” but the *mind*ing or managing of problems to solutions, the mind-object relation is no longer the dilemma of “percept” versus percept,” but of connected phases of inquiry. Our world *is* the world of ongoing constructive discovery—the infant’s “stick” becomes the child’s “pencil;” further inquiry discloses a graphite cylinder with a core of allotropic carbon, then their

molecular or atomic properties. No single disclosure is the “ultimate reality,” let alone the phantom “thing-in-itself.” Instead, inquiry conjures an unbounded fund of potential *reals* suited to various purposes and contexts of use.

Having sketched inquiry’s reflective function, we note its seminal return to the nonreflective realm. Inquiry is not an arc, but an ever-widening *circuit*. Once attained, cognitive objectives of inquiry return to and enrich the dispositional background of nonreflective experience. They dig the trenches of habit, of the tried and true, that helps us cope without the continuous intervention of reflection.

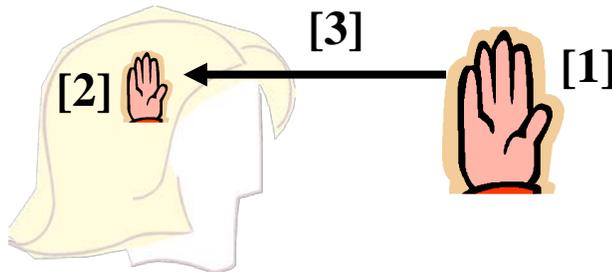
**A “Cultivated” Naïve Realism.** As we’ve seen, nonreflective experience is the *alpha* and *omega* of all theorizing because it undercuts the initial presumption of “mind” versus “mind-independent reality” that puts the Humean skeptic in business. As Dewey notes, we can always doubt what we *know*, but “skepticism as to things we *have* and *are* is impossible.” (*LW I*: 379)

But is desirable or even possible to eliminate containment? Doesn’t common sense and science alike acknowledge perceiving organisms *in* a physical, external world? And though inexorably bound up with bodily and social environments, isn’t consciousness, strictly speaking, mostly “in the head?”

The problem has never been about questioning the fact of perceptual events, external objects, or even the belief that the latter contains the former. Instead, it’s about supposing that the *philosophical* problem objectivity is about getting from subjective mind to objective world. Hume’s challenge shows us that the containment paradigm fails to get the human condition right. Our phenomenological diagnosis attributes this to not reporting what’s actually experienced. The pattern of inquiry aspires to set things right.

To fully do so, however, the inference paradigm must overcome the containment predicament while accommodating the intuitions of common sense and science—specifically, by showing how containment looks *within* inference:

Figure 5. Containment Within Inference



The containment paradox saddles us with the problem of getting from [2] perceptual content to [1] mind-independent reality. The inference paradigm, however, tells a different tale—one of two *objects-objectives*, **both** achieved outcomes of the *pattern of inquiry*. One of these, [1] the flesh and blood hand, was mastered early in life as we learned to manipulate things in our environment. The other, [2] a complex neural event, is something science still struggles to fully understand. Nonetheless, in terms of cognitive access, both are equally “open and above board” in the encountered world, both are attained *objectives* of inquiry—as is [3] the neuro-physiological question about how brains perceive hands.

In all such cases, empirical questions beget empirical answers, and we may speak of “correspondence” and “cause” as we see fit. But these are different questions, with different objectives, than the philosophical question of objectivity. Having vanquished

the epistemological problem of getting from subject to object, we find ourselves at home in a world of hands, heads, and brains—a realism we justifiably dub “commonsense” or even “naïve.” Yet, Dewey reminds us, this is not a direct realism of perceiving things as they are in themselves, but rather a “cultivated naivety” derived from the “severe discipline” of philosophic thought. (*LW 12*: 40, 309)

## 2. Interaction and Transaction

**Self-Action, Interaction, and Transaction.** With Arthur F. Bentley, in 1943 Dewey set out to “fix a set of leading words” to address misconceptions about his legacy.<sup>6</sup> Over six years they published fifteen essays collected in *Knowing and the Known*.

Fearing that “experience” was unsalvageable from subjective interpretations Dewey had never intended, he and Bentley settled upon *transaction* as a suitable replacement. In a nutshell, transaction is “the right to see together, extensionally and durationally, much that is talked about conventionally is if it were composed of irreconcilable separates.” (*LW 16*: 120) In *Knowing and the Known*’s seminal chapter, Dewey and Bentley distinguish *transaction* from *self-action* and *interaction*:

*Self-Action.* Self-action views things as “acting under their own powers.” Unmoved movers, animal spirits, *entelechy*, and the *élan vital* all explain behavior in terms of inherent essences, powers, or forces. Eradicated from natural science, self-action still haunts philosophy and psychology in the guise of an autonomous “knower” imbued with a soul, ego, id, or psyche.

*Interaction.* Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton ushered in science’s modern age, where forces and particles in causal interaction supplanted self-actional

motion. Interaction equally transformed commerce and industry, from the standardization of currency to the specialization of labor. Though vastly superior to self-actional accounts, interaction suffered a major theoretical blow with the discovery that statistical prediction in fields, rather than an aggregate of particles, is a better indicator of behavior in chemistry and physics. (*LW 16*: 112). Despite regressing in science, interaction still dominates Western philosophy—not just among avowed realists but also, as we’ll see, many pragmatists as well.

*Transaction.* In our intended sense, transaction is the methodological instrument for reifying the inference paradigm while exposing the defects of self-actional and interactional alternatives. First and foremost, transaction rejects the “cosmic pattern” consisting of i) human organisms, ii) things in a surrounding environment, and iii) interpretive activity by which the former comes to know the latter (*LW 16*: 9): Interaction assumes that organisms and objects are substantially separate existences, “*Transaction* requires their primary acceptance in a common system.” (*LW 16*: 114)

As we’ve seen, this system is the circuit of inquiry, where 1) *ontological* decrees are converted into *logical* phases of inquiry, 2) subjects emerge as agencies of corrective action and 3) objects are *objectives of inquiry*. Without a scintilla of subjectivism, Dewey and Bentley declare that

a “real world” that has no knower to know it has, so far as human inquiry is concerned...Just about the same “reality” that has the palace that in Xanadu Kubla Kahn decreed... A knower without anything to know has even perhaps less claim to reality than that. *LW 16*: 128

**Firm Words and Hedges.** Perhaps the boldest declaration of his transactional *weltanschauung* is Dewey's insistence that there's no problem of getting to "external" reality because the very move from "internal" to "external" is senseless. We must stop

trying to construe knowledge as an attempted approximation to a reproduction of reality under conditions that condemn it in advance to failure; a revision. . . should start frankly from the fact of thinking as inquiring, and purely external realities as terms in inquiries. (*MW 3*: 93-94)

Here Dewey both 1) acknowledges the skeptical challenge that dooms the containment paradigm and 2) converts the ontological into the logical by insisting that we speak not of realities "*in terms of inquiries,*" but "*as terms in inquiries*"—the far more audacious claim that inquiry is not merely *revelatory* of reality, but functionally *constitutive* of it.

Even more amazingly, this claim was made in 1904—45 years prior to *Knowing and the Known!* Dewey and Bentley insist they never changed their views, but are merely correcting previous incautious language about terms such as "reality," "experience," and "existence." Problematic phrases are not hard to locate. Dewey had often claimed that experience is a natural product of the interaction of an organism and its environment (*LW 5*: 220; *LW 4*: 138) that "reaches down" into nature, "penetrating its secrets." (*LW 1*: 11) Accordingly, he adds, we must distinguish the "rhythmic order" of natural *events* from *objects of experience* which interpret events. (*LW 1*: 245)

The dissonance between such statements and the transactional stance as we've sketched it is so stark as to suggest something more than careless terminology. Indeed, even a sympathetic reader like Richard Bernstein can't help but report a "deep crack" between "phenomenological and metaphysical strains" in Dewey's thought.<sup>7</sup> In the phenomenological strain, *experience* looms large; we focus upon nonreflective immediacy and the role of inference in attaining objectivity. The metaphysical strain, to the contrary, acknowledges the *existence* of a vast and impersonal universe beyond experience organisms learn about via interaction. Either option seems disastrous. If Dewey says *nothing* is beyond experience, it seems he must confess to idealism or panpsychism. But if he allows existence beyond experience, then he must show how he wriggles off the hook of having to explain how beings limited to experience can know or say anything about what is *beyond* experience—thus he's as vulnerable to the foibles of the containment paradigm as the realists he's claimed to usurp.

Clearly, then, this is no mere verbal dispute. Must we, then, concur with Richard Gale's somber assessment that "The reason why no one ever understood what Dewey meant by 'experience' is not because he was a poor writer, as is commonly claimed, but rather because he was formulating a mystical doctrine."<sup>8</sup>

I think not. In an attempt to "firm" Dewey's previous appeals to "organism-environment interaction," Bentley writes:

You put the organism and environment in nature, and rest there... After a while, you use phrasings that seem to imply that 'knowings' are processes of

the organism, as opposed to the objects in nature... phrasings to imply all the old evils you have thrown out. (*DB*: 116)

The main problem, chides Bentley, is that although you “always ‘see’ existence transactionally...you do not get it safely so used.” (*DB*: 483) Clearly something more serious than incautious terminology is afoot here. Both realize that Dewey’s genial nature inclines him to appease traditional realists and naturalists, when in fact, as Dewey admits, “the position we take so bucks the ways of looking at the world” as to constitute a “heresy...so extreme as not to be recognized for what it is.” (*DB*: 636-637) Noting that appeasement has caused Dewey nothing but “radical trouble” over the course of decades, Bentley notes that in rejecting in-itself reality “you at once fear...that you will be subject to attack as idealistic. You, therefore, hedge. Hedging has brought no fruit. I am against any more of it. (*DB*: 205) In retrospect, Dewey observes that “Largely due to him [Bentley], I’ve finally got the nerve inside of me to do what I should have done years ago” (*LW 15*: 489)—pursuing a path made difficult because so “very few” are capable of seeing “facts—as existential events” observed *in* “general procedures of inquiry.” (*DB*: 635)

**Interactional Pragmatism.** I invite we “very few” of sufficient nerve to join me in advancing *transaction* as the “firm” name Dewey and Bentley affix to pragmatism-without-hedging. This is no easy sell. Most still contend he’s a naturalistic realist (of some stripe) who grants mind-independent existence while pressing organism-environment interaction to bury the passive “spectator theory” of knowledge. They believe Dewey hedges not to appease realists, but to assuage his idealistic “permanent

Hegelian deposit” that, regrettably, collects an inordinate amount of interest in his late transactional years. Let’s explore the wages of this “interactional pragmatism.”

In Dewey’s heyday, his fiercest competitor for the heart and soul of pragmatism was Arthur O. Lovejoy. Lovejoy’s ardent tutorial to “convert some pragmatists to pragmatism” insists that knowledge is the product of a vigorous “commerce” with the natural world, “a trafficking with lands in which the traffickers do not live.” (*MW 13: 477, 360*). Since we cannot directly access reality, such commerce requires a “certain venture of belief...that the characters which as present they bear [are] the same characters which they bear as absent,” (*MW 13: 474*) a belief validated by empirical confirmation. According to Lovejoy, Dewey’s emphasis on hypothesis and experiment tracks this view to an extent. However, Dewey admits only reals *of* experience, and not a *reality* and various surrogates and approximations of it. (*MW 13: 448*) In curbing these idealistic impulses, concludes Lovejoy, we attain a true pragmatism “of man as agent, and as reflective agent, in a physical and social environment” where knowledge is always mediate and achieved. (*MW 13: 479*)

In reply, Dewey agrees that no *knowledge* is immediate. What is immediately *had*, however, is not a “surrogate” of external reality, but a nonreflective starting point from which knowledge is the mediate outcome of directed action. (*MW 13: 52*) For all the talk about “interaction” and “commerce,” Lovejoy is actually the immediatist given that his surrogates point to “some entity immediate and complete in itself.” (*MW 13: 52*) What’s subjectively experienced as “present-as-absent” somehow—magically or mysteriously, but transcendent of experience itself—“hooks up” or “converses with” “ready-made” existences. (*MW 15: 45*)

Contemporary interactional pragmatists include Ralph Sleeper, Raymond Boisvert, Sandra Rosenthal, and J. E. Tiles. For Sleeper, this signifies “a radical form of realism—a transactional realism in which...thinking entails active involvement with independent reality, an involvement that is causally efficacious.”<sup>9</sup> Boisvert adds that the experienced object must be distinguished from the existing thing and “should no way be confused with it.”<sup>10</sup> To bridge this gap, 1) “immediate givens received by the individual” combine with 2) *intentionality*—the notion that the idea is the “mental inexistence of an object” that nonetheless “includes something as object within itself.”<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal’s speculative pragmatism proclaims that the “brute” interface of independent reality with experience<sup>12</sup> prompts us to picture “the structure of reality as it exists independently of our variously contextually set inquiries.”<sup>13</sup> Though we never *know* the independent otherness, we can “live through” this “ontologically thick” reality via “a rich, ongoing, interactional or transactional unity between organism and environment.”<sup>14</sup> For Tiles, nothing so arduous is involved once we forsake the idea that perception is mostly “in the head.” Rather than thinking of percepts as effects of external things, we “we *see through* the events in our retinas” to the things.<sup>15</sup>

Given that Dewey’s critique of Lovejoy applies to each of these as well, I’ll forsake analysis of these views, except to note that Sleeper’s and Rosenthal’s use of “transaction” in an overtly *interactional* sense is rampant in the literature among authors who pay lip service to transaction while still hunkered in the bunker of containment.

### **3. Transaction Without Hedges**

**Seeds of Transaction.** In the past two decades Jim Garrison, Tom Burke, Matthew J. Brown and others have recovered Dewey’s logical methodology to balance the naturalistic metaphysics emphasized by earlier successors such as John Herman Randall, Jr., Sidney Hook, and Ernest Nagel. Discussion of his aesthetic, moral, social, and secular spiritual views also thrives. By comparison, transaction remains little more than a rutted furrow. Other than the masterful plowing of Garrison, his associates in the philosophy of education including Joacim Andersson, Leif Östman, and Jim Henderson, philosophers Jules Altman, Sidney Ratner, Stephen Toulmin, and John Stuhr, and some gardening of my own, the project Bentley predicted would take “generations to complete” remains fallow. It’s possible, of course, to apply transactional strategies to moral, social, and educational goals without messing with epistemological mulch. But for the few inclined to *think* transactionally, and curious about Dewey’s project to “see together” the *whole* picture—how these applications connect to our basic “situatedness in the world”—kindly indulge me three suggestions .

**Existence in Experience.** Earlier we recast “reality” as the *realization* of hypotheses in objective outcomes. The relationship between existence and experience is more problematic. As we’ve seen, a “deep crack” opens in trying to decide whether Dewey “makes everything experience” or acknowledges existence beyond it. Appeasements like “nothing is beyond the *reach* of experience” are unhelpful, since whatever is “reached” becomes experience, and thus tells us nothing about “existence itself” (Fig. 3).

Interactional pragmatists insist—on pain of idealism—that “objects of experience” be set off from “independent reality,” and even Garrison, our leading transactionist, distinguishes Dewey’s use of “existence, the topic of metaphysics, from essence, the

topic of logic.”<sup>16</sup> Instead of Lovejoy’s “foreign commerce,” he likens existence to grapes pressed by linguistic meaning into the distilled wine of logical essence. But this invites the now familiar rejoinder—if cognitive recognition is found in the wine, how do we get to the grapes?

Garrison’s analogy is benign if, as I suspect, he’s talking about existence in the empirical or descriptive sense permissible *after* a phenomenology of objectivity has rendered things “open and above board” —Dewey’s cultivated naïve realism. But the important difference between *empirical* talk about “things out there” and a *philosophical* commitment to existence beyond experience is worth examining.

There would be no perceived “deep crack,” of course, if Dewey’s pronouncements about existence and experience were clear and univocal. In the first chapter of *Experience and Nature*, immediately after claiming it “penetrates” into nature, “reaching down into its depths,” he tells us that experience

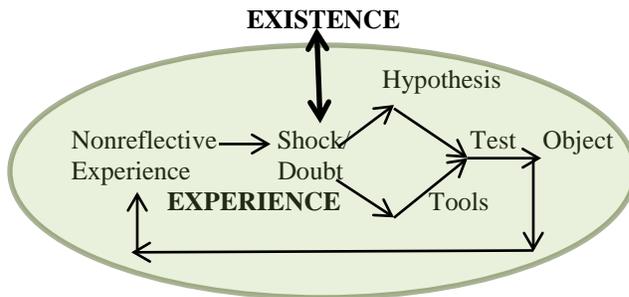
is “double-barrelled in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality. “Thing” and “thought,” as James says in the same connection, are single-barrelled; they refer to products discriminated by reflection out of primary experience. (*LW I*: 18-19)

In the inference paradigm, existence is not something “out there” that either intrudes upon or is “reached” by experience. Instead, existence is the shock of transition *in* experience where “something’s become awry *out there*, and *I* must think to resolve it.”

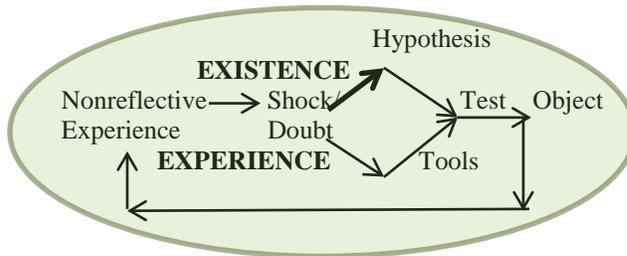
Let's make this explicit. Figure 6A depicts the relationship between existence and experience in interactional pragmatism; Figure 6B illustrates the transactional alternative:

Figure 6. Existence and Experience in Interactional and Transactional Pragmatism.

A. Interaction



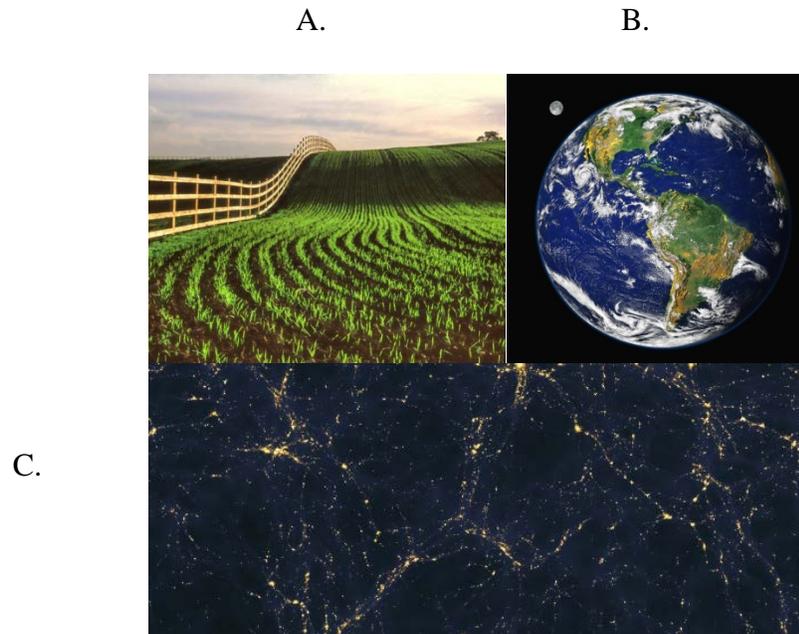
B. Transaction



In the interactional model, the “existential event” is outside of and intrudes upon experience—the “knock of the noumenal” that’s unknowable, known by surrogates, “reached,” or merely lived through. In the transactional alternative, existence is *what it is experienced as*—the experience of shock, doubt, intrusion. It signals a *challenge to thought*—the transition from nonreflective immediacy to the reflective activity of hypothesis, test, and attained objective. The relevant distinction is not between existential events and experienced objects, but rather “events which are challenges to thought and events which have met the challenge and hence possess meaning.” (LW 4: 246)

If “thing” and “thought” are both in experience, how many things are included?

Figure 7. The “Reach” of Experience



(A.) depicts Dewey’s famous paean to experience as “the planted field, the sowed seeds.” (*LW 1*: 18) A quarter century later, (B.) expands this to “include the enviroing world.” But the “firm” word Dewey and Bentley choose to replace “experience” is “cosmos of fact,” the entire “system or field of factual inquiry,”<sup>17</sup> the visible universe depicted in (C.). “My use of ‘Experience,’ ” confides Dewey, “was to attempt a name that covers the whole range of transactions...from the brute to the scientific.” “Cosmos of fact” conveys this comprehensiveness with no suggestion of “mentalist” overtones. (*DB*: 331)

If, with Dewey, we grant that all these things are equally experienced, doesn't Figure 6A now seem a bit silly? While there's always a *beyond of* experience—each picture suggesting a wealth of undiscovered facts—we literally go to the ends of the universe without being *beyond* experience!

**Signs in Transactional Contexts: The Battle for the Interpretant.** Ever since Peirce, *signs* as *sign use* has been integral to a pragmatist theory of meaning, with broad applications to social dynamics and educational theory. Though Dewey stresses the importance of sign-behavior throughout his career, no systematic exposition appears before *Knowing and the Known*, where “namings-known” are specified as *sign*, *object*, and *interpretant*. (*LW 16*: 68-82) How we understand the relation of these terms is crucial, and Dewey is alarmed that even pragmatists tend to interpret them interactionally rather than transactionally.

Sign-behavior cast as *sign*, *object*, and *interpretant* originates in Peirce, though his intended meaning is disputed. Especially noisome is the interpretant, which Peirce vaguely characterizes as “a Third,” a sign’s “proper significate outcome,” and an elucidation of meaning as habit. (*CP 5*: 274, 473, 475)

Charles W. Morris advanced what's now accepted as the consensus view in the late 1930s. Morris, who studied under George Herbert Mead and regarded his views as “compatible with the framework of Dewey's thought,”<sup>18</sup> offers this straightforward interpretation: 1) *Sign* is sign vehicle—the identifying word or symbol, 2) *Object* is *designatum*—what the sign refers to, and 3) *Interpretant*, initially the sign's effect on an interpreter,<sup>19</sup> is later simplified to “the *interpreter* itself—the organism for which something is a sign.”<sup>20</sup>

Given Morris' pedigree and definitions so seemingly innocuous that even transactionists employ it,<sup>21</sup> the reaction from the normally-genial Dewey is jolting. Publically, he complains that "users' of Peirce's writings should either stick to his basic pattern or leave him alone." (*LW 15*: 152) Privately, he calls Morris' account a "distortion" and "complete fabrication" and suggests "nailing him to the cross." (*DB*:457)

Morris, complains Dewey," is controlled by the epistemological heritage of a knowing subject, person, self, or what have you, set over against the world." (*DB*: 145) But sign, object, and interpretant are not distinct entities that merely interact. Instead, their relation is ascertained *within* constructive activity as directives about what *to do*. (*DB*: 289-290)

The correct, transactional relation of *object*, *sign*, and *interpretant* is illustrated by Peirce's own example of a drill sergeant commanding his squad to "ground arms." Here the *object* is the desired *objective*—that the butts of the rifles should be placed on the ground, the *sign* is the command, and the *interpretant* is the shared background experience by which the soldiers successfully interpret the meaning of the *sign* and respond so as to attain the objective. The command to "ground arms," is a sign, is significant, only insofar as the interpretant supplies an appropriate context of understanding. (*LW 15*: 144)

Dewey's ire reveals his adamancy for replacing outmoded interactional views with a transactional alternative grounded in the problem-solving paradigm of inference. Descriptively or empirically, we might get away with talk about interacting objects, signs, and interpreters. But only the "full system" of sign-behavior, interpreted

transactionally, illuminates Peirce's insight that communicated meaning is "our glassy essence."

**Embodiment or a World Without Withins or Withouts.** It's remarkable that the heavy lifting in transactional theory these days is undertaken, not in metaphysics, epistemology, or even pragmatism per se, but in cognitive science, psychology, and the philosophy of education. These professions are most fully invested in understanding and optimizing *sign-behavior*, and as such constitutionally suspicious of "percepts" copying "external realities." Andersson, Garrison, and Östman press this even further: "if we had a rich theory of embodied learning, we might not need epistemology as traditionally practiced."<sup>22</sup>

Embodied cognition insists that experience is "trans-dermal:" in Mark Johnson's phrase, "meaning grows from our visceral connections to life and the bodily conditions of life."<sup>23</sup> Conditions such as sunlight, oxygen, food, and a community of language-users are, as Andersson, Garrison, and Östman observe:

external to individual human existence, but internal to its functioning. Functional transactions dissolve the dualisms of internal versus external, nature versus culture, and body versus mind. The result is a functional world without a within.<sup>24</sup>

They insist their methodology of "a world without a within" is practical and empirical, and from this standpoint "embodiment" is fine. Dewey himself, as the authors note, is apt to say "the epidermis is only in the most superficial way an indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins." (*LW 10*: 64) What concerns me,

unsurprisingly, arises in shifting from empirical description to the philosophical problem of objectivity in general—our basic situatedness in the world. Here “embodiment” flirts with the quagmire of containment—a problem not alleviated by conjuring bigger containers that include air, food, or a linguistic community.

Even in empirical description, I try to avoid any suggestion of containment or interaction; and with Andy Clark prefer “situated” to “embodied” cognition—stressing that *situation* means, first and foremost, the *problematic situation* for which the attained objective marks closure.<sup>25</sup> Nor do I see embodied learning obviating epistemological doubts. As we’ve seen with neurophysiology and other appeals to natural science, if access to air, food, or a linguistic community is simply included in our account, we beg the question of how objective experience is possible. A philosophical phenomenology of inference is needed to both 1) drive home the futility of the containment paradigm and 2) propose a constructive alternative. In this view, nonreflective aesthetic experience is the “alpha and omega” of theorizing. Andersson, Garrison, and Östman seem to endorse this, but, if so, doesn’t the double-barrelledness of thought and thing, subject and object, “in here” and “out there” suggest not just a primal world without withins, but one without withins *and* withouts?

**A Short List of Firmer Names.** In *Knowing and the Known*, Dewey and Bentley “firm” nearly one hundred self-actional and interactional phrases. Here are five additional tips for thinking and expressing ourselves transactionally:

Looser Interactional Phrase

“Existence beyond experience.”

Firmer Transactional Restatement

The “beyond *of* experience,” or, if Dewey’s meaning of “experience”

	is unrecoverable, “fact.”
“Transacts <i>with</i> .”	Never acceptable, since it superimposes interaction upon transaction.
“Interpretant” as “interpreter.”	“A context of shared understanding facilitating an objective.”
“Organism-environment interaction.”	Acceptable only for limited empirical purposes, stated as such; unacceptable as a philosophical ground of cognition.
“Embodied cognition.”	Acceptable only for limited empirical purposes, stated as such; unacceptable as a philosophical ground of cognition. For either application, “situated cognition” is preferable.

### **Conclusion: Uniting the Phenomenological and the Empirical**

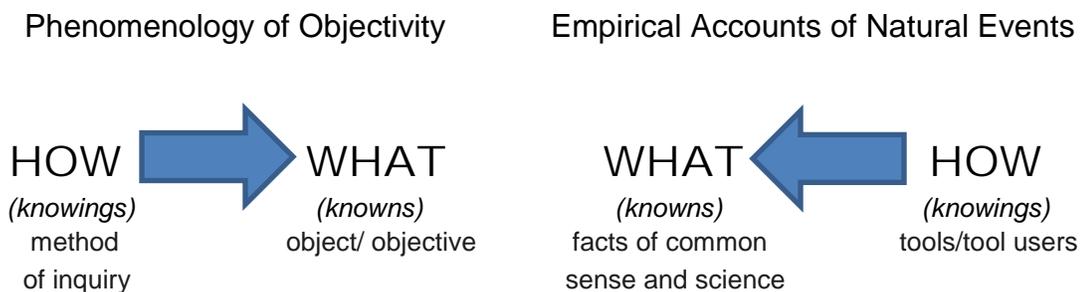
In everyday life, appeals to self-action, interaction, or transaction are decided not by ontological fiat but by contexts of use. That fortitude is an inner resource to be mustered might ease a trip to the dentist; interactional calculations are ideal for sinking a putt. Philosophers’ problems about existence, reality, and objectivity compel the transactional paradigm of inference, but elsewhere appeals to self-action and interaction are suitable.

Modern physics also illustrates this. The foundational paradigm of quantum physics is transactional—reality is manifest in the function of an entire field rather than an aggregate of interacting particles. Nonetheless, in everyday affairs, from measuring torque to designing bridges, Newtonian interaction remains desirable for its applicability and simplicity. Similarly, even if a phenomenological account of cognition is ineluctably transactional, what might dissuade neuroscience, psychology, or educational theory from

preferring “sign-interpreter,” “organism-environment interaction,” and “embodiment” to their transactional counterparts?

Here’s what. Dewey always looked for *continuities* in events that otherwise seem disconnected or oppositional. And if the inference paradigm of *how* things are experienced is always integral to *what* is experienced, it would be incongruous not to look for this in reverse empirical applications from *what* there is to *how* we experience it:

Figure 9. The Reciprocity of “How” and “What”



In our phenomenology (left), objects are uniformly *objectives* of inquiry: *what* is objectively knowable fully constrained by the *how* of the minding or managing of problems to solutions. But this philosophical outcome yields a cultivated naïveté where things are “open and above board” to empirical description. In such accounts (right), the *how* consists of tools and tool users discovering *what* we can learn about the facts of the world, many of which persist independently of human affairs.

The ultimate test of a fully transactional view, I submit, is seeing together this double-movement of the *how* and *what*. A phenomenology of objectivity promises to rejuvenate pragmatism by undoing centuries of misconceptions about existence, reality,

and cognition perpetuated by the containment paradigm. We don't abandon epistemology; we reimagine it delivering an attainable reality. And since a constructed objective is equally a value, transaction opens a seamless bridge to far more significant ethical, social, and educational goals.

From an empirical perspective, this reciprocity alerts us to a transactional revolution that has transformed the natural and social sciences for more than a century. First manifest in chemistry and physics, anthropology and sociology soon overthrew Western paternalism for a pluralistic perspective where every culture is an experiment in the art of living. Economics has witnessed the evolution of the business model from the self-actional sole proprietor and interactional shareholder-executive to a transactional stakeholder where the interests of all affected are significant. Indeed, science itself is now regarded as social phenomena generally driven by what works rather than what is presumed to be ultimately real.

The advance of transaction has been slower in cognitive science, psychology, and education. Dynamics systems theory and situated cognition are only now seriously challenging clunky structural and computational schemas of the mind. Psychology, is still haunted by self-actional *ids* and *egos*—even if by other names. In education, as Andersson, Garrison, and Östman report, “the traditional modernist notion of the mind dominates educational research decades after Dewey’s death while educational researchers still strive to complete the impossible quest for certainty.”

While the challenges are formidable, the prospects are encouraging. Science now realizes that quantum effects permeate everything from precise clocks to power grids, and that interactional thinking is outdated not just “all things considered,” but “many

things considered,” and more all the time. My suggested “firmer names” are offered in hopes that one day philosophy and empirical practice will unite in regarding transactional alternatives as generally more insightful and empowering. There’s no such thing as doing science, psychology, or educational theory without a governing world view. And if the containment paradigm is obsolete, it just makes sense to rethink interactional description from a broader transactional perspective.

## Notes:

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- <sup>1</sup> Greco, John. "Skepticism About the External World." In *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, Ed. John Greco. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 109.
- <sup>2</sup> Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977, 105.
- <sup>3</sup> Stroud, Barry. "Scepticism, 'Externalist', and the Goal of Epistemology." *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 68 (1994), 292.
- <sup>4</sup> Dewey, John. "Logic: The Theory of Inquiry." In *John Dewey: The Later Works, Vol. 12*, Ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1986, 105-121. Hereafter citations from *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, appear in the text by volume and page number: *EW The Early Works* (1882-1898), *MW The Middle Works* (1899-1924); *LW The Later Works* (1925-1953).
- <sup>5</sup> Chandler, Kenneth. "Dewey's Phenomenology of Knowledge." *Philosophy Today* 21 (1977), 51.
- <sup>6</sup> Dewey, John, and Bentley, Arthur F. *A Philosophical Correspondence, 1932-1951*, eds. Sidney Ratner and Jules Altman. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964, 137. Hereafter citations from this work will appear in the text as *DB*.
- <sup>7</sup> Bernstein, Richard. "John Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience." *Journal of Philosophy* 58 (1961), 5-6.
- <sup>8</sup> Gale, Richard. "The Naturalism of John Dewey." In *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*, ed. Molly Cochran. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2010), 62.
- <sup>9</sup> Sleeper, R. W. *The Necessity of Pragmatism: John Dewey's Conception of Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Boisvert, Raymond. *Dewey's Metaphysics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1988, 86.
- <sup>11</sup> Boisvert (1988), 85.
- <sup>12</sup> Rosenthal, Sandra B. *Speculative Pragmatism*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985, 68.
- <sup>13</sup> Rosenthal, Sandra B. "The Pragmatic Reconstruction of Realism: A Pathway for the Future," in *Pragmatic Naturalism and Realism*, ed. John R. Shook. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001, 43.
- <sup>14</sup> Rosenthal (2001), 45-48.
- <sup>15</sup> Tiles, J.E. "The Problem of the External World" in *Key Themes in Philosophy*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- <sup>16</sup> Garrison (2001), 279; see also (2006), 26
- <sup>17</sup> Dewey, John and Bentley, Arthur F. *Knowing and the Known*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1949, 88.
- <sup>18</sup> Morris, Charles W. *Signs, Language, and Behavior*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1946, 273.
- <sup>19</sup> Morris, Charles W. *Foundations on the Theory of Signs*. In *Foundations of the Unity of Science, Vol. 1*, eds. O. Neurath, R. Carnap, and C. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938, 81.
- <sup>20</sup> Morris (1946), 17.
- <sup>21</sup> For example, Garrison (2001, 294) describes semiotic activity as the coordination of 1) a natural biological being, 2) an object referred to, and 3) the sign used to refer.
- <sup>22</sup> Andersson, Joacim, Garrison, Jim, and Östman, Leif. *Empirical Philosophical Investigations in Education and Embodied Experience*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, vi.
- <sup>23</sup> Johnson, Mark. *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, ix.
- <sup>24</sup> Andersson, Garrison, and Östman, 59
- <sup>25</sup> See Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind : Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, 107.