A halting-stage in the evolution of logical theory

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Published in:
Philosophical Readings: Online Journal of Philosophy

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Citation for published version (APA):
“A halting-stage in the evolution of logical theory”. John Dewey’s critical engagement with Lotze’s logic

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the way in which the American pragmatist John Dewey’s engaged critically with Hermann Lotze’s logic in a series of papers in the 1903 anthology Studies in Logical Theory. The first part of the paper describes the backdrop for Dewey’s critical engagement with Lotze, namely, his attempt to distinguish his newly developed instrumentalist understanding of logic from the absolute idealism that had played an important role in his earlier thinking. The next part of the paper then describes the instrumental position from which Dewey approached Lotze’s thinking, while the final part of the paper examines Dewey’s critical analysis of Lotze’s thinking about logic. Here the conclusion will be that even though Dewey saw Lotze as “one of the most vigorous and acute of modern logicians”, he also thought that Lotze represented “a halting-stage in the evolution of logical theory” in so far as his thinking never managed to get beyond the classical “empiristic and transcendental logics” in the way that Dewey thought his own instrumental logic managed to do.

Keywords: Dewey, Lotze, Pragmatism, Idealism, Logic.

Introduction

In the preface to his 1938 magnum opus Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) begins by pointing out that the book represents the culmination of “ideas regarding the nature of logical theory that were first presented, some forty years ago, in Studies in Logical Theory”, and then goes on to say that “with the outstanding exception of Peirce, I have learned most from writers with whose positions I have in the end been compelled to disagree” (pp. iii-iv). What Dewey does not mention in the preface, however, is that one of the persons from whom he learned so much, although in the end he had to disagree with, was the German philosopher Hermann Lotze (1817-1881). But there can be no doubt that Lotze was one of these persons. In each of the four essays that Dewey contributed to the 1903 anthology Studies in Logical Theory, in which he and some of his students at the University of Chicago presented their new ‘instrumental’ logic for the first time, Dewey thus develops his own position in and through a critical analysis of the 1888 English translation of Lotze’s logic. Despite the fact that Lotze probably is the single philosopher whose work Dewey has examined the most in exegetical detail (if one discounts his early work on Leibniz), surprisingly little has been written about the encounter between these two thinkers. The fact that Lotze influenced Dewey is just mentioned in William R. Woodward’s magisterial biography Hermann Lotze: An Intellectual Biography, but not developed in any detail, just as the recent anthology Lotze et son Héritage does not have an essay on Dewey and Lotze, even though it does have ones on Lotze, James and Santayana. And while a lot of standard works on Dewey’s thinking about logic point out that he engaged with Lotze’s thinking, none of them analyzes this engagement in detail. Even though James Scott Johnston cannot avoid discussing Dewey’s engagement with Lotze in his fine John Dewey’s Earlier Logical Theory, it is telling that he complains about how Dewey’s engagement with Lotze “makes for an unsatisfactory explication of Dewey’s own logical theory” because it is quite “difficult to read Dewey’s positive statements on logical theory out of his (negative) criticisms of Lotze”.

Given the fact that Johnston is primarily interested in showing that Dewey never really left the Hegelianism of his youth, it is of course perfectly understandable that he is not interested in his engagement with Lotze for its own sake. But it just goes to prove that this is a general trend among Dewey scholars. In fact, the most detailed examination of Dewey’s engagement with Lotze seems to be Christopher Hookway’s extremely short “Lotze and the classical pragmatists” from 2009, which in less than eight pages discusses the different ways in which “the philosophical ideas of both James and Dewey were influenced by their knowledge of Lotze’s writings”, and, even Hookway ends by concluding that “this part of the intellectual context of pragmatism probably has more of offer to our understanding of James and Dewey than is currently supposed”. I fully agree with Hookway, and in this essay, accordingly, I intend to examine in detail Dewey’s critical engagement with Lotze’s thinking about logic in Studies in Logical Theory. In the first part I sketch the background for Dewey’s engagement with Lotze. This part will, primarily, consist of a description of the position that Studies in Logical Theory occupies in Dewey’s movement away from the absolutism of his youth towards his more mature pragmatism. Then I move on to describe the logical position – instrumentalism – from which Dewey approached Lotze’s thinking. Finally, I then examine Dewey’s critical analysis of Lotze’s thinking about logic. My conclusion here will be that even though Dewey saw Lotze as “one of the most vigorous and acute of modern
logicians”, he also thought that Lotze represented “a hal-
ting-stage in the evolution of logical theory” in so far as
his thinking never managed to get beyond the classical
“empiristic and transcendental logics” in the way that
Dewey thought his own instrumental logic managed to
do¹.

2. From absolutism to experimentalism: Dewey’s He-
gelian background

While Dewey today is recognized as one the three most
prominent classical pragmatists – together with William
James and Charles S. Peirce – he began his career by
being heavily influenced by German Idealism and espe-
cially by the neo-Hegelianism that held sway when he re-
ceived his philosophical formation in the 1870s and
1880s. As has been described in detail by James A. Good,
was not just the British Isles that were influenced by
German philosophy and especially by Neo-Hegelianism
in the latter half of the 19th century. The same was also
the case with the US, which as a consequence did not just
send many of its young philosophy students to study in
Germany, but also witnessed the development of a partic-
ular American form of Hegelianism centered in St. Louis
(hence the name The St. Louis Hegelians), and it is this
American Hegelianism which influenced Dewey’s early
formation as a philosopher². In a way this influence already
began before Dewey decided on philosophy as his
preferred career choice. Before he made that momentous
decision, Dewey thus sent two articles to, in his own
words, the “well-known Hegelian” W. T. Harris asking
for his advice “as to the possibility of [Dewey] success-
fully prosecuting philosophical studies”⁴. Since Harris’
answer turned out to be encouraging Dewey began his
graduate studies in philosophy at the new research
university Johns Hopkins in 1882, where his first serious
encounter with German Idealism and Hegelianism took
place. This encounter was mediated by his new teacher
George Sylvester Morris, who was described at the time
as “one of the most accomplished Hegel scholars in Ame-
rica”, and who “deeply affected” Dewey with his “enthu-
siastic and scholarly devotion”⁵. Besides Morris and his
particular American version of neo-Hegelianism, how-
ever, Dewey was also influenced by such British neo-
Hegelians as Thomas Hill Green, Edward and John Caird,
and William Wallace. As a consequence of this strong
Hegelian influence, Dewey was led to develop a Hegelian
critique of Kant, which he submitted as his doctoral thesis
when he graduated from Johns Hopkins in 1884.

When he left Johns Hopkins, Dewey had thus been
deeply affected by neo-Hegelianism and had also come to
think of himself as part of this movement. In fact, the
impact that Hegelian ways of thinking made on him du-
ing these formative years was so strong that in 1930,
when he looked back on his philosophical development in
the autobiographical essay “From Absolutism to Exper-
imentalism”, he admitted that “the acquaintance with He-
gel has left a permanent deposit in my thinking”⁶. In the
same essay, however, he also pointed out that he gra-
dually “drifted away from Hegelianism in the next fifteen
years” after he left Johns Hopkins. Even though this move
away from Hegelianism happened gradually, one specific
event is usually pointed out as being of particular impor-
tance in the process, namely, Dewey’s 1890 encounter
with William James’ monstrous masterpiece The Princi-
iples of Psychology⁷. Dewey’s encounter with James’ fa-
mous book took place against the backdrop of his own
Hegelian inspired treatment of the new, emerging science
of psychology in his 1886 Psychology, where he still op-
rated with the idea of an “absolute mind”¹⁰. What influ-
ced Dewey most in James’ book was his thoroughly bio-
logical, Darwinian approach to mental life, or, as Dewey
himself described it, “the objective biological factor in
James’s conception of thought”¹ⁱ. What Dewey referred to
by this ‘objective biological factor’ was the fact that Ja-
mes in The Principles treats all categories as tools or me-
ans for life or activity. This new way of thinking made it
possible for Dewey to see another way in which one
could avoid the individualism and particularism of empi-
ricism that had attracted him to Hegelianism in the first
place. Instead of postulating some kind of constitutive
thought, it now became possible to see life, activity or e-
xperience as the thing that held things together and gave
them unity. Taking his cue from this Jamesian idea, De-
wey then gradually drifted away from neo-Hegelianism
and especially the idea of a “transcendent absolute”. One
aspect of the process had to do with psychology where he
developed a functionalist-biological approach which re-
ceived its classical expression in his famous 1896 article
“The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology”. Another aspect –
and the one that is most important in relation to Lotze –
had to do with logic. This was a subject that Dewey had
taught both in 1890 and in 1899-1900 through critical di-
ussions of the works of such influential thinkers as John
Stuart Mill, Bernard Bosanquet, Francis Herbert Bradley
and - Hermann Lotze. But it was through his critical
engagement with Lotze’s logic in Studies in Logical The-
ory from 1903 that he first presented his new instrumental
understanding of logic to a broader audience, which also,
as it is often said, represented the final, culminating stage
in his move from Absolutism to Experimentalism. In this
way Dewey’s critical engagement with Lotze played an
important role in his move from Absolutism to Experi-
mentalism, and while John R. Shook is probably right to
point out that Dewey, in theory, might as well have cho-
sen Bradley or Bosanquet as the target of his analysis, he
also seems right when he suggests that “Lotze’s preemi-
nent stature and the structure of his logical and epistemo-
logical system” probably made him “an irresistible target
for Dewey”.¹² In order to understand how and why the
structure of Lotze’s logical and epistemological system
made him an irresistible target for Dewey, however, it is
first necessary to take a closer look at the new, instrumen-
tal logic that Dewey’s encounter with James led him to
develop.

3. Dewey’s framework: Epistemological vs instrumen-
tal logic

Dewey’s approach to Lotze in Studies in Logical Theory
is informed by the idea that there are two radically diffe-
rent and mutually exclusive ways of thinking about logic.
On the one hand there is “the epistemological logician”
whose thinking leads to an “epistemological type of lo-
Logic” (p. 55). This type of logic is then opposed to the “instrumental type” (p. 53) of logic that Dewey himself espouses. As Dewey sees it, the difference between these two forms of logic has to do both with the way they think about thinking as well as with what they take to be the fundamental problem of logic. According to Dewey, the characteristic thing about “the epistemological logician” is thus that he does not just operate with a distinction between “thought as such” or “at large” and “reality as such” or “at large” (pp. 50, 51), but also thinks that “the main problem” of logic is to decide whether “the specifications of thought as such hold good of reality as such” (p. 51). So the epistemological logician presupposes a sharp separation between thought and reality (or the subjective and the objective), which he then thinks it is the primary job of logic to try to bridge, and it is because he thinks that “logic is supposed to grow out of” this classical epistemological problem “and lead up to its solution” (p. 51) that Dewey calls this type of logician “epistemological”.

As Dewey sees it, the history of philosophy has been dominated by two (warring) types of epistemological logics, namely, “empiristic” and “transcendental logics” (p. 85). The difference between these two forms of epistemological logic has to do with the way in which they try to bridge the gulf between “thought as such” and “reality as such” in order to explain how “the specifications of thought as such” can “hold good of reality as such”.

The characteristic thing about empiristic logics, as Dewey understands them, is that they recognize that thinking is dependent upon certain, empirical “antecedents” (p. 72) in the form of “an experience which is mere existence or occurrence” (p. 79). Typically this has taken the form of an isolated sensory impression or feeling. The job of the empiristic logician has then been to find out how it is possible to go from this idea of thought as dependent upon empirical antecedents to the idea that some ways of thinking are of more “worth” (p. 79) than others, even though they all take their cue from empirical antecedents. The perennial problem for this type of logic, as Dewey sees it, is that it becomes virtually impossible to explain how it is possible for thought to make a distinction between valid and invalid ways of thinking if all thinking takes its cue from an antecedent that, as “an experience which is mere existence or occurrence”, has nothing to do with validity and invalidity. The gap between genesis and validity simply becomes too wide to bridge.

As opposed to empiristic logics, transcendental logicians begin from the perspective of thought with the idea of “thought as active in forms of its own, pure in and of themselves” (p. 85), which then leaves the problem of explaining why we have reason to think that the forms of pure thought are valid for something beyond thought itself, i.e., reality. The way the transcendental logician solves this problem is by introducing the idea of “some constitutive thought” or “absolute universal thought” (p. 82) which has somehow already structured reality rationally, so that the categories of pure thought are valid for something beyond pure thought itself. In the case of human beings, however, “Absolute Reason” works “under limiting conditions of finitude of a sensitive and temporal organism” (p. 82) so that human thinking (which is reflective as opposed to constitutive) has to take its cue from “fragmentary sensations, impressions, feelings” even though reality in itself is rationally structured according to the categories of “Absolute Reason” or “Pure Thought” (p. 82). Despite the different starting points, however, the problem for the transcendental logician is, as Dewey sees it, at bottom the same as for the empiricist one (if one ignores the additional problem of explaining why “a perfect, absolute, complete, finished thought finds it necessary to submit to alien, disturbing, and corrupting conditions in order, in the end, to recover through reflective thought in a partial, piecemeal, wholly inadequate way what it possessed at the outset in a much more satisfactory way” (p. 83)). If human thinking, as a consequence of human finitude, is reflective and takes its cue from some “wholly indeterminate unrationaled, independent, prior existence” (p. 83), then the antecedents of human thinking are not really already rationally structured by constitutive thought and the transcendental logician has the same problem as the empiricist, namely, to explain how it is possible to distinguish between valid and invalid thinking if reflective human thinking takes its cue from “a wholly indeterminate, unrationaled, independent, prior existence” (p. 83).

In order to avoid the problem that he takes to be common to both the transcendental and the empiristic form of epistemological logic, Dewey’s own instrumental approach to logic does not begin with a “fixed distinction” or a “fixed gulf” between “thought as such” and “reality as such”. Instead it takes its cue from Dewey’s idea of an experience or a situation. According to this idea, there are many different types of experiences or situations. While some experiences or situations are primarily of “an affectional quality”, others are thus “practical or appreciative or reflective” (p. 59), as Dewey explains. At the same time that Dewey’s thinking about logic takes its cue from this idea of an experience or a situation instead of the distinction between “thought as such” and “reality as such”, it also has a very different take on “the problem of logical theory” (p. 52). Instead of thinking that the main problem of logical theory is to find out whether “the specifications of thought as such hold good of reality as such”, an instrumental logician like Dewey believes that the main job of logic is, on the one hand, to describe how “the reflective process” (p. 65), “activity” (p. 54), “function” (p. 65), “situation” (p. ) or “experience” relates to “unreflective” (p. 49) forms of experience. Besides describing how “reflective” experience relates to “unreflective” experience, however, Dewey also thinks that logic should describe the main characteristics of reflective experience as a peculiar form of experience. So, as Dewey sees it, logic should both describe the relations “between” reflective and unreflective experience as well as reflective experience from “within” (p. 59).

In order to understand why this way of thinking makes Dewey’s approach to logic specifically instrumental, it is necessary to take a closer look at his understanding of the relation between “reflective” and “unreflective” experience. According to Dewey, “reflective experience” does not just come “out of” (p. 47) an “unreflective” (p. 49) form of experience, but also exists “for the sake of” (p. 47) such a form of experience. To be more precise, Dewey is convinced that the peculiar form of experience termed thinking arises as a consequence of tensions, crisis, con-
flict, disequilibration, disintegration or problems in unre
deflective experience and has as its primary goal to solve
the problem out of which it arose in the first place. A
simple example may serve to illustrate Dewey’s thought
here. Imagine a long jumper who systematically oversteps
the foul line. Since the purpose of this unreflective form
of experience or activity is to jump as far as possible wi-
without overstepping, the fact that he systematically over-
steps creates a tension, conflict, problem or disequilibr
ation in his activity. This problem may then set the long
jumper and his coach thinking about why he oversteps.
Perhaps he thinks too much about the foul line? Perhaps
his run-up is too long and he gets tired before he reaches
the foul-line and so on. Whatever conclusion the reflecti
ve experience leads to, however, the long jumper and the
couch will use it to modify the jumper’s activity, hoping
thereby to solve the problem in unreflective experience
out of which reflection arose in the first place, and it is in
this sense that Dewey thinks reflective experience or logic
is to be seen as “an instrument of adjustment or adapta-
tion to a particular environing situation” (p. 58).

Dewey’s instrumental understanding of the relation
between reflective and unreflective experience has a
number of consequences which sets it off from epistemolo-
gical logics. First of all Dewey’s approach does not
imply that the unreflective experience which antecedes
and evokes reflection is a-rational or meaningless – a me-
re existence or occurrence. Even though the long jumper
experiences a tension or problem in his activity, it is not as
if the situation is totally void of meaning. Many things
still make sense and it is from these that his reflective ex-
perience takes its cue. Secondly, and most importantly,
Dewey’s approach does not begin by taking “the distinc-
tions of thought and fact, etc., as ontological, as inhe-
rently fixed in the makeup of the structure of being” (p.
57) in the way that epistemological logics do. Instead,
Dewey’s instrumental approach sees the “distinction of
meaning and fact” as “an induced and intentional practi-
cial division of labor” within reflective experience. What
this means is that the distinction between thought (idea,
meaning) and fact (reality) is one that is deliberately in-
troduced by the one engaged in a reflective activity be-
cause it is useful if reflective activity is to achieve its goal
and solve the problem in unreflective experience that e-
voked it in the first place. In the case of the long jumper,
for example, it will be useful for him in his reflections on
why he oversteps to introduce a distinction between the
facts of the case (how long is his run up? What is he thin-
king when he runs etc.) and his ideas about how to chan-
ge his run up or his thoughts while running. But while this
distinction is important in the jumper’s reflective expe-
rience, it does not, according to Dewey, exist when he is
unreflectively engaged in jumping, and the only justifica-
tion for introducing it, as well as particular facts and ideas
in his reflective experience, is because he has reason to
think that they will help him solve the problem that origi-
nally made him think. For, as Dewey sees it, the test of
the particular distinctions and objects within reflective
experience is also instrumental in the sense that “the test
of validity of [an] idea [or a fact] is its functional or in-
strumental use in effecting the transition from a relatively
conflicting experience to a relatively integrated one” (p.
107). And it is because Dewey’s instrumental approach to
logic in this way does not just treat reflective experience
as instrumental in relation to a meaningful but problemati-
c and unreflective form of experience, but also treats the
different distinctions within reflective experience as “flex-
ible and historic, relative and methodological […] in-
stead of as “absolute, fixed and predetermined”, that he takes
his own approach to be superior to all epistemological lo-
gics - whether transcendental or empiristic.

4. Lotze’s logic as a halting stage in the evolution of
logical theory

At the most general level, Dewey’s reasons for classifying
Lotze’s thinking about logic as “a halting stage in the
evolution of logical theory” is quite clear. On the one
hand he sees Lotze as trying to break with a transcenden-
tal way of thinking about logic. As he points out in one
place, the peculiar thing about Lotze’s thinking is thus
that “he saw that previous transcendental logicians had
left untouched the specific question of our supposedly fi-
nite, reflective thought to its own antecedents, and he set
out to make good the defect” (p. 83). In another place he
makes the same point by remarking that Lotze “is too far
along to be contented with the reincarnation of the purely
formal distinctions of a merely formal thought-by-itself.
He recognizes that thought as formal is the form of some
matter, and has its worth only as organizing that matter to
meet the ideal demands of reason; and that “Reason” is in
truth only an adequate systematization of the matter or
content” (p. 98). So Lotze tried to move away from a
transcendental approach to logic by taking into account
the empirical antecedents of thought, and Dewey praises
many of the insights that this led him to. At the same
time, however, that Lotze tried to take the empirical ante-
cedents of thinking into account, Dewey also believes that
this move plunged him into fundamental “inconsisten-
cies” (p. 79) and “contradictions” (p. 81) because he ne-
ever freed himself from the dualism between thought in
itself and reality in itself that Dewey takes to be shared by
all epistemological logics – transcendental as well as em-
piristic. As Dewey sums up his general view at the end of
one chapter, “The significance of Lotze for critical pur-
oposes” is thus that “his peculiar effort to combine a tran-
scendental view of thought (i.e. of Thought as active in
forms of its own, pure in and of themselves) with certain
obvious facts of the dependence of our thought upon spe-
cific empirical antecedents brings to light fundamental
defects in both the empiricist and the transcendental lo-
gics. We discover a common failure in both: the failure
to view logical terms and distinctions with respect to their
necessary function in the redintegration of experience” (p.
85). So the reason why Lotze’s logic is so interesting to
Dewey is because he has tried to move beyond the tradi-
tional empiricist and transcendental logics just as Dewey
himself wanted to. The big problem, however, is that Lo-
tze did it in the wrong way by sticking to certain “logical
terms and distinctions” as fixed in themselves instead of
viewing them instrumentally “with respect to their neces-
sary function in the reintegration of experience”, as De-
wey’s instrumental approach to logic does, and it is be-
cause Lotze’s thinking about logic has not left this com-
mon presupposition of epistemological theory behind that
Dewey is led to think that it “represents a halting-stage in the evolution of logical theory”.

In the rest of this paper I will take a closer look at the interpretation of Lotze that Dewey takes to support this general conclusion. My main purpose here will be to make Dewey’s reasons for claiming that Lotze’s thinking about logic is characterized by fundamental “inconsistencies” and “contradictions” as clear as possible. Whether these reasons are well-founded and Dewey’s various interpretations represent Lotze’s thinking faithfully, I will leave to Lotze scholars to determine. Following his own instrumental understanding of the relation between reflexive and unreflexive experience, Dewey’s critical engagement with Lotze’s thinking is divided into three parts. First Dewey analyzes Lotze’s thinking about the way in which “reflective experience” is evoked or called forth by empirical antecedents. This is done in a chapter entitled “The Antecedents and Stimuli of Thinking”. Then Dewey engages with Lotze’s understanding of the way in which reflective experience is supplied with facts and ideas. This is done in the chapter entitled “Data and Meanings”. Finally, Dewey also analyzes Lotze’s understanding of validity or objectivity in a final chapter on “The Objects of Thought”. Given the limited amount of space available, my main focus in the rest of this paper will be on Dewey’s reason for thinking that Lotze’s understanding of “The Antecedents and Stimuli of Thinking” is marked by “inconsistencies” and “contradictions”.

As Dewey presents it, Lotze thinks that the “ultimate material antecedents of thought are found in impressions which are due to external objects as stimuli” (p. 68). These impressions, as Lotze sees it, are “mere psychical states or events” that succeed each other and give rise to a “train or current of ideas” (p. 68). This current of ideas, as Lotze understands it, is “just as necessary as any succession of material events” (pp. 68-9). No matter whether the current is the product of successive impressions from external objects or the product of a single external impression which then stimulates an “associative mechanism” (p. 68) in such a way that we start remembering or imagining, the current of ideas is thus necessary. In order to back up this analysis, Dewey refers to some of the opening pages of Lotze’s Logic and provides the following quotation from Lotze: “Just because, under their respective conditions, every such series of ideas hangs together by the same necessity and law as every other, there would be no ground for making any such distinction of value as that between truth and untruth, thus placing one group in opposition to all the others” (p. 69, Lotze I, p. 2). As this passage indicates, no distinctions of value (of truth and untruth) exist within the series of ideas as such. One person may be led to think that the position of the stars is the reason why he lost his job when he in fact lost it after his horoscope had predicted it, while another person’s reading of Marx may lead him to think that he lost his job because of capitalism’s inherent tendency to move production to where the production costs are lowest. As mere currents of ideas, they will be on the same level. They will each have been produced by the same necessity determined by external impressions and the associative mechanism. According to Lotze, however, the current of ideas happens to have “a peculiar property” since some ideas “are merely coherent” while others are “coherent” in the sense that they reflect a “real connection” among things or events (p. 69), and it is the special job of thought to “recover and confirm the coherent, the really connected” at the same time that it “elimi- nates the coincident as such” (p. 69). According to Dewey, these are the main features of Lotze’s thinking about the empirical antecedents of thought. On the one hand there is “de facto coexistences and sequences” in the form or “mere happenings” and then there is the activity of thought which tries to assess “the cognitive worth of these combinations” (p. 69).

Dewey’s assessment of Lotze’s thinking about the antecedents of thought reflects his overall assessment of Lotze’s thinking. On the one hand he thus praises the fact that Lotze does not just avoid “the extravagancies of transcendental logic, which assumes that all the matter of experience is determined from the very start by rational thought”, but also “avoids the pitfall of purely empirical logic which make no distinction between the mere occurrence and association of ideas and the real worth and validity of the various conjunctions thus produced” (p. 70). On the other hand, however, Dewey also thinks that “a further analysis” of Lotze’s position will lead to the conclusion that it is riddled through and through with inconsistencies and self-contradictions” (p. 70).

The big problem, as Dewey sees it, has to do with the fact that Lotze is led to provide “impressions and ideas” with two radically different and irreconcilable roles. His basic position is that the impressions are “the ultimate antecedent in its purest and crudest form” in the sense that it is “that which has never felt, for good or bad, the influence of thought” (p. 70). This is the idea that impressions are “nothing but states of consciousness, moods of ourselves, bare psychical existences” (p. 71). At the same time, however, that Lotze takes an impression to be “a bare event” that antecedes thinking but has never experienced “the influence of thought”, Dewey also believes that he takes impressions to furnish “the material content of thinking”. In order to back up this claim, Dewey quotes copiously from Lotze, who says such things as “it is the relations themselves already subsisting between impressions, when we become conscious of them, by which the action of thought which is never anything but reaction, is attracted; and this action consists merely in interpreting relations which we find existing between our passive impressions into aspects of the matter of impressions” (Dewey p. 70, Lotze I, p. 25); “thought can make no difference where it finds none already in the matter of the impressions” (Dewey p. 70, Lotze I, p. 36) and “the possibility and the success of thought’s procedure depends upon this original constitution and organization of the whole world of ideas, a constitution which, though not necessary in thought, is all the more necessary to make thinking possible” (p. Dewey p. 71, Lotze I, p. 36).

The reason why Dewey finds it so problematic that Lotze lets impressions and ideas play, first, the role of “ultimate antecedents” or “crude material” and, then, the role of “content for thought” (p. 71) is that he takes it to amount to a contradiction. As he sees it, it simply does not make sense to say, first, that an impression “is merely subjective”, “a bare state of our own consciousness” or a “mere happening” and then go on to say that it is in fact determined not only by “external objects as stimuli” but also by an associative mechanism “so thoroughly objecti-
ve or regular in its workings as to give the same necessary character to the current of ideas as possessed by any physical sequence” (p. 71). For when Lotze treats the impressions as determined in this way, they are no longer treated as “bare psychical existences” but as “real facts in a real world” with the (unexplained) “capacity of representing the cosmic facts which cause them” (p. 71). According to Dewey, this contradiction in Lotze’s thinking is a direct product of the fact that he attempts to “put thought’s work, as concerned with objective validity, over against experience as a mere antecedent happening, or occurrence” at the same time that he also wants to “consider thought as an independent somewhat in general which nevertheless, in our experience, is dependent upon a raw material of mere impressions given to it” (p. 80). So Lotze wants to move away from a purely transcendental logic by taking the empirical antecedents of thinking into account. But because he is stuck with an empiristic conception of experience as “mere impressions”, the only way in which he can take the empirical antecedents into account if he also wants to keep a distinction between valid and invalid ways of thinking is by describing his “impressions” in contradictory terms.

So, according to Dewey, Lotze’s thinking about the antecedents of thought represents “a halting stage in the evolution of logical theory” because it never frees itself from the idea that Dewey takes to plague all epistemological logics: that “the difference between the logical and its antecedent is a matter of the difference between worth and mere existence or occurrence” (p. 79). And the only way, Dewey thinks, that someone like Lotze can avoid the contradictions that such a distinction leads to is by dropping the distinction and turning towards Dewey’s own (instrumental) conception of logic, according to which “meaning and value is already there” in the unreflective experience that evokes thought, which then has for its task “the transformation or reconstruction of meaning, through an intermediary position” (p. 72). It is because Lotze, despite his good intentions and many specific insights, never managed to do this, that Dewey took his thinking about logic to represent “a halting stage in the evolution of logical theory”.

Notes

1 See J. Shook, Dewey’s Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality; T. Burke, Dewey’s New Logic; and J Scott Johnston, John Dewey’s Earlier Logical Theory.

2 J Scott Johnston, John Dewey’s Earlier Logical Theory, p. 1.08.


4 J. Dewey, Essays in Experimental Logic (includes a reprint of Studies in Logical Theory), pp. 66, 85,98

5 J. Good, A Search for Unity in Diversity: The “Permanent Hegelian Deposit” in the Philosophy of John Dewey, p. xii.


7 Ibid. p. 9.

8 Ibid. p. 12.

9 See P. Manicas, “American Social Science: The Irrelevance of Pragmatism” in European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy vol. III, p. 14, where Manicas claims that “It is true and important to recognize that between perhaps 1891 and 1903, with the Studies in Logical Theory, Dewey had made a conversion to his distinctive version of naturalism”. It is important to note, however, that Shook, Good and Johnston have recently questioned whether Dewey ever turned away from Hegel — as opposed to neo-Hegelianism — but for my purposes this question is not that important.

10 J. Good, A Search for Unity in Diversity: The “Permanent Hegelian Deposit” in the Philosophy of John Dewey, p. xii.


13 In the rest of the paper all reference will be to J. Dewey, Essays in Experimental Logic.

14 Dewey’s main target was Lotze’s Logic (especially book 1), the English translation of which Dewey refers to, but he also drew on Lotze’s Microcosmus as well as Henry Jones’ Philosophy of Lotze from 1895.