

Figuring Things Out

“ ‘Beautiful — just beautiful . . . it seems to me you’ve discovered a wonderful rule that will work for any compound sentence beginning with the word ‘if.’ ” (page 87, lines 13, 17-18). Indeed, the “simple language” of the children in *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* has expanded in complexity and comprehensiveness, modeling the very process of logical inquiry with which it is concerned.

Tony’s problem of tardiness leads him on yet another quest for a rule he feels certain must exist: “a rule that would help him figure things out.” (page 85, line 6-7) Once again his friends provide the “help” needed to discover this rule. While the mechanics of denying or affirming the antecedent or the consequent of a proposition to determine the status of its companion term is undoubtedly an important discovery, the relationship of hypothetical propositions in *judgment* seems key to a full appreciation of that discovery.

John Dewey sees judgment as a continuous process whereby an indeterminate situation is resolved into a determinately unified one. ‘The transformation occurs through logical operations, notably those involving comparison/contrast, which enable a new understanding of the subject matter. Propositions, such as those discovered by Tony and company, are vital tools in reaching judgments. They are the symbolic means through which we are able to both express and explore problematic situations. The flexibility of propositions enable the initiation and critical evaluation of the entire rational investigation.

Dewey notes that the subject matter of a proposition may be material or procedural. Thus, the structure may deal with experimentally verifiable conditions (existential) as well as those which operate as possibilities (conceptual or ideational). As such, there exists an efficient division of labor in inquiry. It is precisely this “give and take” that points to the viability of inquiry as a communal effort.

Hypothetical propositions naturally express action seeking meaning. Born of suggestion, they move to ideational status as they develop meaning within the context of relationship. Inquiry resolves the initial problem into the structured logical format of an “if . . . then” statement, thus defining and delimiting its own field of investigation. Implication, economy of thought and impetus of creativity, is the heart of such propositions. And the very process of reasoning is constituted “ . . . where discourse is a matter of sequential implications rather than communication of something already possessed.”’ Again the dual role of the experiential and the ideational cooperate in the effort to discover solution. The former seen most clearly in particular propositions, determines the data which sets the problem while the latter, most evident in universal propositions, formulates *possible* operations. Delicately balanced, the tendency to stress either the existential or the conceptual deters inquiry.

The students directly experience the contribution their logic brings to judgment and illuminate for us its potential as well as its practicality.

Footnotes

1. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, NY, 1938), p. 283.
2. *Ibid*, p. 301.

Bibliography

- Dewey, J. *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1939.
- Lipman, M. *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery*. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1971.