ABSTRACT. I show why the standard textbook argument against the pragmatist reconstruction of truth should be dismissed as a fallacy. It only works if one inadvertently substitutes for the pragmatist concept of knowledge an unreconstructed one that predates the experimental revolution in philosophy (likened to the Copernican revolution in astronomy) started by Kant and completed by Dewey. I argue (as did Dewey against Russell) that the concept of propositions as mental reconstructions of what is the case converts a function in inquiry into an independent structure, which is another fallacy.

The pragmatic reconstruction of the truth value of propositions as use value has been criticized for a long time, most notoriously by Bertrand Russell in the debate with John Dewey that followed the 1938 publication of the latter’s Logic: The Theory of Inquiry. Judging from the present debate in textbooks, the pragmatic view is obviously untenable simply because true propositions are not necessarily useful and useful propositions are not always true. This objection illustrates well what Dewey deprecates as a common procedure in philosophical controversy, namely, “representation of the position of an opponent in the terms it would have if the critic held it; that is, the meaning it has not in its own terms but after translation into the terms of an opposed theory”.

I cannot agree that this standard textbook argument against the central idea of pragmatism is compelling, and I submit that it should be dismissed as a simple fallacy, call it the fallacy of inadvertent substitution. It works only if one substitutes an unreconstructed concept of truth and, more importantly, an unreconstructed concept of knowledge that predates the experimental revolution in philosophy (likened to the Copernican revolution in astronomy) started by Kant and completed by Dewey. If we acknowledge, Dewey argues, that the knowing of experimentally controlled constructive inquiry is “one kind of interaction which goes on within the world”, then we will have to find ways for revising our received concepts of truth and knowledge that continue to frustrate successful inquiry in philosophy just as they did in the empirical sciences before their experimental breakthrough: “Fundamentally, the issue is raised whether philosophy is willing to surrender a theory of mind and its organs of knowing which originated when the practice of knowing was in its infancy.”
My brief review of the prehistory of the pragmatic reconstruction of truth and of Dewey’s final reply to Russell’s objections will show that matters are more complicated than the common critique of pragmatism suggests and that the simplistic standard objection is no warrant for proclaiming the pragmatic view “moribund”.6

I want to explore some connections between what Kant and Dewey describe as revolutions in philosophical method. Both believe that their adoption of the experimental method constitutes a genuine breakthrough, and a case can be made for the claim that the pragmatic revolution, which arguably culminates in Dewey’s Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, concludes what Kant’s critical efforts began. It seems to me that the liberating effects of their experimental approach are most conspicuous in their reconstruction of the traditional concept of truth, which I will use as a measure of their philosophical achievement.

More specifically, I want to discuss four claims: First, Dewey’s operational logic with its new concept of truth is the achievement of the experimental revolution initiated by Kant and completed by Dewey, i.e., in his “theory of inquiry” Dewey draws the same conclusions about the needed reconstruction of the received notion of truth as does Kant in his “treatise on method”. Second, these conclusions demonstrate what is radically new and philosophically promising in the experimental turn in philosophy proper such that reviewing them helps to bring out the full force of the pragmatic revolution that is still obscured and muffled by the common epistemological and metaphysical reading of the new pragmatic logic, even though it was explicitly rejected by Dewey.7 Third, in their pragmatic transformation, assertions, propositions, ideas, and ideals are no longer a matter of states of consciousness that represent the real, as in the epistemology of consciousness and philosophy of mind, but of functions and operations for the resolution of existential conflict situations. Fourth, the experimental reconstruction of truth shows why the current philosophical debates over alethic realism, antirealism, and relativism are without theoretical import. They presuppose the obsolete notion of inquiry as random groping (Herumtappen) and unbridled analysis and issue in the fallacy of unlimited extension or universalization.8

I. KANT’S EXPERIMENTAL REVOLUTION

On the face of it, the traditional understanding of truth seems to be totally unaffected by the experimental revolution. As Isaac Israeli defines it, truth is the adaequatio rei et intellectus, the agreement between matter and mind, reality and reason, fact and fancy.9 Kant seems to accept this old