

EDITED BY LARRY A. HICKMAN

# Reading Dewey



## Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Bloomington and Indianapolis

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# Introduction

*Larry A. Hickman*

John Dewey (1859–1952), hailed during his lifetime as “America’s Philosopher,” is now generally recognized as one of the seminal thinkers of the twentieth century. His critical work ranged more broadly than that of either of his great contemporaries, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and he anticipated by several decades some of their most trenchant insights. Dewey’s groundbreaking contributions to philosophy, psychology, and educational theory continue to animate research on the cutting edges of those fields.

The twelve original interpretive essays in this volume locate Dewey’s major works within their historical context and present a timely reevaluation of each of the major areas of his broad philosophical reach. They explore his contributions to logic, ethics, social and political philosophy, the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of art, metaphysics, and the philosophy of the human sciences. They also locate Dewey’s work as it relates to the dominant strands of modern philosophy, as it participates in the major debates of continental philosophy from phenomenology to post-structuralism, and as an early contribution to feminist thought.

This collection is thus designed to introduce Dewey’s basic insights and to provide a context for understanding the current revival of interest in his thought. The last previous comprehensive collection of original essays to do this was *Guide to the Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston and published in 1970. Although her collection still serves as a benchmark for Dewey studies, developments during the quarter-century since its publication have demonstrated the need for a reinterpretation of Dewey’s basic insights by, and for, a new generation.

## The Breadth of Dewey’s Philosophical Reach

Dewey disliked the idea of “systematic” philosophy and said so early in his career. Nevertheless, no major philosopher during his time or since has exhibited a broader philosophical reach. When he accepted a fac-

ulty position at the University of Chicago in 1894, it was as head of a department that included philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy. He was to make major contributions in each of these fields.

His contributions to psychology include the seminal 1896 essay “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” which served both as a fatal blow to introspectionism and a manifesto of the new functionalism. In 1942 a panel of seventy of America’s prominent psychologists voted it the most influential essay published by the *Psychological Review* during the journal’s fifty-year history.

In that essay Dewey criticized the concept of the reflex arc on the grounds that it had failed to take into account the situatedness of the organism. He argued for the then novel thesis that the interests and habits of the organism, its active situations, influence how its stimuli are chosen.

Dewey’s research in psychology profoundly influenced his work in logic. Skillfully avoiding the pitfalls of psychologism, he nevertheless argued that inquiry is a form of behavior, and that an account of its genesis and development as habit-formation must be a part of its theoretical dimension. In his view, logical forms accrue to subject matter in inquiry; they are not given prior to inquiry.

In the field of pedagogy, or the philosophy of education, Dewey established a laboratory school where he and his colleagues could apply their innovations in psychology and philosophy to the education of young children. He published groundbreaking works on the developmental stages of learning, on techniques by which the native talents and interests of children can inform and be informed by the curriculum, and on the complex interactions between classroom education and the institutions of the wider society.

Dewey’s philosophical work was both rich and varied. During his decade at the University of Chicago (1894–1904), he founded and led a school of instrumental pragmatism that made major contributions to ethics, logic, and social psychology.

Following his move to Columbia University in 1905, Dewey increasingly turned his attention to the construction of a “philosophy of culture.” In *How We Think* (1910) and *Democracy and Education* (1916), he sought to develop a theory of deliberation as it operates in the best examples of day-to-day learning and decision making. In *Experience and Nature* (1925), he developed a version of evolutionary naturalism that continues to provide insights into current environmental and technological problems. It is

a matter of continuing significance that Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* announced and examined the consequences of the end of western metaphysics-as-usual well in advance of Heidegger’s 1927 *Sein und Zeit*, and that it anticipated by some two decades both Wittgenstein’s rejection of private language arguments and his instrumental view of language.

In *Individualism Old and New* (1930) and *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935), Dewey addressed the problems associated with changing notions of individualism and liberalism within technological cultures. In *Art as Experience* (1934), he argued that aesthetic experience has both cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions, and that the value of a work of art lies in its instrumentality for the enlargement, consolidation, and consummation of the meanings of human experience. In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), he worked against the grain of the increasingly formal logic of that time in an attempt to demonstrate how inquiry is always situated, always in a context, and consequently always much richer than the practitioners of formal logic had imagined. *The Knowing and the Known* (1949), written in collaboration with Arthur F. Bentley, represents Dewey’s attempt to move beyond the models of “self-action” utilized in classical philosophy and the “interactional” models of modern mechanistic physics in order to develop a “transactional” way of thinking that honors the dynamic features of human behavior.

In these and other major works, Dewey developed rich accounts of the relations between the scientific method and the methods of democracy, the transactional relationships between knowing subjects and the objects of their knowledge, and the role of philosophical inquiry in the reconstruction of technological culture.

### Sources and Legacy: Dewey’s Place in American Thought

Dewey assessed what he took to be his relation to fellow pragmatists C. S. Peirce and William James in his 1925 essay “The Development of American Pragmatism.” Peirce’s pragmatic maxim provided him with the insight that the meaning of an idea lies in its conceivable consequences. For Peirce, as for Dewey, action is far from being the end of deliberation; it is instead a phase within the formation of a new general habit of action that is applicable across a wide range of situations. Dewey was also influenced by Peirce’s complex theory of categories. Throughout his published work, but especially after 1925, Dewey utilized and developed what Peirce

