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Reading Dewey

Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation

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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 poststructuralism, 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
had termed “firstness” (presence or quality), “secondness” (force or fact), and “thirdness” (habit or law).

Dewey also owed a debt to the work of William James. James’s 1890 *Principles of Psychology* provided him with a rich sense of the edges and fringes that lie just beyond the focal points of our experience. James’s radical empiricism furnished Dewey with the idea that relations, too, and not just what analysis later reveals as their relata, are objects of experience. James’s insight that there are cognitive dimensions of belief, his incipient instrumentalism, and his notion that evolution is not yet finished—each of these themes was taken up and developed in Dewey’s mature work.

Even before his death in 1952, Dewey’s version of pragmatism began to be eclipsed by new philosophical movements. Captivated by the attempts of the positivists of the Vienna Circle and their allies to purge philosophy of all that they regarded as unscientific, by the ideal language philosophy of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* period and the ordinary language philosophy of his *Investigations* period, and by a growing preoccupation with German and French phenomenology and existentialism, American philosophers began to regard Dewey’s work as old-fashioned and of little relevance.

But by the end of the 1960s this situation began to change. Dewey’s published work, much of it scattered and out of print within just a few years after his death, began to be reissued in a critical edition of thirty-seven volumes, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. His insights began to receive renewed attention by social and political philosophers and philosophers of education. Major interpretative studies of Dewey’s philosophy of culture, his philosophy of art, his metaphysics, his ethics, his logic, his philosophy of religion, and his theories of radical democracy began to appear. Today, Dewey’s work is once again in the forefront of American philosophy. Its contributions to environmental studies, feminist studies, multicultural studies, and even cognitive science are the subject of ongoing investigation by a new generation of philosophers.

Dewey’s Basic Ideas in their Historical Context

*Dewey’s Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*

For Dewey, the aesthetic is one of the basic moments of human experience, and the making of art is one of the most basic ways in which the meanings of human life are enriched. It was on these grounds that he argued that the traditional distinction between the fine and the instrumental arts signals a failure of integration of ends and means, and an impoverishment of experience.

In “The Art of Life: Dewey’s Aesthetics,” Thomas M. Alexander begins with a brief presentation of the historical context of Dewey’s *Art as Experience*. He then discusses its relationship to *Experience and Nature*, which Dewey had published nine years earlier, and its reception by Dewey’s colleagues and critics.

Even though Dewey had written little about art as *such* prior to 1925, when he was already in his sixty-sixth year, it is clear from his remarks in these two volumes that he regarded art as a pivotal aspect of human experience.

When Dewey writes about art, he is writing about the means of overcoming debilitating dualisms—the splits within experience that tend to make it either chaotic, on the one side, or rigid and repetitious, on the other. And just as refined works of art grow organically out of those that are cruder and less developed, our experience of the fine arts comes alive only as it is grounded in concrete, lived experience. Nor must art be unfailingly happy or comforting in order to be “good” art. In a well-chosen series of examples, Alexander demonstrates how the arts have embraced, clarified, and enriched experiences that would otherwise have been enervating or destructive.

Alexander’s essay emphasizes Dewey’s understanding of perception as more aesthetic than epistemic, as more participatory than passive, and as capable of opening humans outward to the full range of possibilities afforded by their environing conditions. It also illuminates the ways in which Dewey thought that aesthetic experience implicates enriched notions of democracy, communication, education, and religious experience.

*Dewey’s Idea of Communication and Community*

Rooted in the ideals of the Progressive Era of American history and the typically American faith in the ability of communication to achieve consensus, Dewey’s vision of community is one in which misunderstanding and even initial intransigence is overcome as parties to conflict come together to recast and reconfigure common problems in ways that lead to novel solutions. “Of all affairs,” writes Dewey in *Experience and Nature*, “communication is the most wonderful . . . Where communication exists,
things in acquiring meaning, thereby acquire representatives, surrogates, signs and implicates.”

In his essay “Dewey’s Conception of Community,” James Campbell explores Dewey’s understanding of the ways in which groups are formed and how they function, how they develop and maintain their values, and how they grow, or deteriorate, as they respond, or fail to respond, to opportunities for their reconstruction.

Campbell reminds us that the social pragmatism developed by Dewey and his colleagues George Herbert Mead and James Hayden Tufts drew on notions of community that had been central to the American experience since the earliest days of European colonization. Internally, communities must exhibit shared interests. Externally, they must interact freely with other modes of association. The work of community building is never easy; it demands a strong commitment to mutual respect and the pooling of experiences.

**Dewey and the Human Sciences**

Dewey’s contribution to the human sciences, particularly social psychology, was deeply influenced by his commitment to evolutionary naturalism. In collaboration with George Herbert Mead, Dewey developed first a functionalist, then a social behaviorist view of the human sciences that substituted “interests” for “desires” and placed heavy emphasis on the role of social and cultural institutions as platforms for continuing adjutative activity. In his mature work, the problems of psychology were absorbed into his accounts of inquiry within the many areas of human endeavor such as art, politics, and law. He argued that psychological phenomena, far from being the sources of social phenomena, were more often their consequences.

In “Dewey and American Social Science,” Peter T. Manicas develops what he terms Dewey’s “scattered views” on the social sciences. Although they are still largely misunderstood and for the most part unappropriated, he suggests, they nevertheless hold considerable promise as tools for reconstituting those disciplines.

Especially in his 1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey roundly rejected positivism and attempted to establish an instrumentalism that would increase our understanding of the continuities within actual social relations. One consequence of this view is that science and commonsense inquiries are, and must be understood as, continuous. Another is that if social scientists are to facilitate the growth of a Great Community, then they will have to get beyond the fragmentations and abstractions that are current features of their disciplines.

**Dewey’s Philosophy of Education**

The clearest statement of Dewey’s philosophy of education is found in his 1897 essay, “My Pedagogic Creed.” In that essay he argued that education involves the development of the learner’s capacities and interests in ways that empower her or him to assume the role of constructive participant in the life of the wider society. Nevertheless, in Dewey’s view schools are communities and not simply sites of preparation for community life. Constructive educational practice begins with “the primitive unconscious unity of social life,” from which it then differentiates the various academic disciplines. Schools are the foremost agents of social progress, and it is the moral duty of a society to provide educators with the tools necessary for this task.

In “Dewey’s Philosophy as Education,” James W. Garrison invites us to consider the ramifications of Dewey’s famous remark that “if we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education.”

As a part of his extended discussion of Dewey’s treatment of dispositions, habits, emotion, and character, Garrison argues that philosophy is education because one of its aims is to develop a holistic vision of human growth. If life is to be meaningful, and if human beings are to increase the store of its meanings, then philosophy as education must foster transactions between organism and environment with a view to establishing continuities.

Garrison argues that the flowering and fruit of philosophy as education is a kind of moral poetics, in which lifelong learning converts what would otherwise be disconnected and discordant into experience that is refined and harmonious.

**Dewey’s Social and Political Philosophy**

Dewey’s extensive writings on social and political issues present his attempts to rethink and recast traditional notions of individual and society, public and private, liberalism and conservatism, and above all, democ-
Democracy is, in his view, not so much a form of government as it is a process—a body of tools and methods for undertaking the ongoing reconstruction of social life. “Democracy,” he wrote in 1939, “is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness.”

In “Dewey’s Social and Political Philosophy,” John J. Stuhr reminds us of Dewey’s observation that there are no global social or political theories that are adequate for all times and places. If we are to avoid the academic sin of “chewing a historic cud long since reduced to woody fibre,” then we must work in the practical arena to bring about positive change. Such efforts must remain cognizant of actual cultural forces and changes, and they must be prepared to persist over the long haul. Faith in democracy is radical, since it works toward ends that have never yet been realized in any nation or society.

Do Dewey’s recommendations in the areas of social and political philosophy have a future? Stuhr admits that he does not know. The answer, he suggests, depends on the extent to which we decide to work together to establish and realize common goals, to cast aside old ways of thinking and imagine new alternatives, and to face the future with fresh energy.

Dewey’s Ethics

Dewey’s work in ethics is the flower of both his aesthetic theory and his theory of inquiry. In its aesthetic dimension, ethics grows out of the affective moments of human life. Feeling, and feeling with, are the sources of both the felt pleasures of harmonious living and the disruptions and displacements that occasion inquiry. For its part, inquiry in ethics involves the evaluation and resolution of the conflicting claims of experienced values. Dewey rejected traditional notions of fixed duties and rights, and he thought that the moral atomism of some of his predecessors had led to disastrous social practice.

In “Dewey’s Ethics: Morality as Experience,” Gregory F. Pappas presents Dewey’s attempt to carve out a middle position between what he regarded as two equally extreme views of ethics. At one extreme there are those who regard morality as the application of eternal verities. According to this “rulebook” view, advocated by deontologists and some “virtue” ethicists, ethical norms exist prior to experience and are imposed upon it. At the other extreme are the extreme relativists and subjectivists who think that ethical norms are more or less arbitrary. Rejecting both views, Pappas reminds us, Dewey called for an ethics that placed the center of moral gravity within the concrete processes of living, rather than within an ivory tower.

Dewey’s Philosophy of Religion

Early in his career, Dewey withdrew from participation in organized religion. Nevertheless, his work retains a deep sense of the importance of ideals within human life and of the energies and enthusiasms that men and women marshal in order to realize their profoundest commitments. During the years surrounding the publication of A Common Faith in 1934, Dewey joined in extensive discussions with theologians and philosophers of religion regarding the extent to which a religious humanism was possible.

In “Dewey’s Philosophy of Religious Experience,” Steven C. Rockefeller draws our attention to the tortuous path taken by the evolution of Dewey’s own religious experience. His childhood, influenced by his mother’s sharp sense of sin and alienation, had left the adolescent Dewey with what he would later call an “inner laceration.” But his undergraduate study of science and philosophy convinced Dewey that the ruptures between soul and body, and especially between religion and science, could be healed. During his twenties and thirties Dewey turned to the palliatives offered by neo-Hegelian idealism. But finally, in the years that followed his move to Chicago in 1894, he began to develop his own naturalistic understanding of religious experience.

Rockefeller reminds us that Dewey was attacked by religionists of the right for his alleged atheism and relativism, and of the left for his alleged failure to take evil seriously. But in the end, he suggests, the type of faith that Dewey recommended may turn out to offer precisely the resources that will be required if human life on earth is to have a future.

Dewey’s Metaphysics

In 1925 Dewey described metaphysics as a “statement of the generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds without regard to their differentiation into physical and mental.” To this he added that “Any theory that detects and defines these traits is therefore but a ground-map of the province of criticism, establishing base lines to be employed in more intricate triangulations.” There has been considerable debate regarding whether
Dewey intended his own ground-map to be a metaphysics of existence, which would have been yet another contribution to the ontological metaphysics of the western tradition, or a metaphysics of experience, which would have effected a radical departure from the tradition.

In "Dewey's Metaphysics: Ground-Map of the Prototypically Real," Raymond D. Boisvert draws extensively on this second metaphor of metaphysics as "ground-map of the province of criticism." He argues that this conceptual link between maps and metaphysics has a threefold pertinence: first, both types of description are constructed; second, neither rests on any ultimate foundation; and third, both are open to revision.

In this matter, as elsewhere, Dewey attempted to chart a course between extremes. He rejected the claims of those such as Descartes and Kant who had accepted metaphysics as the study of "supersensible reality." But he was also critical of the claims of positivists such as A. J. Ayer that metaphysics as the study of "supersensible reality." But he was also critical of the claims of positivists such as A. J. Ayer that metaphysics is "impossible" or "meaningless."

In a further development of Dewey's leading metaphor, Boisvert suggests that Dewey's metaphysics should be thought of not as one map, but as many—as a kind of atlas which gains plausibility as it becomes thicker.

**Dewey's Theory of Inquiry**

Dewey defined inquiry as "the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole." He thought this idea of sufficient importance that he advanced it on several different levels. In his presentations to teachers, he laid out a five-stage process of deliberation that moves from the vague awareness that something is unsettled to the consummatory moment in which a warranted conclusion is reached. His logics of 1903, 1916, and 1938 represent a fuller and more technical treatment of these matters. In his Logic: The Theory of Inquiry (1938), for example, Dewey turned several elements of traditional logic on their head, arguing for example that logical forms accrue to subject matter in inquiry and are not imposed upon it. In the face of the formal logics of his time and ours, Dewey's contention is that inquiry is always situated and contextual, and that it is undertaken in response to actual perceived problems.

In "Dewey's Theory of Inquiry," Larry A. Hickman presents Dewey's logic in terms of some of its central, and most controversial, features. Unlike much of contemporary epistemology, for example, Dewey argued that judgments cannot be separated from the contexts in which actual inquiry takes place. He also identified inquiry as a form of organic behavior and argued that it is instrumental to what he called "warranted assertibility," which was his reconstruction of the much used (and abused) term "truth."

One of Dewey's most controversial claims was that forms accrue to subject matter in inquiry and are not imposed on it from without. In holding this position he broke with over two thousand years of tradition. Dewey's treatment of judgments and propositions also breaks new ground. He denied, for example, that propositions have truth values. He preferred instead to characterize them as valid or invalid, which was his way of assessing whether they are effective, strong, and relevant with respect to the advancement of inquiry. Finally, coming full circle, Dewey argued that inquiry is essentially social. It promotes cooperation among reflective organisms because it allows them to rehearse actions before making irrevocable commitments.

**Dewey's Feminism**

Dewey was an early feminist who supported university co-education for women, the dissemination of information about methods of birth control, and women's suffrage at a time when those issues were still the source of considerable strife. Dewey's views were no doubt informed by his wife, Alice Chipman Dewey, and by Jane Addams, with whom he had a close personal and professional relationship. Dewey thought that gender issues were central to enhanced understanding of self and society. His feminism is thus a part of his wider commitment to the enlargement of human community by means of the development of shared meanings and the undertaking of joint social action. For Dewey, the work of social reconstruction requires that every member of society, male and female alike, should experience the liberation of her or his capacities for enhanced appreciation and growth.

In her essay "John Dewey's Pragmatist Feminism," Charlene Haddock Seigfried argues that pragmatist theory itself provides strong resources for feminist thinking since it is committed to pluralism and perspectivism, it understands experience as dynamic, and it rejects representational realism. As a result of its deployment of these resources, pragmatism has been able simply to ignore some of the issues that have preoccupied academics and
to turn its attention instead to the problems of those, such as women and people of color, who bear the brunt of adverse social and economic conditions.

Seigfried thinks that pragmatism's claim that theory must be intimately related to experience and its insistence that inquiry have a central place within experience were particularly attractive to the first generations of feminists since of all its many features these are the ones that tend most to undermine established power relations. In all this Seigfried demonstrates the relevance of Dewey's thought for some of the most persistent conflicts of our time.

Dewey's Response to Modern Philosophy

Dewey's response to the theories of knowledge advanced during the modern period of philosophy, from Descartes to Nietzsche, was to undercut their assumptions and to propose radical alternatives to their stated projects. As a part of his assault on the modernist "quest for certainty," Dewey criticized attempts to provide a firm foundation for knowledge based on the priority of the thinking self (Descartes), directly experienced impressions (the Empiricists), and the individual transcendental ego (Kant). In Dewey's view, experience does not constitute an epistemological problem to be explained from an external standpoint. Dewey also criticized the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment rationality that was mounted by Hegel and his followers. He contended that its lack of concreteness had vitiated its underlying project. The weakness of both movements, he argued, was their failure to recognize that human experience is the situated awareness within which feeling occurs and within which problems are felt, articulated, and resolved. Characteristically, however, Dewey took up and advanced what he regarded as the best and most enduring elements of both Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers.

The final pair of essays in this volume locate Dewey with respect to the modernist tradition, which began with Newton and Locke, and the "Continental" tradition, which owes much of its authority to the work of Husserl and Heidegger.

In her essay "The Contemporary Significance of the American Philosophic Tradition: Lockean and Redemptive," Thelma Z. Lavine locates Dewey squarely at the intersection of two competing philosophical frameworks, each of which sought to dominate the course of modernity. What she terms "Enlightenment Modernity" was preoccupied with eternal truths discoverable by reason and universally applicable. "Romantic Modernity," on the other hand, countered the claims of universal reason with its own claims on behalf of particularity and creativity.

Lavine argues that it was Dewey, uniquely among American philosophers, who understood the competing claims of these movements, and who attempted to take into account what was best in each.

Dewey in Dialogue with Continental Philosophy

Dewey's rejection of many of the central assumptions and aims of modern philosophy places him in dialogue with Continental philosophers from Husserl and Heidegger to Derrida. Like Heidegger, he thought that experience is always situated and inevitably caught up within the presuppositions of a particular life-world. But Dewey could accept neither Heidegger's privileging of poetry over the other forms of techne, his deep pessimism regarding technology, nor his now famous flight, evident in his later work, into the mysteries of "Being."

In his imaginative essay "Dewey in Dialogue with Continental Philosophy," Joseph Margolis sheds a great deal of light on these complex issues. He does this first by drawing our attention to Richard Rorty's seminal 1974 essay "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey," which he thinks fails to capture the essential differences between Dewey and Heidegger.

Margolis thinks that the path to understanding the most trenchant differences between Dewey and Heidegger leads through an appreciation of the work of Merleau-Ponty. This is to say that Dewey asserts a continuity between the natural and the phenomenological in a way that Heidegger never did, but which was an essential part of Merleau-Ponty's effort to come to terms with Husserl.

In the long run, Margolis submits, the most promising prospects for dealing with big problems of philosophy will come from the convergence of pragmatic and phenomenological approaches since they undercut skepticism, reject all forms of cognitive privilege, and freely admit the historical context of inquiry.