

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEWEY FOR PHILOSOPHY (AND FOR MUCH ELSE BESIDES)¹

I

From the 1920s until his death in 1952, John Dewey was more influential than any American philosopher has been, either before or since. For the last half century, however, Dewey's major works, once read and studied by philosophers and the broader public alike, have had relatively little impact on American philosophy or on American intellectual culture. Although he has had prominent champions, Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam among them, Dewey is absent from the curricula of most American universities and colleges, and, even when he appears, it is often as an inert fragment of intellectual history, as the expression of attitudes that belong to different times and that have no serious implications for the present.

To see how far Dewey is from the fashions of contemporary philosophy, it is only necessary to consider the account of the subject that he offers in *Democracy and Education*.

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*.²

Most of the Anglophone philosophers whose writings are currently influential would find this characterization absurd. Applied philosophy is all very well (although philosophy of education ranks as a very low-budget application) but professionals know where the center of the discipline lies: in logic, metaphysics, epistemology,

¹ Previous versions of this essay were read at the University of Vermont (as the 2008 John Dewey Lecture), at the celebration of Dewey's 150th birthday at the Center for Inquiry, at a symposium honoring his sesquicentennial at the 2009 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, and at Vanderbilt University. I am grateful to the audiences on these various occasions for their questions and comments. Particular thanks are due to Larry Hickman for his thoughtful commentary at the APA symposium. I greatly appreciate the patience shown by Larry and by Michael Eldridge in welcoming a newcomer in an area of philosophy they have been exploring for many years.

² *Democracy and Education* (Middle Works Volume 9) 338.

philosophy of language and philosophy of mind – the “core areas” as they are usually known.

Dewey wanted to redirect philosophy, to bring it back into contact with the concerns from which he believed it had originally sprung.³ In the sentence that follows his account of philosophy as the general theory of education, he offers a contrast with rival visions:

Unless a philosophy is to remain symbolic – or verbal – or a sentimental indulgence for a few, or else mere arbitrary dogma, its auditing of past experience and its program of values must take effect in conduct.⁴

The thought that philosophy should be confined to the few is anathema to Dewey, and he recognizes the danger that it may do so. In the paragraph that precedes the definition, he has drawn attention to the pressures that create a gap between philosophy and the broader culture.

The fact that philosophical problems arise because of widespread and widely felt difficulties in social practice is disguised because philosophers become a specialized class which uses a technical language, unlike the vocabulary in which the direct difficulties are stated.⁵

Using technical formulations is dangerous, because continued usage of the esoteric language may incline philosophy to concentrate on the allegedly timeless problems bequeathed by tradition, without returning to the genuine source of philosophical reflection, the social difficulties that arise in different forms in different times and places, thus making the professional practice divorced from and irrelevant to the wider culture. A Deweyan survey of contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy, particularly focused on those fields that professionals advertise as the “core areas”, would give ample reason to think that the danger has not exactly been avoided. Dewey was no clairvoyant, and was thus unable to foresee the scholasticism that prevails in much contemporary metaphysics, epistemology, and theory of language and mind, but he saw the same defects in earlier schools of philosophizing, including those that flourished in Britain and America during the early decades of his life. His call for “Reconstruction in Philosophy” was based on precisely that awareness.

³ This concern is articulated at length in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Middle Works Volume 12). But it is already present early in Dewey’s career: see “The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge” (*Early Works* Volume 5 4-24) especially 5, 20-24.

⁴ *Democracy and Education* (Middle Works Volume 9) 338.

⁵ *Ibid.*

II

To understand more clearly what Dewey wanted from a reform of philosophy, and why he thought of it as regeneration rather than abandonment of the enterprise in favor of something else, it helps to begin with an important formulation of related ideas that occurs in the work of his great fellow-pragmatist, William James. In one of the most memorable passages in *Pragmatism*, James re-states the principle he ascribes to Charles Sanders Peirce:

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere – no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.⁶

Unsympathetic readers of this passage, especially those in the grip of the thought that philosophy is centrally focused on issues about the meaning of words or the content of thoughts, interpret James as advocating a verificationist approach to meaning – a Very Bad Answer to the Central Question in Philosophy. With some strain, that construction might be imposed on the middle sentence of the paragraph. The flanking sentences make it patent, however, that James is concerned not with “cognitive significance” (or linguistic meaning) but with the *importance* of questions and of answering those questions. Moreover, the questions he has in mind are philosophical questions. Reflecting on the practice of philosophers, he wants to know why anyone should be interested in knowing the answers to the questions they labor to address. The standard for importance is psychological – the answer to an important question changes the psychological lives of those who receive it, freeing them from difficulties they had been confronting. Furthermore, James has a very particular question in mind, for he supposes that philosophy is the search for a “world-formula”, and its importance lies in the fact that each of us needs to find the true one.

This apparently mysterious language becomes far less puzzling once we attend to central themes in James' early writings. A concern with the function of philosophy already occupied James in the 1870s, when he wrote an early version of “The Sentiment

⁶ *Pragmatism (Writings 1902-1910)* 508.

of Rationality". At the core of that essay, and prominent in other lectures and writings – "Is Life Worth Living?", "The Will to Believe", *The Varieties of Religious Experience* – is the proposal that philosophy should make sense of "that somewhat chaotic view which everyone by nature carries about with him under his hat".⁷ James' elaboration of the task leaves no doubt about the stimulus that drove him. He yearns for a reconciliation of the scientific picture of the world, synthesized from the physics of Newton and Maxwell, the evolutionary biology of Darwin, and his own and kindred ventures in human psychology, with some sense of purpose in nature, some way of giving point to the whole and a direction to human existence. Achieving that reconciliation is, for James, *the* philosophical project, one that he pursues with remarkable intensity and considerable integrity. A satisfactory world-formula would acquiesce in the scientific facts without blinking, and yet offer James, and his contemporaries who often felt similar anxieties, a sense of the importance and purposiveness of human life.

Dewey agrees with, and takes over, some of this. He shares with James the central thought that philosophical questions need to be assessed for their significance, and that the assessment turns on the differences that are made to human lives. Unlike James, however, he does not take there to be a single vast philosophical problem, centered on something like the reconciliation of natural science and religion – as we shall see, that will turn out to be one issue for him, but it has neither a monopoly nor any special priority. James might be correct to declare, vaguely, that philosophers ought to make sense of the natural and chaotic views we carry under our hats, but the character of these views and the difficulties they pose for us are not historically invariant. Indeed, Dewey would surely diagnose the specific question that so occupies James, as arising in a very particular historical context, one that has absorbed the new physics and the new biology, one that has turned a scientific critical apparatus on religion, and one in which anthropological inquiries are revealing the diversity of the beliefs about the transcendent that guide the lives of diverse groups of people.

The thought that philosophical problems evolve is evident in Dewey's writings. Chapter III of *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, for example, traces the way in which the generic Jamesian task of "responding to the difficulties life presents"⁸ assumes different forms, as we learn more about the natural world. From the very first pages of *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey insists that the impetus to philosophy was present in all human contexts, from the natural and social environments of our Paleolithic ancestors, through the variant forms of society we know from history and anthropology, to the

⁷ "The Sentiment of Rationality" (*Writings 1878-99* 504)

⁸ *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (*Middle Works* Volume 12)

circumstances of the present. His central task is to recognize the appropriate questions that arise for his contemporaries.

The problem of restoring integration and cooperation between man's beliefs about the world in which he lives and the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life. It is the problem of any philosophy that is not isolated from that life.⁹

Dewey rejects, however, the Jamesian simplification that reduces the problem to reconciling a monolithic entity, Science, with another monolithic entity, Religion. His closing pages emphasize the partial, fragmentary and unsystematic character of all our knowledge. We have, he suggests, specific problems that arise from the conditions of modern life, problems of individual conduct and of social organization.

Man has never had such a varied body of knowledge in his possession before, and probably never before has he been so uncertain and so perplexed as to what his knowledge means, what it points to in action and in consequences.¹⁰

Within the general project of systematizing the incomplete and disorganized picture of the world that our various fields of inquiry deliver, there are specific issues, urgent questions for people today, that arise concerning what should be valued and what purposes should be pursued. These questions emerge from the actual conditions of democracy, from the fragmentation of large societies, from the inequalities and conflicts that divide people. In some cases, they may be questions that reformulate some problem framed by earlier philosophers in a very different social-historical context; others may be new, beyond the conceptual horizons bounding previous philosophical thought. Genuine philosophy, philosophy that is not "isolated from life", must start from framing and reformulating its questions, taking seriously, from the beginning, James' criterion of significance.

If this is to be more than a vague gesture at reform, two tasks require attention. First, more needs to be said about what makes questions significant, or, in Dewey's version, what enables philosophy to be connected with life. Second, Dewey's readers can reasonably demand some concrete details about how new, or modified, philosophical questions emerge from the circumstances of contemporary life. As I shall argue shortly, Dewey offered us a series of major books, once widely and enthusiastically read, that amply satisfy the latter demand. On the other hand, he did not do much to articulate the general pragmatist thought that "philosophy should make

⁹ *The Quest for Certainty (Later Works Volume 4)* 204.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* 249.

a difference". So, before trying to reconstruct the Deweyan agenda, I shall attempt to make good the lack.

III

James' criterion – that answering a philosophical question makes a psychological difference to someone, somewhere and someone – looks toothless. For consider the scholastic questioners of any age, those who ask after the number of angels that can dance on a pinhead or wonder if evidence someone does not possess can undermine the person's knowledge. Arriving at answers plainly does make a psychological difference to the medieval disputant or to the contemporary epistemologist: these people gain psychological relief, feel satisfied, elated, disappointed. Nor will it help to add, in a Deweyan vein, that the psychological change must find expression in conduct, for, equipped with their answer, the inquirers now do different things. Moving on to new scholastic questions, perhaps about the form of the dance the angels perform or the accessibility of the evidence that subverts, they read different texts, take different notes, and hold different animated conversations from those they would otherwise have engaged in. The Jamesian slogan sounds good, but it is universally tolerant.

It is not hard to recognize what James and Dewey hope to rule out. They conceive of certain intellectual trends as fossilized and sterile, of the people who are dedicated to continuing these trends as benighted, and of the psychological changes brought about by their fruitless inquiries as not really counting – these alterations don't make a genuine difference. To state their intent so baldly only exposes the fact that general talk of psychological change or change that affects conduct is inadequate as a criterion of genuine difference-making. Some extra account is required.

What could that account be? One possibility is to make pragmatism definite by insisting on enhanced abilities to intervene in nature. The trouble with answers to questions about dancing angels or undermining evidence is that they don't issue in increased powers to cope with our environment.¹¹ Recalling the familiar pragmatist metaphor of "cash value", one might require that the answer to a significant question must effect psychological changes in those who adopt it, in such a way as to enable them to act in profitable ways. To pursue this line would call for some elucidation of what exactly counts as an intervention in nature, and what makes interventions profitable, but, whether or not the necessary explanations are forthcoming, there is an

¹¹ In conversation, Hilary Putnam suggested to me that the trouble with the question about the dancing angels is that there are no angels. That may be a trouble, but it isn't the only one. Even if there were angels, the question would still be idle.

important objection to so bluntly practical a criterion. Any global disregard for questions of clarification whose resolution yields no new possibilities of action seems crude and Philistine, a negation of philosophy rather than a reconstruction of it. Neither James nor Dewey, as I read them, ever doubted that issues of clarification are important for their own sakes, for both recognized that there are forms of inquiry whose aims are purely explanatory. Simply understanding aspects of nature, for example the starry heavens above us or the passions that work within, is sometimes significant. The demand that clarification always issue in enhanced facilities of intervention cuts away questions that ought to be retained.

Dewey's emphasis on the partial, incomplete, and selective character of human knowledge supplies a clue to a better elaboration of the desired criterion. We shall never, he contends, arrive at the complete truth about the world, for that is, if not incoherent, at least radically unattainable. The image of some final theory that might yield all the truths about nature is unreal, simply because the set of such truths is too vast to be captured in anything we could appreciate as a system. Even for this room, during the period in which we sit here, there is some large non-denumerable infinity of possible languages, in each of which there are infinitely many truths about what goes on – truths about momentary temperature fluctuations, about spatial relations among various constituent parts, and so on and on and on. Human beings pursue inquiry profitably by selecting issues that matter to them, by considering certain types of order that they can find, or sometimes create, in their natural and social environments – pockets of order like Newtonian or Mendelian systems.¹² Success accrues not by discovering all the truths, but by answering the questions that matter.

To say this is simply to present in a more general frame the point that James and Dewey make about philosophy and philosophical significance. The generalization makes apparent the fact that decisions about the significance of questions arise for all kinds of inquiry, and opens up the possibility of addressing the special case of philosophy as an instance of a more global phenomenon. Philosophy is one field of inquiry among many, part of a constellation that extends from art history through zoology. Human resources, as well as human abilities are finite, and inquiry must be selective. How then should we apportion time, energy, and talent among various types of inquiry, and within the diverse areas, what questions ought to command attention?

My formulation slides over a crucial point in its casual invocation of the first person plural – who are “we” for whom particular issues matter and who make

¹² Here, Dewey's conception is close to the ideas presented by Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

decisions about directions for inquiry? The “we” that directs inquiry is a fiction, since the selective course of investigation, broadly conceived, results from an uncoordinated play of individual interests and aspirations, constrained to some extent by the variant wants of broader groups (national “wars on cancer” and the like). The “we” for whom some questions matter, on the other hand, is a serious topic for identification, and Dewey, staunch democrat that he is, has an obvious proposal: the inquiries to be pursued are those that affect all members of the human species. The specialists who undertake inquiry, he tells us, represent all of us:

... these persons represent a social division of labor; and their specialization can be trusted only when such persons are in unobstructed cooperation with other social occupations, sensitive to others’ problems and transmitting results to them for wider application in action.¹³

He is acutely aware that the tacit contract that links the work of inquiry to the broad needs of people can be broken. In a passage that parallels the concerns about philosophical isolation I have already cited, he writes:

[Inquiry] degenerates into sterile specialization, a kind of intellectual busy work carried on by socially absent-minded men. Details are heaped up in the name of science, and abstruse dialectical developments of systems occur. Then the occupation is “rationalized” under the lofty name of devotion to truth for its own sake.¹⁴ (RIP 147)

Dewey’s account of philosophical significance is embedded with a standard for well-ordered inquiry, one that is thoroughly democratic and egalitarian.

I elaborate that standard as follows.¹⁵ Well-ordered inquiry would pursue just those lines of investigation, to the extent and in proportion to their evaluation as significant by a group of deliberators representing all human circumstances and points of view, all thoroughly informed as to the existing state of human knowledge and to the foreseeable prospects for developing it further, and all fully committed to mutual engagement with one another. The conditions that figure in this account are intended to rule out the various ways in which, from a thoroughly democratic point of view, inquiry can go astray. Most evidently, as Dewey recognizes so clearly, investigations

¹³ *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Middle Works Volume 12) 164.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The account given in what follows condenses some ideas I develop at greater length in Chapter 10 of *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2001). For further explanation and defense, see *Science in a Democratic Society* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2011).

can give priority to the wishes or to the whimsical interests of the few, at cost to the many: bio-medical research can focus, as it so strikingly has in recent decades, on projects that might enhance the lives of an affluent minority, while leaving the life-threatening and incapacitating diseases that afflict vast numbers of poor people, most especially children, radically understudied; more abstract disciplines, like philosophy, can pursue issues that fascinate specialists, while paying scant attention to questions that touch on the lives of many people. To demand that all human circumstances and points of view be represented is a first step towards avoiding this predicament. Genuine democracy, however, cannot be content with an expression of the raw wishes of all individuals, uninformed about the actual state of human inquiry and about how it might be developed. For you to make a decision about how inquiry would promote your interests, you need not only the ability to convey your own perspective, to report on the things about which you are the best expert, your own needs and aspirations, but also an understanding of the ways in which your goals could be promoted, given what is already known and what might now be probed and pursued. Democracy thrives on the combination of expertise, in which the individual's own intimate knowledge of context and preference is shaped by the collective corpus of knowledge. Hence, well-ordered inquiry insists that the research agenda be that chosen by well-informed representatives of all points of view. The final condition is needed, to overcome a familiar obstacle of actual deliberations, partial insistence on individual points of view, even when it is clear that they bring problematic consequences for others. By requiring that the deliberators be mutually engaged, the constraints on well-ordered inquiry insist that no group's interests can be sacrificed. The three conditions can be viewed as combating three forms of tyranny: the tyranny of wealth and power, the tyranny of ignorance, and the tyranny of the majority.

Much more could be said about the ideal of well-ordered inquiry that I favor – and that seems implicit in Dewey's own writings.¹⁶ I hope, however, that the picture is clear enough to allow for further elaboration of the Jamesian account of significance. The apparent laxity of that account is corrected, not by declaring that certain kinds of psychological changes, those felt by contented scholastics, past or present, who arrive at answers to their own esoteric questions, are counted as not mattering because they have no expression in practical intervention, but rather by arguing that these kinds of

¹⁶ One important issue, raised by Hilary Putnam, is how the ideal of well-ordered inquiry permits research into pure mathematics. My (brief) answer is that mathematical developments in the Renaissance and early modern period, particularly the introduction of the languages of algebra and the calculus, justifiably convinced inquirers of the wisdom of allowing mathematicians to play the sorts of games that interest them, with the expectation that some of the linguistic manipulations they devise can prove useful for investigations of the natural world. That answer is developed at greater length in "Mathematical Truth?" (Chapter 7 below).

changes could not be seen as making a genuine difference by the standards of well-ordered inquiry. We can imagine the dialectic between the scholastic and his pragmatist opponent. At the first stage, the pragmatist challenges the scholastic to show how answers to the questions he pursues would make a difference. In response, the scholastic maintains that these answers provide important clarifications, delivering cognitive benefits which, although not evidently yielding increased powers of intervention in nature, are to be valued for their own sake – Dewey’s “lofty devotion to truth”. Appealing to the standard of well-ordered inquiry, the pragmatist now asks whether this style of clarification can take priority over other investigations that might matter to people: does the current lack of clarity make itself felt in the lives of non-specialists, does it interfere with projects that might address issues of concern to many? Here, pragmatism acknowledges that pursuit of technical problems, even problems not readily understood by the vast majority of human beings, can be of enormous value. For solving those problems might advance the enterprise of tackling broader issues, eventually leading to results that would be welcomed by all. Well-ordered inquiry endorses the associated projects, precisely because ideal deliberators would be able to appreciate these facts, and would, in consequence, support the investigations.

The James-Dewey criterion of significance thus presents a *challenge* to lines of inquiry, not a simple knock-down argument against anything the vulgar find irrelevant or impractical. It is eminently possible that abstract philosophical questions, even those that carry a whiff of scholasticism about them, might meet the challenge and find pragmatic endorsement. Problems about the character of human perception, highlighted by classical forms of philosophical skepticism, or issues about the general conditions under which individuals can know, might be shown to underlie unclarities that permeate large areas of inquiry. If that is the case, then it is valuable to recognize just why it is so, valuable to see how the pragmatist challenge is met. James and Dewey expect that healthy forms of inquiry, including healthy forms of philosophy, will be alert to the possibility that traditional problems, and the derivative questions they generate, may no longer be in accord with the standards of well-ordered inquiry, and that practitioners will pose the challenge for themselves and their colleagues.

There is, of course, no easy algorithm for testing extant or proposed lines of research against the standards of well-ordered inquiry. Often, it will be hard to decide how an ideally-informed and mutually-engaged discussion among a fully representative sample of human beings would set priorities. Not always, however. In the bio-medical case, for example, even though we may not know the details, we can be confident that no ideal discussion would vindicate the profoundly skewed research agenda that has dominated research. Similarly, in fields whose technical “literature” is read only by a small minority of specialists, whose “progress” is marked by no accumulation of results that supports wider inquiries, whose track record shows no

significant reshaping of other forms of investigation, there are grounds for suspicion that the pragmatist challenge cannot be met. Pragmatists from Peirce on have taught us that particular doubt, not global skepticism, should be the spur to inquiry, that we should only scratch where it itches. That maxim can be honored by focusing the challenge on those disciplines where we find cause for suspicion – fields so detached from the broader culture, that their “contributions” fade without leaving a trace.

Professional Anglophone philosophy, both in Dewey’s time and in ours, has the marks that invite the challenge. That is not yet to condemn it, for further argument might reveal that the challenge can be met. I shall postpone until the very end any further consideration of this point. Serious attention to the state of any branch of inquiry is aided by recognizing alternative versions of its future – and so we return to the second topic I promised above, namely Dewey’s proposals about how philosophical problems grow out of the conditions of human life.

IV

Dewey’s positive vision of philosophy can be illustrated by a number of detailed examples, of which I shall choose three. The first of these centers on ethics, and is elaborated in *Human Nature and Conduct*, as well as in the textbook, *Ethics*, he co-authored with James Tufts (Dewey being responsible for the long middle section). His reflections on ethics start, not with some proposed system of ethical truths, nor with problems about the meaning of ethical statements or about our knowledge of ethical principles, but with the moral life as it is lived by his contemporaries. Central to his approach is the denial that there is some complete system of ethical truth that would, if only we knew it, supply answers to all questions about what we should do or be. He writes:

... rigid moral codes that attempt to lay down definite injunctions and prohibitions for every occasion in life turn out in fact loose and slack. Stretch ten commandments or any other number as far as you will by ingenious exegesis, yet acts unprovided for by them will occur. No elaboration of statute law can forestall variant cases and the need of interpretation *ad hoc*.¹⁷

We are offered a hypothesis about the moral life as we experience it, a claim that all of us constantly find the collection of ethical resources, supplied by our communities, by religious teachers or philosophical system-builders, to leave us with ethical work to do. We are also offered an analogy: ethics is akin to law; it has a history and evolves over

¹⁷ *Human Nature and Conduct*.

time; moreover, it is never finished, and there is always further work to be done. There are a number of important points in this approach – first, the emphasis on ethical practice and not on the objective values (laws, reasons) it is often assumed to embody; second, the rejection of any ideal set of ethical axioms, to be specified by the ingenious philosopher, and to be supplied with a complete justification; third, the conception of human life as embedded in an ethical practice inherited from earlier generations and extended in the individual's lifetime. The challenge for each of us is to make appropriate use of what we have received, and to do what we can to refine and improve it: "The best we can accomplish for posterity is to transmit unimpaired and with some increment of meaning the environment that makes it possible to maintain the habits of decent and refined life."¹⁸

The term 'habit' here is crucial. Dewey recognizes the size of the class of actions we perform daily, understanding that it would be impossible for us constantly to be deliberating about what should be done. Born into ethical practices, we are trained to respond to recurring situations in particular ways. The habits we acquire, some of them common to all members of our society, others arising from various roles and institutions that the society specifies, give rise to patterns of conduct, and it is frequently apt that people produce these patterns without thinking. In a constantly changing world, however, individuals may find their smooth habitual performances disrupted; they feel the pressure of contrary dispositions. This can occur because of unusual contingencies: travelers on their various missions encounter a suffering stranger at the roadside. Or it can arise out of unprecedented opportunities, as when new forms of technology expand our possibilities. An ability to communicate with distant people, and to affect their well-being, may create new potential analogs of the suffering stranger at the roadside. Learning that faraway people are in want, we can no longer continue our old routines under the more-or-less regretful assurance that there is nothing that we can do to help them. Similarly, when biomedical advances make it possible to test before birth or to use parts of early embryos to explore ways of relieving disease and disability, old habits of conduct clash, and there is ethical work to be done.

From Dewey's perspective, classical treatments of ethics, whether supplied by philosophers or religious teachers, tend to two dangerous oversimplifications. They take for granted the existence of an ideal ethical system, to be fathomed by the aspiring ethicist, in light of which all conduct could be finally appraised. They also simplify the psychology of the agent, inventing some special "moral point of view", to which we

¹⁸ *Human Nature and Conduct*.

should all aspire. Dewey wants us to reject both fictions, in favor of understanding both the incompleteness of ethical practice and the hodgepodge of considerations that figure in ethical life. Instead of supposing that Reason (whatever that is) should overwhelm sentiment and habit, or that Moral Sentiments are the ultimate authority in conduct, or (to manufacture an implausible position) that proper moral agents are creatures of the Habits they have been taught, Dewey supposes that there are serious ethical questions, for each generation, about the kinds of sentiments that should be developed, the circumstances under which they should be given priority, the forms of reasoning that should be employed and the occasions on which they are appropriate, and the domain under which habit is the appropriate guide to what is done.

I shall illustrate his perspective with a serious example, and a claim that many philosophers find absurd. Giorgio Agamben is only one of several European thinkers who have suggested that Auschwitz is a test of all prior systems of ethics. The quick and obvious response is to declare that the validity of ethical maxims cannot be tested in any such way: the horrors of the holocaust and the death camps merely reveal the inabilities of those who administered the machinery of annihilation to appreciate those maxims. So blunt an answer is inadequate. For, in the first place, the compromises made by the inmates of the camps, those who inhabited what Primo Levi calls "the grey zone", demand an extension of ideal ethical theory to accommodate levels of allowing for external pressures and human frailties. Second, and more significantly, even the most superficial acquaintance with the letters and diaries of those most centrally implicated in the daily work of human annihilation makes it evident that these people firmly believed the maxims that have been central to the major ethical traditions. The problem came in their application of those maxims, and its source lay in the categories and classifications they used. There is no field of human inquiry or practice, neither in ethics nor in any of the sciences, in which principles wear their applications on their faces. The ways in which the world is seen and described are crucial for proper responses to it, and an ethical system, broadly construed as a means of assessing, directing and reforming human action, is deficient to the extent that it allows for forms of blindness that subvert performance – the blindness so evident in the pious *KZ-Arbeiter* who could write to their families about their love of their neighbors and their derivative duty to free humanity from the pestilence caused by vermin. Previous ethical systems were tested by the atrocities of the twentieth century because they allowed for certain dreadful forms of blindness.

From a Deweyan perspective, some sorts of failure are inevitable, since an ideal language that would block all potential misapplications of ethical resources is a fantasy. The challenge for philosophy is to understand the character of ethical practice, in the psychology of the ethical agent, the social training that begins an individual's ethical life, and the history of the various ethical traditions that survive today. Based on that

kind of analytic understanding, one can undertake a version of the task that traditional philosophy has begun with: a search for precepts and methods of resolving ethical debate. Yet because there is no ideal system, no ideal language, no ideal method, to be found, the quest must be for ethical resources that are pertinent to our context, relevant to the failures of ethical practice we can recognize in the past and the difficulties and disputes that confront us now. Specifically, one part of this is a matter of stabilizing and extending what an analytical account of ethical practice reveals as the achievements of our predecessors: learning from the lessons of the twentieth century, and seeking ways of making the value of human lives more vivid and more secure; working to discover proper ways of using the new opportunities technology has made available.

Beyond that, however, is a more ambitious task. The habits we acquire in our socialization are often embedded in institutions and roles that have a long and intricate history. Some current occasions of ethical difficulty result from the conflict of entrenched habits, and cannot be resolved without a serious analysis and reform of our social life. Ethical dilemmas may derive from conflicting maxims that presuppose social institutions – as, for example, some of the commandments presuppose institutions of private property and of marriage. As I read him, Dewey envisages the possibility both of genealogical reconstruction, that exposes the multi-layered purposes roles and institutions are supposed to achieve, and of experimental efforts to make those institutions more adequate to current human needs. In the first part of this, he shows an unexpected kinship with apparently more radical thinkers – with Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault. In seeing genealogy as the prelude to experimentation, however, Dewey stakes out a unique position, one that regards philosophy not as the disclosure of the One True Path, a path that history has previously deserted or for which it has not yet been ready, but rather as the source of proposals that may be democratically discussed, and tested against future human experience. Simultaneously, he withdraws from the classical ambitions of systematizing ethicists, and offers a more extensive domain in which philosophers might make their admittedly tentative proposals.

V

My treatment of two other illustrations of Dewey's philosophical program will be much briefer. As we might expect, his contributions to political philosophy diverge from the foundational topics that are typically the focus of philosophical concern. Instead of starting by asking why the state should have authority over us, he relies on the supposition that some sort of association with others and regulation of life together is an unavoidable feature of the human condition. Born into a particular state, we should treat its authority as we treat the authority of our teachers, appraising the

resources we have acquired and trying to correct them where they are found wanting. If there are alternatives available to us, we may even want to move elsewhere. On the other hand, if we remain, the important task is to improve the form of political life into which we have been pitched.

John Stuart Mill, whom William James hailed as a precursor of pragmatism, focused a question that he saw as arising within his own society. Victorian Britain, Mill claimed, was liable to introduce laws and social pressures that interfered with freedom and cramped individuality. Dewey follows Mill in supposing that this is an area in which serious difficulties arise for twentieth-century democracies – most notably, the United States – but he poses the problem differently. He starts from a distinction between the private and the public, which supposes that *interactions* among individuals are private, when the important consequences are confined to the group of individuals concerned; they are public when there are significant consequences for outsiders. By analogy with Mill's principle that legal (or public) intervention into the life of an individual is warranted when the individual's actions affect the lives of others, Dewey supposes that a transaction among two or more people becomes a matter of public concern when it has adverse effects for those who are not parties to it.

This may initially appear to be a minor twist on Mill's seminal claims about political liberty, but the shift is consequential. Whereas the life projects Mill champions, the ability of each of us to pursue his own good in his own way, might take any form, and, indeed, might even be completely solitary, a dedication to life as a hermit say, one of Dewey's central claims about humanity is that our lives, if they are worthwhile, are inevitably social. Conjoint action is essential to us, in that a serious life project without it is deficient. On this basis, Dewey replaces the "thin" conception of democracy in which free elections are viewed as central (a conception he ascribes to James Mill, John Stuart's father), with something far richer. Placing conjoint action at the center of valuable human lives, he supposes that democracy advances human freedom through its ability to provide individual people with the ability to act together and to play a role in directing the activities of a group. So, "in a generic or social sense" democracy is characterized as follows:

From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain.¹⁹

¹⁹ *The Public and its Problems* (Late Works Volume 2) 327-8.

The ideal of human freedom introduced here mixes elements of the so-called “positive” and “negative” conceptions: Dewey takes over from Mill both the thought that the terms on which people enter in to their patterns of conjoint action should be free from coercion, based on an early education that opens up to them a wide range of possibilities for their lives, and also the requirement that these interacting groups should be able to carry on their activities without outside interference, except insofar as they impinge upon other like groups; he also draws from the Republican tradition the idea that our freedom is enhanced through the ability to act with others, by operating as part of groups whose activities we can “form and guide according to our capacities”. In recognizing this as a part of democratic freedom, Dewey is surely influenced by Tocqueville, who was so strongly impressed by the “voluntary associations” he found in New England communities.

Times have changed, however. Even from the perspective of the 1920s, it was plain that the United States no longer functioned as a body of overlapping groups, each pursuing its activities in harmony with others. As Dewey sees it, the problem for serious democracy in a large and heterogeneous society, arises from the decomposition of the public:

... there are too many publics, for conjoint actions which have indirect, serious and enduring consequences are multitudinous beyond comparison, and each one of them crosses the others and generates its own group of persons especially affected with little to hold these different publics together in an integrated whole.

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The great opportunities for freedom in large societies result from this multiplication, but the difficulties of overcoming ignorance about the consequences of their diverse activities, coupled with the “scattering” of the citizens and, derivatively, with their inability to appreciate the worth of the projects pursued by people with whom they have little contact, produces a diminution in the freedom experienced by many. Just as Mill was concerned with the limitations placed on freedom by the intrusions of government (and of social prejudice, which, as he admitted, was both invasive and hard to combat), Dewey sees freedom as threatened by citizens’ inability to cohere as a great community, one in which the joint projects of groups (the many smaller publics) are sustained to the extent that they are pursued in harmony. Anyone who shares this conception of democratic freedom understands that the mere opportunity to register a vote, even under conditions of public honesty, is inadequate to realize it, and that the promise to let citizens keep a slightly larger percentage of their income, at cost to all the

²⁰ *Op.cit.* 320.

social structures that make joint projects possible, is the most cynical debasement and violation of it.

Dewey's social and political philosophy calls for a sociologically and economically informed analysis of the conditions under which his ideal of freedom might be realized in a heterogeneous society. That issue replaces in his writings the traditional focus on the legitimacy of the democratic state. It does so in accordance with the basic pragmatic approach I have identified. We are born into a state, in our case a more-or-less-flawed realization of democracy, and the analysis of the flaws and proposals for improvement are the urgent questions for our times.

I turn finally to a last Deweyan question, the problem that James elevated as *the* philosophical issue. In the wake not only of Darwinism but of detailed critical study of the scriptural texts (of Judaism as well as of Christianity), of psychological and anthropological discoveries and historical understanding of the world's major religions, James and many of his contemporaries struggled to find a way beyond what they saw as discredited literalist belief towards something that would preserve the fundamental value they found in religious practice. Characteristically, James focuses on the plight of the individual who has heard all the terrible news: how is this individual to reconcile the scientific picture of the world with any sense of purposiveness for himself and his own life. At times, James views the solution to the problem as requiring some sort of license to believe in a "transcendent" being; at other times, he is content to allow that it can be solved satisfactorily if one can reach a state of "affirming the universe" or "identifying oneself with the ultimate things".

Dewey has also heard the terrible news, and he is convinced that it makes any kind of literalism about supernatural entities impossible. The message of the various inquiries – historical, biological, anthropological and so forth – is that literal belief in anything transcendent has to be abandoned. On this point, he is blunt: "... there is nothing left worth preserving in the notions of unseen powers, controlling human destiny to which obedience, reverence and worship are due".²¹ Yet, he suggests, it is worth reflecting on the ways in which, in some traditions, acts of obedience, reverence and worship have been valuable to individuals and to societies. Dewey's social emphasis is as characteristic as James' focus on the individual predicament. The religious attitude is important for building a unified self, for each of us needs to see our life as having some point or purpose, but it is realized through collective activities, displayed in "art, science and good citizenship".²²

²¹ *A Common Faith (Late Works Volume 9)* 7.

²² *Op.cit.* 17.

Dewey offers an analysis of traditional religions. They identify particular kinds of experiences and behavior as important for people because the pertinent episodes and actions are supposed to disclose or respond to a transcendent being. The devout are alleged to receive an “enduring change in attitude” because they have apprehended this being and its (his?) will for them. Focusing on the psychological changes, Dewey inverts the perspective:

I should like to turn the statement around and say that whenever this change takes place there is a definitely religious attitude. It is not a religion that brings it about, but, whenever it occurs, from whatever cause and by whatever means, there is a religious outlook and function.²³

Dewey is as convinced as Nietzsche that God is dead, and, like Nietzsche, he thinks that there is a philosophical issue about what happens next. Unlike Nietzsche (whose individualism is more akin to James), Dewey’s approach to the problem emphasizes the social conditions under which individual lives gain purpose and meaning.

He offers a diagnosis of the difficulties in achieving a thoroughly secular society. With the fragmentation of the public, it is difficult for people to pursue the types of conjoint actions that are so central to human life. Living in heterogeneous societies that no longer function as any kind of community – let alone a Great Community – their possibilities for the collective projects that elaborate their freedom are narrowed, and it is only within the framework of certain institutions, churches, synagogues and mosques, that they can find opportunities for becoming unified and whole. The philosophical issue of understanding how finite human lives can obtain point and meaning is not simply a question about individual projects and their significance – although it is that as well, and, in this regard, Dewey thinks that artists, novelists and dramatists have offered more insights than most philosophers – but also about the social conditions under which the religious attitude can develop. Here his exploration of religion connects closely with the problems of ethics and social philosophy, as he conceives them. It is no accident that his set of lectures on religion is entitled *A Common Faith*.

Writing in the 1930s from the Upper West Side, Dewey thought that literalism and supernaturalism in religion were in a crisis from which they could not recover. Were he to contemplate American society today, he would surely be appalled by the massive ignorance that allows the most grotesque forms of Biblical literalism to flourish, and he would probably be grateful to the authors who periodically remind those who read their books of the many-sided arguments constructed from the late eighteenth

²³ *Op.cit.* 13.

century to the early twentieth century that precipitated the crisis. Yet he would also protest the vehement negativity of the attacks on religion, their scathing lack of concern for what comes next. Despite Dewey's own efforts to point the way, the decline of literalist faith left a vacuum into which even the crudest forms of supernaturalism could easily re-intrude. Without some positive attention to issues of meaning and purpose, social structures that make for genuine community and freedom through conjoint action, the secularist program was doomed to leave central human needs unsatisfied. However eloquent, mere exhortations to brace up and join the great Darwinian party are not enough. Dewey saw very clearly that a fully secular society must take up philosophical questions that arise when literalist faith is abandoned, that secular humanism needs not only to be secular but also to be humane.

VI

My three examples give only a very sketchy and incomplete account of the ways in which Dewey aims to reconstruct the philosophical agenda, but I hope to have shown how the issues on which he concentrates relate to broad concerns about human life and society, the kinds of concerns that would be expected to play a role in decisions about well-ordered inquiry. There are two obvious (and related) objections to my defense of his approach. The first would contend that the proposed inquiries do not count as philosophy because of what they require: so thorough an immersion in other disciplines (psychology, sociology, history, and so forth) that they belong to other practitioners. The second would reach the same conclusion by focusing on what they leave out, to wit any connection with the "central problems" that have figured in the history of philosophy and in the professionalized Anglophone practice that has emerged from that history.

I respond to the first criticism by advancing a different vision of what the history of philosophy has taught us. It is impossible to read the greatest thinkers from ancient times to the early twentieth century, without recognizing the extraordinary breadth of their knowledge: the writings of Plato and Aristotle, Hume and Kant, Rousseau and Mill, Hegel and Schopenhauer testify to the many fields that these authors knew, and to which they often contributed. Peirce, James, and Dewey were similarly able to draw on a range of knowledge, and, in the last half century, the deepest and most influential philosophical work, that of John Rawls, of Hilary Putnam, of Michel Foucault and of Thomas Kuhn, has been permeated by awareness of many different disciplines. Dewey supposes that there is no pure philosophy that can deliver conclusions independently of substantive prior premises. Instead, he takes the philosophical attitude to consist in analysis of a broad swath of inquiries, and the synthesis of ideas from diverse disciplines in a way that no specialized practitioner of any of those

investigations could attain. Philosophy is not a discipline for those who are proud to know nothing, but for people who aspire to know something of everything, so that they can propose (and the modest word is appropriate here) a broader perspective.

Yet one might reasonably ask after the place, if any, that traditional “core questions” in epistemology or metaphysics (say) will have in a Deweyan approach to philosophy. Some questions about knowledge remain pertinent. Unsettled debates in various particular fields of inquiry sometimes require attention to the standards of evidence that are to be employed, and philosophers can help with such controversies by refining and applying methodological canons they can show to be at work in uncontroversially successful investigations. Philosophical research on aspects of the special sciences, from the pioneering suggestions of Peirce to the present, provides clear examples of this useful work. More generally, traditional philosophical questions about the conditions for individual knowledge, questions that seek, for example, convincing accounts of perception or memory, might contribute to improved understanding and consequent removal of obstacles that currently block forms of inquiry. Dewey would insist, however – and rightly so – that these questions be pursued in light of the best information that can be drawn from contemporary sciences, from physics, biology, and psychology in particular. Even more important are epistemological questions that traditional philosophy has largely neglected, issues in *social* epistemology about the direction, certification and distribution of knowledge. How ought the agenda for inquiry be set? What standards should be applied to count a proposed result as something “we” know, something on which “we” can now build? How should the vast and heterogeneous corpus of human knowledge be disseminated, so that it meets the needs of citizens in democratic societies? Only recently has Anglophone philosophy begun to address these issues, but, as Dewey saw very clearly, they are primary for the success of democracy. Our own democratic difficulties reveal only too evidently that that assessment is correct.

As I noted at the very beginning, Dewey lacks a large body of admirers. Among those who do read him closely, there is an understandable tendency to turn him into a regular guy. Commentators labor to discover in particular works – most notably the late *Logic* and the earlier *Experience and Nature* – a set of metaphysical and epistemological proposals that can rival those of his most celebrated Anglophone successors. We are offered accounts of truth and knowledge in terms that articulate the supposedly fundamental notions of *situation* and *instrumentality*. On my own interpretation, these attempts underrate the radical shift that Dewey intended. His aim was not to replace the large epistemological and metaphysical systems of his predecessors with an alternative system, and his writings do not offer rivals to those that are currently in vogue, but rather to disentangle the pictures of the world and our relation to it that would accord with our best scientific understanding from the

excrescences of over-ambitious philosophy. The concepts and claims of metaphysics and epistemology are tools that should be fashioned to enable inquirers to pursue their primary questions. Epistemology and metaphysics are thus subordinate to the issues in philosophy Dewey takes as primary. They are means to the construction of a "general theory of education".

A provocative analogy may help. The business of chemistry requires investigators to have, or to make, vessels in which they can observe reactions. That demand motivates a derivative practice, the blowing of glass, with sufficient clarity to enable the observations and sufficient regularity to make measurement easy. A sensible glass-blowing practice concentrates on producing the properties that are pertinent to the chemists. We can easily imagine, however, a group of technicians becoming so infatuated with their own craft that they devote hours to the creation of vessels with special properties that have no bearing on chemical success. Ventures in epistemology and metaphysics, Dewey claims, are often guilty of a similar form of self-absorbed blindness.

So he would judge the contemporary philosophical scene. Dewey would find much to admire in contemporary philosophy, in inquiries into the special sciences, in genuine interaction with art and literature, in the sophisticated historical studies that have provided lucid accounts of older philosophers, in the parts of political philosophy and ethics that pay closest attention to the problems and challenges of contemporary societies, and perhaps, most of all, in the growing attention to issues about race, gender, and class. Yet he could not fail to recognize the ways in which the scholasticism against which he reacted in the early twentieth century has re-emerged in the early twenty-first. Confronted with the blizzard of "isms" and of fiercely technical dissections of minute questions that fill specialized journals, and that are seen as the province of "Real" or "Core" philosophy, the patronizing air with which philosophical discussions of, for example, race are taken as "Worthy" but not quite the "Real Thing", his verdict would be obvious: the glass-blowers have taken over the lab.

VII

I close with a personal memory. Thirty years ago, as an assistant professor at the University of Vermont, I listened to Richard Rorty's John Dewey Lecture. It was a newer version of a presentation I had heard before, and it would eventually appear in print under the title "Keeping Philosophy Pure".²⁴ Building on his influential book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty argued that philosophy was not a special

²⁴ In *Consequences of Pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

discipline – not a “*Fach*”, as he put it. My reaction, then, was that Rorty had focused only on part of philosophy, and that his obituary for the subject was premature.

That reaction is preserved here, but with a very different emphasis. Rorty, who already claimed Dewey as an ally, was brilliantly insightful in identifying the poverty of “normal philosophy”. His critique of philosophy-as-usual is as necessary today as it was in the 1970s or in the 1920s. I differ from him only in seeing the possibility of renewal, where he envisaged a burial. It is, perhaps, a matter of temperament. Pessimists will suppose that attempts to reconstruct philosophy will invariably succumb to the old diseases, whereas optimists will hope that, with the advantages of hindsight, we can learn to do better. So I side with Dewey, who, with his calls to analyze and reform our practices in the light of “intelligence” was one of the great optimists.

