John Dewey's Legacy for the 21st Century

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Why would anyone today think that John Dewey's ideas are still relevant to the problems of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? For one thing, the six decades since his death in 1952 have seen enormous technical, demographic, climatic, economic, and cultural changes, to name just a few. For another, at the time of death his ideas had already been out of fashion for more than a decade. Nor would they get much in the way of respect during the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nostalgia aside, do we have any good reasons for continuing to read Dewey with an eye to our current situation?

*Tracing Lines of Intellectual Influence*. Historians of philosophy and intellectual historians might answer this question by reminding us that there is still much that we do not understand about Dewey's role in the history of philosophy, and more specifically about his contributions to the development of American pragmatism and the philosophy of education. Examination of the ways his ideas relate to those of Peirce, James, Mead, Addams, and others, and especially to the many female teachers and school principals who were his collaborators and, as he said, his inspiration as well – all of this holds the promise of expanding our understanding not only of the past, but of our present and future as well.

Lines of influence between Dewey and William James, for example are at this point far from clear. Since Dewey was not particularly keen on preserving his correspondence, the entire known extant James/Dewey correspondence comprises only 26 letters. We do know for example, that Dewey had already absorbed James's 1890 *Principles of Psychology* within a year of its publication. We also know that the 31 year-old Dewey did not shy from writing to James, pointing out certain peculiarities of that work. In one remarkable letter he writes to James that "on page 369 (I)4 you virtually fall into the meshes of the 'psychologic fallacy." Nevertheless, Dewey was so impressed with James's work that he immediately initiated a two-semester course at the University of Michigan dedicated to the *Principles*. The lines of mutual influence between James and Dewey, I suggest, require further scholarly attention.

As for Dewey's relation to Peirce, if one has an eye for such matters it is possible to find scattered throughout Dewey's work sets of "threes" that bear a remarkable resemblance to Peirce's firsts, seconds, and thirds. Consider, for example, Dewey's discussion in chapter nine of *Experience and Nature* of the failure of purported works of art to be fully fine, in the sense of final, because they have become merely instrumental to some non-aesthetic purpose. First, some fail because they constitute no more than self expression. Second, others fail because they are little more than reactions to existing programs and projects in the art world. And third, still others fail because they are little more than exhibits of commercial or political commodification. Is it too much of a stretch to interpret this text as a discussion of three failures of putative art objects as 1)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 1891.05.06 (00458): John Dewey to William James

qualitative expression without regard to another, 2) overt reaction to a second, and 3) the intrusion of an irrelevant third element between the artist and his or her materials and his or her public? Is it too much to detect an echo of Peirce's categories in this material? Regarding Mead, much more briefly, it is arguable, and in fact highly probable, that Dewey borrowed from his close friend much of his own treatment of the formation of the self. Jane Addams also enters the picture. Dewey's letters to his wife Alice bear unassailable testimony to his debt to Addams concerning issues of great social import. And the story of Dewey's relation to his teachers is a project that cries out for attention. The phrase "Dewey's teachers" is of course ambiguous: there were teachers who worked for and with him, but there were also those who taught him a great deal. They included Elsie Ripley Clapp, Anita McCormick Blaine, Myrtle McGraw, Frances Bradshaw, and many others.

For those more interested in the specifics of tracking anticipations and influences across philosophical orientations, the question of Dewey's relevance might be addressed by considering the ways that Dewey anticipated some of the insights of his younger contemporaries such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein, both of whom were 30 years his junior. As we know, some of the ideas about technology and tool use that Dewey advanced in 1916 in both *Essays in Experimental Logic* and *Democracy and Education* anticipated Heidegger's treatment of "Vorhandenheit" and "Zuhandenheit," by at least a decade. And his 1893 essay "The Superstition of Necessity" argued, well before Wittgenstein's 1921 *Tractatus*, that existential necessity is merely a "superstition." Wittgenstein would later write a German version of that very claim: "*Der Glaube an den Kausalnexus is der Aberglaube*." Of course Dewey also anticipated the later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* as well, when he argued that language is instrumental, when he rejected the idea of a private language, and when he demolished the "picture theory" of language.

I have little doubt that these facts are well known to members of this audience. I emphasize them here because there continues to be considerable confusion regarding what the founding pragmatists actually said and accomplished. Here is Anthony Gottlieb in his July 1, 2012 review of Carlin Romano's book *America the Philosophical*, published on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*: "According to pragmatism, our theories should be judged by their practical value rather than by their accuracy in representing the world. The ultimate fate of this idea was neatly put by a great American philosophical wit, Sidney Morgenbesser, who said it was all very well in theory, but it didn't work in practice. He meant that pragmatism sounds like a good ruse, but it emerges as either trivial or incoherent. when you flesh it out." Continuing, he writes that "[t]here are weaker strains of philosophical pragmatism, which investigate the meaning of our concepts by looking at how we use them. But this idea is mainly the property of Wittgenstein. . . ."

Time does not permit me to list all the things that are wrong with Gottlieb's remark. I will only suggest that until the record of Dewey's contributions to technical philosophy are better known, including the fact that he anticipated by at least two decades Wittgenstein's turn to an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgensteain, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, C. K. Ogden, trans. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1986), 5.1361.

instrumental view of language and that the theory was hardly Wittgenstein's "property" – until those historical accuracies are honored in reviews and journals of opinion, there is still much work to be done.

Hermeneutic Integrity of the Text. In the last paragraph I began my transition from suggestions about the relevance of histories of philosophical developments and studies of lines of influence to a discussion of the continuing relevance of Dewey's technical philosophy. There is first, and perhaps most importantly, the question of fealty to the text. In other words, to what extent have contemporary philosophers (leaving aside the casual remarks of less technically informed journalists)— to what extent have contemporary philosophers gotten Dewey right? Complicating the matter, we are perhaps all aware that at least one famous philosopher suggested that even if Dewey didn't say what he said he said, then he should have said what he said he said.

Others, viewing Dewey's work through the lens of 20th century Anglo-American analytic philosophy, have found "mistakes" where the relevant text, presented to a candid world, would indicate no such mistakes. Robert Brandom, for example has argued that one of the mistakes of the classical pragmatists (including Dewey, it is supposed) is that they looked only "downstream" to the consequences of belief, thus missing an important feature of contemporary semantic theories, namely that the antecedents of belief encountered "upstream" as the circumstances of appropriate application are correlative to consequences and therefore must be taken into account. But to argue in this manner is to fail to note a crucial distinction Dewey made in his 1938 Logica distinction certainly familiar to most or all of us in this room – between language adopted for purposes of communication more generally, or what Locke called "civil language," and "language that is determined solely by prior inquiries related to the purposes of inquiry, the latter alone being logical in import." (LW.12.284, emphasis added) It is difficult to know how to read Dewey as saying something other than that a judgement that terminates a sequence of inquiry is true, that is, warranted as assertable, as a consequence of *prior* inquiries and as fitting within a previously problematic stuation – "prior" here meaning nothing short of "upstream." So I submit that there remains work to be done calling the attention of some of the so-called "analytical" pragmatists to the actual details of the texts of classical pragmatism.

The Forward Reach of Dewey's Technical Philosophy: Dynamic Systems Theory. Beyond the important issues of hermeneutic integrity, if we are to talk of contemporary relevance there is also the very large question of the forward reach of Dewey's technical philosophy. In this regard it is safe to say that there are aspects of his work that are only now beginning to be appreciated and that continue to provide the stimulus for cutting-edge research programs. Dewey's 1896 essay on "The Reflex Arc in Psychology" stands out as a prime example of this phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> W. Teed Rockwell, a leader in the field of dynamic systems theory, has said this about as clearly as it can be said. "If Dewey had been your ordinary run-of-the mill prophetic genius, he would have used his classic 1896 article "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" to predict the downfall of behaviorism and the rise of cognitive psychology almost a century later. Instead he leapfrogged over both behaviorism and cognitive psychology, and articulated the basic principles

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Reference to Reflex Arc article here.

of dynamic systems theory." In brief, Dewey's 1896 essay takes us well beyond Skinner, Watson, Chomsky, and Fodor, to name a few, by refusing to register information as atomic moments that are somehow welded together. He argued instead, in Rockwell's felicitous paraphrase, that "we respond to each perception with a set of behavior patterns, which normally help to fulfill a purpose of some sort. The behavior itself also exists within a range of possibility spaces, and acquiring skill is setting up consistent and useful correlations between perceptual space and behavioral space; or to put it more colloquially, learning to do the right thing at the right time. . . . " (Rockwell, 165-66) Fellow philosopher and neuroscientist Alva Noë concurs, deploying a long passage from Dewey's 1884 essay, "The New Psychology" as the head note to his chapter on extended mind. Echoing Dewey's remarks more than eight decades earlier, he asks "Where do you stop, and where does the rest of the world begin? There is no reason to suppose that the critical boundary is found in our brains or our skin. (Noë pp. 67-68) Here is Dewey himself in Experience and Nature, in a sort of "prequel" to Noë's comment: "The thing essential to bear in mind is that living as an empirical affair is not something which goes on below the skin-surface of an organism: it is always an inclusive affair involving connection, interaction of what is within the organic body and what lies outside in space and time, and with higher organisms far outside." (LW.1.215) Research in what Tibor Solymosi has termed "neuropragmatism" appears to have a rich future, and there is little doubt that Dewey's work, including his "reflex arc"essay, will continue to be relevant to further research in this promising program. The forward reach of Dewey's technical philosophy continues to have great potential in this area of research.

The Forward Reach of Dewey's Technical Philosophy: Conceptual-Propositional Theory. The forward reach of Dewey's technical philosophy is also evident in the related field of research into the corporeal-metaphorical basis of cognition. There is Mark Johnson, for example, whose 2007 book The Meaning of the Body demonstrates some of the ways that aesthetics and logic, as they are intertwined in Dewey's work, can have a significant impact on some of the basic assumptions of Anglo-American analytic philosophy of language. Building on Dewey's insights in Experience and Nature and Art as Experience, he argues against what he calls the "conceptual-propositional theory of meaning" advanced by philosophers such as Quine, Searle, Davidson, Fodor, and Rorty. (Johnson, p. 8) As we know, the view they hold in common is that "[S]entences or utterances (and the words we use in making them) alone are what have meaning. Sentences get their meaning by expressing propositions, which are the basic units of meaning and thought." Moreover, "[A]ccording to this objective semantics, neither the syntactic rules, nor the logical relations, nor even the propositions themselves have any intrinsic relation to human bodies." (Johnson, p. 8)

Johnson, of course, will have none of that. His candidate for replacement of this widely accepted view is empirically obvious and beautifully stated: "if babies are learning the meaning of things and events, and if babies are not yet formulating propositions, then meaning and understanding must involve a great deal more than the ability to create and understand propositions and their corresponding linguistic utterances. . . . Meaning traffics in patterns, images, qualities, feelings, and eventually concepts and propositions." (Johnson, pp. 8-9) Comparison of this statement with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Rockwell, p. 177

Dewey's remarks in *Experience and Nature* is instructive: "Every thought and meaning has its substratum in some organic act of absorption or elimination of seeking, or turning away from, of destroying or caring for, of signaling or responding. It roots in some definite act of biological behavior; our physical names for mental acts like seeing, grasping, searching, affirming, acquiescing, spurning, comprehending, affection, emotion are not just 'metaphors." (LW.1.221) Given the continuing dominance of what Johnson calls the "conceptual-propositional theory of meaning," and given the considerable implications for philosophy of the alternatives presented by Dewey and Johnson, I would suggest that the forward reach of Dewey's technical philosophy offers an almost inexhaustible resource for reconstruction of the philosophy of language during the coming decades.

Teaching Logic. While we are on the subject of propositions, it seems worth pointing to an area where Dewey's ideas have not yet received adequate consideration, even though they have enormous potential to change the ways that courses in introductory logic are taught. His treatment of logical propositions provides an interesting case. Dewey's larger logic, of course, inverts the traditional account. Whereas the traditional account begins with terms, which are combined into propositions, which are further strung combined to form arguments, Dewey instead begins with judgments, of which propositions are treated as component factors. Taken seriously, this alone would probably present a major headache to most authors of logic textbooks. Dewey, however, goes even further: he argues that propositions are neither true nor false, but rather appropriate or inappropriate, valid or invalid.

As they function in the logic of living inquiry, propositions are just proposals, and proposals are on their faces neither true nor false. In baseball, for example, a pitcher's offering to the batter is neither true nor false: it is merely a proposal until it enters into a judgment – that is, until it is judged to be true or false by the action of either the batter, or the umpire, or both. A batter's hit, based on his or her judgment regarding the appropriateness and validity of the pitch, is in turn a proposal to a fielder. The same may be said of a marriage proposal. The proposal may be sincere, valid, and relevant. But it is the judgment of the recipient of the proposal, and not the proposal itself, that carries the truth value. Thus does Dewey capture the rhythms—the delicate give and take – of living inquiry: propositions are proposals and judgments may be intermediate or final with respect to some end-in-view. It is perhaps also worth noting that in the film industry a proposal is also a pitch – neither true nor false until a judgment is made by a producer. Once again, Dewey's radical insights offer a rich resource for further research and exploration. How, for example, would introductory logic courses change were Dewey's logical works taken seriously? It seems fair to suggest that current studies of the predicate calculus would not be abandoned, for they are indeed useful, but that they would be embedded within a larger context of a theory of inquiry to which they were treated as ancillary.

In the few minutes that remain to me, I want to mention two additional areas in which Dewey's ideas continue to be relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns. The first is in the field of economics.

*Economics*. As we know, the heart of neo-classical economic synthesis is the idea that: people have rational preferences among outcomes; that individuals maximize utility and firms maximize

profits; and that people act independently on the basis of full and relevant information.<sup>5</sup> But already in his 1898 essay "Why is Economics not an Evolutionary Science?" Thorstein Veblen had proposed supplanting the older economic models, based as they are on nineteenth century physics (and metaphysics), with newer ones that are rooted in the evolutionary models of the biological sciences. He argued that neoclassical economic theory was in need of reconstruction because of its reliance on pre-Darwinian assumptions and outlooks.<sup>6</sup>

For his part, Dewey rejected a fundamental principle of the old economics, namely the idea that a Cartesian self floats free as an atomic economic entity, independent and with scant regard for institutional context. With respect to ethical considerations, Dewey wrote that "The individual disconnected from his social situation is ethically unreal, and no devices for instilling, through stories about him, lessons of truth-telling, patriotism, industry, etc., succeed in really concealing the moral unreality of the case." (MW.4.210)<sup>7</sup> Viewed from another angle, Dewey charged this notion of economic individualism with impeding the progress of science and technology. "For the most part," he wrote, "economic individualism interpreted as energy and enterprise devoted to private profit, has been an adjunct, often a parasitical one, to the movement of technical and scientific forces." (LW.5.85)

Dewey summarized the problem with the neoclassical argument in the following way. "The essential fallacy is that the theory assumes that original and natural wants determine the economic phenomena of production and exchange. In fact, before they become economic wants—effective demands—they are reshaped by the existing distributive-exchange system. The market and business determine wants, not the reverse; the argument moves in a vicious circle." He then pointed out that the argument contains a logical mistake. There is an ambiguous middle

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See E. Roy Weintraub, "Neoclassical Economics," *Concise Encyclopedia of Economics* < <a href="http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/NeoclassicalEconomics.html">http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/NeoclassicalEconomics.html</a> Accessed 8 September 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> My colleague Kenneth Stikkers reminds me that neoclassical economists now claim that even if their anthropology may be a bit off, their position nevertheless has strong predictive value.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> References to John Dewey's published works are to the critical (print) edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1991), and published in three series as *The Early Works: 1882-1898*, *The Middle Works: 1898-1924*, and *The Later Works, 1925-1953*. These designations are followed by volume and page number. "LW.1.14," for example, refers to *The Later Works*, volume 1, page 14. In order to insure uniform citations of the standard edition, the pagination of the print edition has been preserved in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953: The Electronic Edition*, edited by Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, Virginia: InteLex Corp., 1996).

term: "want" as psychological and "want" as actual demand are conflated. (LW.15.264)<sup>8</sup> Dewey's point is that putative fixes, such as the distinction between "absolute" demand and "effectual" demand merely fine tune the problem of hedonism. They do not fix it. Dewey's and Veblen's alternative offered economists an image of an embodied and socially contexted human being who is "a coherent structure of propensities and habits which seeks realization and expression in an unfolding activity." This alternative to the neoclassical version homo economicus would not be isolated and autonomous, but situated and conditioned within the context of formative institutions of many and various types.

In other words, an evolutionary economic theory would take into account the history and present tendencies of the institutions that are instrumental to the formation of individuals and communities. The idea of a more or less static economic entity pushed and pulled by various forces but regularly returning to equilibrium would be replaced by a post-Darwinian model in which changing circumstances create newly informed and reconfigured individuals who are continually required to seek new ways of recalibrating their situation within those changing environments.

Current institutional economists, which include Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman, tend to accept a post-Darwinian model such as the one advanced by Veblen and Dewey. The same might be said of the proponents of the new "behavioral" economics. They do not eschew mathematical analysis, to be sure, but instead argue that our understanding of economic conditions requires that we take fuller account of the cultural contexts within which mathematical and statistical models operate. Institutionalists are thus highly critical of some of the "unquestioned" assumptions of the classical synthesis, such as most versions of "rational choice theory" and what they regard as subjectivist accounts of "utility."

In the competition between neoclassical and institutionalist economic models, the stakes are very high, and they once again underscore Dewey's relevance to our current situation. The current situation in China serves as an example. Institutionalist insistence on cultural context fits nicely, for example with arguments by sociologist Daniel A. Bell and others that the Chinese Communist Party will need to manage the country's economic development in ways that acknowledge and honor her Confucian traditions. To ignore those traditions would inevitably deform analyses of economic activity, effectively leaving them as exercises on a drawing board, isolated from the flux of real world events.

There are now strong indications that some of the new projects in institutional economics are beginning to get some traction. I call your attention, for example, to several essays produced by the Political Economy Program at the National Bureau of Economic Research, authored or coauthored by Alberto F. Alesina. Alesina writes of the increasing difficulty of fitting the various

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Economists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century distinguished between "absolute demand" and "effectual demand." In fine, the difference is between "I want x" and "I want x so much that I am willing to sacrifice y." Dewey responds that this distinction does not fix the hedonism problem.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Veblen, "Why is Economics not an Evolutionary Science?," 390.

complexities of contemporary societies into the "traditional model of economic policy in which benevolent social planners maximize the utility of a representative individual." Some economists, he reports, have "started exploring how political forces affected the choice of policies, paying special attention to the distributive conflicts and political institutions, which are absent in representative agent models." <sup>10</sup>

If we add analysis of underlying ethical issues to this, we get something very much like Dewey's analysis of desiderata for projects in economics. And if we add the specifics of institutional influences in traditionally Confucian societies, I suggest, then we get important resources to bring to the continuing discussions about the future of democratic forms of life in those societies.

*Education.* I have saved the most important part of my discussion of Dewey's continuing relevance for last, but, regrettably, my remarks must be brief. It is by now hardly a secret that there is an educational crisis in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere. Here is a story from the New York Times: "Public Money Finds Back Door to Private Schools." Here is another: "Military Children Stay a Step Ahead of Public School Students." Here is a third: "Profits and Questions at Online Charter Schools."

Dewey's insights into education are arguably now more relevant than ever in the field of education. Even though there are exceptions, and I will mention some of those in a moment, educational policies and practices are tending in the opposite direction of the broad-based humanistic educational programs for which Dewey fought so hard. What are these trends?

First, there is an emphasis on standardized tests and teaching to the test that extends from K-12 up now into higher education. This type of system, which has long been a feature of schools in China, Japan, and elsewhere, has produced the infamous "cram schools." The "No Child Left Behind" initiative, that was put into place by the George W. Bush administration and is now being slightly modified by Obama's secretary of education, incorporates some of the worst features of those Asian systems. Dewey, of course, was a strong opponent of the type of rote memorization that is required for high level performance on such tests.

Why is it the case, as the *New York Times* reports, that "Military Children Stay A Step Ahead of Public School Students"? Among possible factors listed in that report, the one that immediately arrests the eye is that military schools are not required to teach to the test. Standardized tests are used, but they are used in the ways that Dewey recommended: in order to assess a student's abilities and weaknesses, and as a test of the effectiveness of the curriculum. The curriculum itself is more diverse and the emphasis is on learning to learn rather than memorizing facts that will soon be forgotten. Other factors include smaller class size and amicable relations between teachers and management. One of the consequences of this approach seems to be that the achievement gap that plagues some public schools does not appear to exist in schools run by the American Department of Defense.

Alberto F. Alesina, "Program Report," *NBER Reporter* 3 (2007). <a href="http://www.nber.org/programs/pol/pol.html">http://www.nber.org/programs/pol/pol.html</a> Accessed 8 September 2011.

Second, in the United States there is a growing movement toward Charter Schools. Even though such schools tend to be funded with public dollars, there are in most cases inadequate safeguards against discrimination in the selection of students or required sectarian religious instruction. Dewey, by contrast, was a strong proponent of what he regarded as the democratizing tendencies of public education, and he argued that a democratic society must put in place safeguards against discrimination and taxpayer-funded religious instruction.

Third, there is a growing movement in the field of home schooling and virtual schooling. Home schooling tends to be particularly prevalent among religious fundamentalists who want to shield their children from contact with those with whom they disagree. Dewey, by contrast, regarded the public school as a primary agent of socialization, a place where children can be exposed to difference in ways that are of benefit not only to them and their parents, but to the wider society as well. Some schooling at home is virtual schooling provided by for-profit charter schools operated entirely online, at taxpayer expense. According to the report I mentioned, such companies utilize public funds for advertizing and to lobby legislators for additional funding. Morever, when compared to all schools in Pennsylvania, to take just one example, on-line schools were shown to lag significantly in terms of performance.

Fourth, there is also the related matter of "for-profit" universities, which in the United States are draining enormous sums of money away from public institutions of higher learning. Some of these institutions, according to reliable reports, have tended to mislead their students and prospective students not only about prospects of future employment, but the legitimacy of their expected degree as well. Compounding the problem, many students attending questionable forprofit universities receive public support that they then spend on tuition, tuition payments that could have been spent at public or private non-profit universities.

A two-year study by the U. S. Congress, released on August 1, 2012, paints a picture of for-profit higher education that is grim indeed. In the 2009 fiscal year, the colleges examined spent \$4.2-billion (22.7 percent of all revenue) on marketing, advertising, recruiting, and admissions staffing. They spent \$3.6-billion (19.4 percent of all revenue) on profit. And they spent \$3.2-billion (17.2 percent of all revenue) on instruction. As I write, the State of California has apparently begun to address some of these corrupt practices by denying CalGrant funds to the worst offenders. As we know, Dewey argued against corporate corruption and for the proposition that public funds should serve the public, and not narrow corporate interests.

In the few minutes alotted to me I have attempted to address the issue of Dewey's continuing relevance by discussing issues that involve the tracking of influence within the history of philosophy, the hermeneutic integrity of the texts of classical pragmatism, the forward reach of Dewey's technical philosophy as it applies to dynamic systems theory and reform of the teaching of logic, economic theory, and education. I have suggested that Dewey's project remains relevant and that progressive philosophers, historians, economists, and educators can find within it continuing insights that will serve to advance their own research agendas. (4900w)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Source: The Chronicle of Higher Education, July 30, 2012. < <a href="http://chronicle.com">http://chronicle.com</a> /article/A-Damning-Portrait-of/133253/?cid=at&utm\_source=at&utm\_medium=en>