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# John Dewey's Critique of Our "Unmodern" Philosophy

Larry A. Hickman

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- 1 In what follows I want to discuss some of the themes of John Dewey's "new" book *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, recently published by Southern Illinois University Press.<sup>1</sup> The scholarly world certainly owes a debt of gratitude to Professor Phillip Deen for his efforts to bring this volume to fruition. His careful research among the Dewey Papers in Special Collections of Morris Library at Southern Illinois University Carbondale led him to see what others had overlooked. He discovered more than a dozen chapters of an incomplete manuscript whose date, the late 1930's and early '40s coincides with the period during which Dewey famously lost a manuscript while returning from Hubbards, Nova Scotia to his home in New York City. Now Deen has meticulously collected, collated, and edited those materials, as well as providing a highly informative introduction. He has been able to flesh out the narrative of their provenance and their relevance to the rest of Dewey's published work by his careful reading of Dewey's correspondence from the period.
- 2 To put the message of *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* in a nutshell, Dewey is keen to explain why *we have never been modern* and what we should be doing about that. Of course he does not want to deny that there was progress during the transition from medieval to modern philosophy. But he is also clear that human history, which is of course our cultural history, is filled with missed opportunities, stubborn resistance to change, and fixation on old ideas long since proven threadbare and irrelevant. Here is Deen in his introduction:

Our beliefs and institutions were developed when scarcity was a central concern, nature was a constant source of fear, and economic production was primarily the work of individuals. The industrial revolution changed all that [...] Dewey contended that the underlying beliefs [of modern philosophy] and their legitimization have remained rooted in a pre-modern world. Modern technoscience does not seek correspondence to a fixed reality, but sets elements of experience in relation to one another in the interest of improved future conduct. It is post-

Darwinian, rejecting fixed ends and essences and turning to context, relation, and experiment. However, philosophers still use categories developed during the search for the immutable – even those positivists and realist philosophers who believe themselves to be truly scientific. (xxx)

- 3 Readers of this new volume encounter a Dewey who is more candid and less constrained by the blue pencils of his editors than the more familiar Dewey of the 37 volumes of the *Collected Works*. His criticism on page 90 of Husserl's phenomenological reduction,<sup>2</sup> for example, and his aside on page 267 about priests hearing confessions of indulgence of libidinous imagery, are more reminiscent of the frank expressions we find in his private correspondence.
- 4 In this volume we also encounter restatements of familiar ideas, now reworked, refined and put into relation with other ideas in ways that make them once again fresh and meaningful. Dewey's discussion of technology in chapter ten stands out in this regard, as do his remarks on the quest for certainty and the epistemology industry, the relationship between theory and practice, the continuity between humans and the rest of nature, and the reductive nature of traditional ethical theories.
- 5 Dewey also plays repeated variations on the theme of his well-known 1896 essay *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology*. This book in fact brims with references to the reflex article. Dewey's treatment of the reflex arc has its roots in the organic, in the physiological, in a genetic account of inquiry. Wariness in non-human animals prefigures awareness in human beings. In the relation of organism with what is relatively external to it, we get separation of stimulus and response only on reflection or analysis. Stimulus is analyzed as a condition of the organism into an environing situation and response is analyzed as preparation for further environmental engagement. The key concepts of this narrative are organism and environment, context and continuity.
- 6 These concepts, organism and environment, context and continuity are Darwinian, and they are keys to what is missing in the modernist project. Dewey's discussion of these concepts and how the "medieval synthesis" prevented completion of the project of modernity authenticates yet again his place as dialogue partner with contemporary philosophers such as Bruno Latour, who has famously (also) claimed that "We have never been modern." Latour's remark echoes a claim that is central to this new Dewey volume: our culture continues to honor an ingrained substance-accident ontology that seeks the essential nature of things; it honors a soul/body or mind/body split that retards scientific and social progress; and it clings tenaciously to notions of certainty that have their origins in classical and medieval thought and that have no place in our technoscientific milieu. Worse, contemporary philosophers continue to be major consumers and disseminators of these stagnant and counterproductive ideas.
- 7 As Dewey put the matter in a letter to Christine Chisholm Frost in 1941, "many of the fundamental ideas of the old synthesis were not discarded but were carried over into the systems that attempt new philosophical formulations, and thereby has prevented the development of a synthesis which actually corresponds to the vital conditions and forces of the present" (Dewey to Frost, 1941.01.23, 13074).<sup>3</sup>
- 8 The problem, as Deen succinctly glosses it, was that "Just as science was making rapid advances in the attainment of knowledge, philosophy was asking whether knowledge was possible at all" (xxii). In short, one of the most important of the features, and failures, of modernity was its preoccupation with the problem of doubt, or skepticism. Mainstream philosophy has never been modern because it is still wrestling with this question,

whereas the technosciences have long since dismissed the quest for certainty in lieu of a quest for the production of what is warranted and assertible.

- 9 The failure of modernity (the reason why "we have never been modern") is thus due to a series of bad choices: doubt and skepticism over experimentalism; substance over process; structure over function; intuition and revelation over cosmological and methodological naturalism; the soliloquy of an individual, internal consciousness over the observable behavior of social inquiry; preference for a mind/ body split over organic holism and acceptance of mind as "extended and embodied"; ruptures over continuity; the unexamined values of custom over those that have been evaluated in relevant contexts; and studied and proud ignorance of context, especially in the field of inquiry. Each of these failures can be characterized as a failure of nerve: on one side of the coin of modernity we find the problem of skepticism; on its obverse, the quest for certainty.
- 10 If you think this claim questionable or gratuitous, then I invite you to consider the following data from the *Philosophers Index*. From 1943 to 2012 the number of essays and reviews in English with "skepticism" in the title was 2087. Lest you think it is unfair to go back 69 years to 1943, it is worth noting that interest in the problem seems to have increased, rather than diminished. More than half, or 1136 of those titles are from the 12 years since 2000. There are doubtless other essays and reviews that concern skepticism but do not use the word in the title, and it is also possible that some of these essays attack or dismiss the problem of skepticism. The point is that the concept is still front and center in philosophical journals.
- 11 But if the answer to our current situation does not lie in accepting the failed project of modernity, then neither does it lie in the central claims of what some have termed post-modernism. Emphasis on deferral and difference merely identifies the skeptical symptoms; it does not provide a prescription. Deferral and difference amount to little more than skepticism on a diet. Emphasis of one side, the skeptical side, of the modernist coin does not constitute an alternative to the failed modern project. And despite the fact that there are still philosophers ready and eager to spend that coin, I suggest that its value has been rendered null by the pragmatist critique of modernity. Pragmatism is not concerned with global doubt, or with whether there are atomic sense data, or with the conditions for the possibility of knowledge. Pragmatists take knowledge available from work done by the technosciences seriously and they are comfortable with what they are intellectually entitled to believe. Just as experimentalism, fallibilism and assertion with warrant are among the tools that have made the technosciences successful, so are they the tools that pragmatists bring to problems of evaluating and therefore knowing. The type of intelligence that invents the telephone, Dewey tells us, is the same type of intelligence that is called upon when the times call for the invention of tools to address novel and pressing moral situations.
- 12 Of course it should also be acknowledged that doubt is important as an aspect of the experimental methods that pragmatists hold in such high regard. But pragmatic doubt is not the global doubt of Descartes, nor is it the false doubt of the "thought experiments" that are popular among some writers of essays on ethics. I mean the so-called moral dilemmas that often involve lifeboats, trolleys, or tunnels, pitting the rescue of one person against the lives of many others.<sup>4</sup> If Cartesian doubt is too wide, the doubt of these "trolley problems" is too narrow: as Allen Wood has argued so perceptively, context has been stipulated out of the assignment. There is no continuity with the real world in which we live. Doubt has become so focused as to become meaningless. Pragmatic doubt is

always doubt in *medias res*. It is contexted doubt. It is present on those occasions when continuity breaks down. It is the doubt of problem formation and testing.

- 13 Pragmatic doubt is thus neither the inflationary doubt of the Cartesians, nor the deflationary "trolley problem" doubt of analytic ethics. Nor is it ethereal "skepticism-on-a-diet" doubt by deferral and difference that is popular in some precincts of so-called postmodernism.
- 14 It should have by now become apparent, I think, that what is called for in our current situation is a productive pragmatism that both recognizes and avoids the errors of the modern project at the same time that it avoids the mistakes of the so-called postmodernist project. I have termed this type of pragmatism "post-postmodernism" because it both anticipated what is serviceable in post-modernism, such as its rejection of grand narratives, foundationalism, essentialism, and so on, and at the same time it avoids the core difficulties of that project. Dewey urged us to accept an evolutionary naturalism that accepts the fact that there is community and commonality within human experience, that inquiry is always inquiry in context, and that it is possible to have beliefs that are both warranted and assertible.<sup>5</sup>
- 15 Yes, these themes have been well and often articulated. What I am suggesting, however, is that even though we pragmatists may know why the modern project failed and even though we pragmatists may know what to do about it, how to address the matter in our classes, our research, and our roles as public intellectuals – as writers of blogs and columns in newspapers and journals of opinion – there are still those who do not seem to have gotten the memo, who are both oblivious of the failure of the modern project and who are among those well known philosophers to whom the reading public looks for articulation of what philosophy is and what it does. This unfortunate situation, I suggest, could be addressed by utilizing some of the newly sharpened tools that Dewey provides in *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*.
- 16 There are, for example, prominent philosophers who continue to work in the modernist mode. One example of such persistence is ready to hand in the work of British philosopher Derek Parfit. Parfit's recently published two volume work *On What Matters* attempts to take us back to a time when it was thought that there were "non-natural facts." Here is Allan Gibbard reviewing Parfit's book in a recent issue of the *London Review of Books*:
- Parfit's theory of what reasons are is a form of non-naturalism. That there is reason not to torment oneself or others isn't a natural fact: it is not, that is to say, the sort of fact we can confirm by observation, as we can with the facts of physics or psychology. If something is a reason, that's a fact, a fact that is not purely natural. Parfit holds that most fundamentally we know about them by intuition.<sup>6</sup>
- 17 Continuing, Gibbard writes, "Parfit cites mathematics. Pure mathematics, too, is non-natural and known by pure thinking, not by observation. Ultimately, it is by intuition that we know what must hold mathematically." Again: "Parfit reports that Bernard Williams seemed genuinely not to understand such claims, but he thinks that may be because Williams lacked a concept that the rest of us have." How do we know a non-natural fact? "When we 'see,' as it were, that a mathematical claim must be true, we are 'responding in non-causal ways to the validity of some kinds of reasoning'." "If there were no non-natural properties, Parfit tells us at one point in a tone of despair, then nothing would matter. For something to matter, after all, is for there to be reason to care about it, and facts about reasons are non-natural." To his credit, Gibbard rejects Parfit's non-

naturalism. "If no properties are non-natural, what follows is an either/or: either nothing matters or Parfit is wrong that mattering is non-natural. Now it seems beyond doubt that things matter, whereas we needn't wholly trust in Parfit's metatheory of mattering."

- 18 Parfit's non-naturalism appears to be yet one more example of how we have never been modern. His attempts to bring together elements of Kant's ethics and the work of the Utilitarians are supported by the contextless doubt – the deflationary doubt – of "trolley problems," and he has chosen intuition and revelation over cosmological and methodological naturalism. He has decontextualized and reified facts, rather than treating them as "facts of a case," as Dewey would have us do.
- 19 Dewey's remarks in the closing pages of *Human Nature and Conduct* could have been written with Parfit in mind.

The reason [that the very meaning of the general notions of moral inquiry is a matter of doubt and dispute] is that these notions are discussed in isolation from the concrete facts of the interactions of human beings with one another – an abstraction as fatal as was the old discussion of phlogiston, gravity and vital force apart from concrete correlations of changing events with one another. (MW14.222)<sup>7</sup>

- 20 And as Murray Murphy succinctly put the matter

Dewey will admit no transcendental realm of ideals, no division of the moral from the natural, no nonsense about cognitive versus emotive meaning. Action is 'conduct' because it is morally appraised, controlled, and guided, not from above, but from within the natural world. (MW.14.xv)

- 21 But that is probably enough about how things have gone wrong. I said earlier that *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* provides some newly sharpened tools to address this problem. The one I want to emphasize is his claim that if knowing is treated as a mode of technology then we finally can get past problems that have prevented us from being modern. This is a strong claim and it puts technology at the center of his program of resolving the difficulties that philosophy has inherited.
- 22 Possibly tired of defending his use of the term "instrumental" (although I suppose that it is worth repeating once again that Dewey's instrumentalism has little to do with *Zweckrationalität*, the *bête noir* of the Frankfurt School) Dewey points out that any word can be misunderstood and then he carries on, introducing expanded, more finely tuned meanings of technology than appear elsewhere in his work. He also offers an excellent definition of the term "instrumental." He has used it, he says, to "designate the intermediate position and function of the subject matter of knowledge in the inclusive complex of the transaction constituting human living as a going concern" (242). He reports his fears that the term "technology" will meet the same fate as has "instrumental."
- 23 He tells us that the role or task of philosophy is to help bring to light or formulate the needs and obstructions that constitute the practical problems and resources which, if they were systematically used, would further their resolution" and that anything that does this is *ipso facto* philosophical. He develops two senses of technology. It may be helpful to compare this with an earlier statement that was his most succinct up to that point. It comes from *What I Believe* (1930):

'Technology' signifies all the intelligent techniques by which the energies of nature and man are directed and used in satisfaction of human needs; it cannot be limited to a few outer and comparatively mechanical forms. In the face of its possibilities, the traditional conception of experience is obsolete. (LW.5.270)

- 24 This is a strong and remarkable statement, since it says that technology is by its very nature intelligent and that its use should be expanded. As such, it runs directly counter to contemporary treatments of technology by Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas, and Frankfurt School figures Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. It should be said, parenthetically, that philosophers of technology who are our contemporaries have moved perceptibly in Dewey's direction. These would include Don Ihde, Andrew Feenberg, Peter-Paul Verbeek, and others.
- 25 As remarkable as were Dewey's remarks on technology in *What I Believe*, his remarks in this volume are both more specific and even more remarkable. What Dewey terms "wide" technology is knowledge producing more knowledge in systematic ways. "Narrow" technology, on the other hand, includes those technologies now called such, that is, technology as employed in the various disciplines. Wide technology ideally guides narrow technology, but is also informed by such practices.
- 26 What has this to do with philosophy? Knowledge, Dewey writes, "is, first, a form of technology in the methods it employs in producing more knowledge and improving its own methods and, furthermore, is *capable* of being a technology in humane social guidance of technologies now called such but whose human and social consequences are left a matter of pulling and hauling of conflicting customs and institutions which are hardly touched by effective use of the method of intelligence at work" (244).
- 27 Wide technology is what allows philosophy to serve, ideally, as what Dewey called "liaison" among the various disciplines. Admittedly, terminology can be confusing. In my own earlier attempts to understand Dewey's take on technology I have used the term "technology" to refer to what he here terms "wide" technology, and I have used the term "techniques" to refer to "narrow" technology.
- 28 Dewey takes issue with the claim that "technology is indifferent to the uses to which it is put." "As long as that statement remains as true as it is at the present time," he writes, "it signifies that something else is sure to decide the uses to which it is put – traditions and customs, rules of business and of law – which exist now because they came into existence in the past, superficially sugared over by moralistic condemnations and exhortations" (244). In other words, one of the reasons we have never been modern is that we have not trusted technology in both senses of the term, wide and narrow. We have repeated the mistakes of the Athenian Greeks. We have benefitted from technical advances, but we have failed to place them in the proper contexts, to see the types of values that they involve and the types of choices that they offer, and we have just relegated them to the realm of the "material" as opposed to the "spiritual."
- 29 So Dewey identifies knowing as one form of technological art. He references his 1916 logic here, drawing analogies between the role of crude ores, intermediate stock parts, tools, and finished products in industry and the role of raw materials, intermediate parts, tools, and products of sequences of inquiry. He undercuts the traditional problem of appearance and reality by recasting it as a relationship between the raw (or crude) and the finished (or refined). Metaphors of arts, crafts, and industry dominate chapters 10 and 11 of this work.
- 30 Here is Dewey in what is perhaps the clearest statement in his entire published corpus regarding the relation between the two types of technology:
- What has been said should protect the view that scientific inquiry is one form or type of technological art from being assimilated to the specific content of

technologies already familiarly so designated –although it is highly probable that the association of knowing with “mind” and of technology with industries carried on for pecuniary profit will cause some persons to indulge in continued identification of the position here taken with the doctrine that knowledge is subordinated to gaining some fixed ‘practical’ end of a private or ‘personal’ sort. (246)

- 31 Of note here is the connection he makes between technology and mind. It is significant, I think, that he presents his clearest statements about technology in a chapter on mind and body: wider technology involves systematic attempts to develop new tools, including those that are conceptual, for the resolution of the problems of organic beings whose minds are both embodied and extended.
- 32 Lest there be any doubt about the “primary concern” of his discussion up to this point, Dewey makes it clear enough on page 249. It is the task of outlining the grounds upon which scientific knowing should be regarded as a form of technology. Whereas epistemology tries to treat transactions wholesale, absent proper context, technological undertakings start from need, and they are instrumental and not yet final. The point is production of means of satisfaction of objective conditions.
- 33 Now there may be those, and in fact there have been those, who have suggested that the pragmatic criticism of the modernist project is altogether too negative in tone. There is anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, anti-reductionism, anti-spectator view of knowledge, anti-mind/body dualism, anti, anti, anti. To those critics I would suggest, with Dewey, that criticism of ideas that retard growth and development of inquiry is itself a positive project. We do not fault those engineers who inspect bridges and other aspects of our infrastructure for cracks and faults: we instead offer them our support and encouragement.
- 34 What Dewey has given us in *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, with the generous editorship of Philip Deen, is an account of how and why we have never been modern. He has illuminated the bad choices made along the way: doubt and skepticism over experimentalism; substance over process; structure over function; intuition and revelation over cosmological and methodological naturalism; the soliloquy of an individual, internal consciousness over the observable behavior of social inquiry; preference for a mind/body split over organic holism and acceptance of mind as “extended and embodied”; ruptures over continuity; received values over those that have been evaluated in relevant contexts; and studied and proud ignorance of context, especially in the field of inquiry. He has called upon philosophers and others alike to treat knowing as a mode of technology because it is “the one form of technology which directly and systematically stimulates and promotes production of consequences, uses and enjoyments which constitute departures from previous conditions and even breaks in customary ways of doing things” (251).
- 35 In short, it is possible to heal the split between fact and value, knowing and evaluation. Dewey challenges us to imagine that the genuinely modern can be brought into existence.

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## NOTES

1. John Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, edited by Phillip Dean (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012).
  2. In a note on page 90 Dewey professes to find it ironic that "the so-called phenomenological school now flourishing" claims that "the way to obtain a 'scientific' philosophy, binding on all thinkers, is to forget everything that is scientific including its method of inquiry, and make a 'subjectivistic' or Cartesian approach, starting from the 'pure consciousness of an individual knower'."
  3. *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1871-1952*, Larry A. Hickman, General Editor; Volume 1: 1871-1918, fourth edition; Volume 2: 1919-1939, third edition; Volume 3: 1940-1952, second edition; Volume 4: 1953-2008, first edition. Charlottesville, VA: Intelix Corporation, 2008.
  4. Allan Wood has launched a brilliant assault on these false doubts in his response to Derek Parfit's *On What Matters*. See D. Parfit, *On What Matters*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, vol. 2, pp. 66-82.
  5. Jim Garrison has drawn my attention to a very interesting passage in Derrida's *Grammatology*, in which he discusses the semiotic Theory of Charles S. Peirce. Derrida apparently misses Peirce's point that sign-interpretation need not go on ad infinitum. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976, 49.
  6. Allan Gibbard, "Five Girls on a Rock," a review of *On What Matters* by Derek Parfit, *London Review of Books*, 7 June 2012, 23.
  7. 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. 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: IntelLex Corp., 1996.
  8. This is a play on Dewey's remark in the introduction to the 1948 edition of *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. "The genuinely modern has still to be brought into existence" (MW 12.273).
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