

**Hickman, Larry A., Matthew Caleb Flamm, Krzysztof Piotr Skowronski, Jennifer A. Rea, eds.**

*The Continuing Relevance of John Dewey: Reflections on Aesthetics, Morality, Science, and Society.*

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2009 was a banner year for John Dewey. Three international conferences commemorated the philosopher's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday: one at UNC Chapel Hill concerned education, one at the Buffalo Center for Inquiry covered his influence on subsequent philosophy, and one at the University of Opole, Poland addressed 'John Dewey in the Context of American and European Values'. *The Continuing Relevance of John Dewey* collects papers delivered at the last meeting. While it does not always live up to its title's claim of linking Dewey's work to contemporary concerns, it nonetheless contains insightful essays on many aspects of his thought, half of which come from European scholars whose perspectives on Pragmatism rarely make it across the Atlantic. In addition to an introduction by Larry Hickman, the book comprises seventeen essays divided into four sections: aesthetics, ethics, science and logic, and society.

The volume's first section contains six essays on aesthetics. Placing aesthetics first may come as something a surprise. Since pragmatism has been sometimes characterized as a dressed up technologism, one might suspect it has little space for ethereal concerns like art and beauty. Broadly understood, however, aesthetics indeed stands at the heart of Dewey's philosophical vision. Most generally, Dewey held that the felt harmony of an aesthetic experience could serve as a model for overcoming traditional dualisms between philosophy and life, thought and practice, and art and the everyday. Aesthetics' aspirational import is mirrored by what might be called its foundational import, for Dewey also stressed how aesthetics foregrounds the practically ineffable qualitative basis of human experience. The essays in this section address both aspects of Dewey's aesthetic thought: James Campbell and Krzysztof Piotr Skowronski emphasize its social dimensions, while John Ryder, Robert Innis and Sebastian Stankiewicz focus on its qualitative and cognitive dimensions. The section is rounded out by an illuminating article by Richard A. S. Hall on parallels between Dewey's approach and that of American composer Charles Ives. Campbell's essay, 'Aesthetics as Social Philosophy', is of particular note, written with characteristic insight, as is Stankiewicz's 'Qualitative Thought, Thinking Through the Body, and Embodied Thinking'; both authors ably demonstrate the relevance of Dewey's aesthetic thought for political philosophy and naturalized ethics alike.

That said, it is unlikely a reader will leave this section with all his or her questions answered. On the social side of things, we are left to wonder what exactly it means to say, with Campbell, that '(a)rtistic living is our goal' (35). Social harmony is undoubtedly a good thing, yet without more specification this ideal can be empty if not outright dangerous: Plato's republic was nothing if not harmonious, but few now would choose to

live there. In *Art as Experience* and other works, Dewey offers numerous thoughts on how one's built environment—the design of schools, parks and public spaces, for example—effect community and inter-subjective participation, and it would have been nice to see more specific discussion of the relationship between aesthetic experience, construed broadly as a harmonious regulative ideal, and the place of art in life. On the qualitative thought side of things, one might have expected more from three essays on the cognitive aspects of aesthetic qualia, for none confronts the fundamental problem of how to square a philosophical approach rooted in an extra-discursive sensory matrix with a pragmatic insistence on communicable meaning. If qualia can only be articulated through a common discourse, and discourse is shaped by social practices of interpretation, the real action of aesthetic inquiry lies in those hermeneutic structures of mediation that give meaning to our sense. While it would be unfair to expect comprehensive treatments of this question here, it is surprising not to find any confrontation with it at all. Robert Innis comes closest in his helpful 'The "Quality" of Philosophy: On the Aesthetic Matrix of Dewey's Pragmatism' when he gestures to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (51), but his invocation of these thinkers is unaccompanied by any sustained discussion. Ultimately, the biggest problem with this section is a lack of any consistency in the meaning of the term 'aesthetics' employed by each of the contributors, such that at times the collection seems like a random assemblage: for Ryder and Skowronski, it means 'art', for Campbell it means something like 'telic harmony', and for Innis it is akin to Kant's 'sensory matrix'. A stronger editorial hand, or at least a short editorial introduction parsing out these differences, would have cleared up confusions.

The volume's second section comprises four essays dedicated to Dewey's ethics. Unlike philosophers seeking universal and absolute moral principles, Dewey offered a functionalist approach to ethical issues; for him, moral theories were tools for reconstructing problematic situations into equilibria more amenable to human growth. Consequently, none of the inherited trifecta of deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics reigns supreme, and moral conscientiousness spells attentiveness to the concrete problems at hand rather than the application of abstract, inviolable schema. The essays here are the least satisfying of the volume, with the exception of Angel M. Faerna's 'Dewey's Value Theory and the Analytic Tradition of Moral Philosophy', a piece that usefully situates Dewey within a larger tradition of empirical ethics. Hugh McDonald's summary of Dewey's theory of valuation will be helpful to readers unfamiliar with his ethical thought, though specialists are unlikely to gain much from it. Matthew Flamm's contribution on the metaphysics of Dewey and Santayana makes a number of interesting if controversial points, yet unfortunately does not grapple with the reasons why Dewey rejected any 'deep' referents in his ontological framework. Flamm accepts Santayana's claim that Dewey's naturalism is superficial without ever explaining why this is a problem. Do appeals to speculative cosmologies in the manner of traditional Western religious metaphysics really lead to better moral theories? How are such appeals supposed to work in a modern pluralist society? These are important questions, and perhaps Santayana's accusation that Dewey was a 'half-hearted naturalist' can offer a way into them, but this is far from evident in Flamm's piece. Finally, Ramon del Castillo's essay, 'John Dewey and the Ethics of Recognition', is an especial disappointment, feeling like a casual conference talk you've walked into halfway

through. Though framed as a response to Axel Honneth's interpretation of Dewey, this essay never explains the content of Honneth's apparently 'insightful readings' (121), an oversight that makes assessing del Castillo's own critique of Honneth impossible. More attention to the now-vast literature on the ethics of recognition would also have made this essay more compelling as a contribution to understanding Dewey's continuing relevance is social and political philosophy.

The volume's third section features three essays on science and logic. As with other philosophical domains, Dewey reconstructed science and logic in terms of their value for human practice rather than as absolute pursuits disengaged from quotidian concerns. Hence for Dewey, logic covers not the abstract rules of correct reasoning, but is the study of inquiry, the first step in the process of resolving problematic situations. Larry Hickman addresses the implications of this functional approach to the teaching of science, Philipp Dorstewitz speaks to Dewey's contributions to the philosophy of science, and Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen defends Dewey's ontological pluralism. Of all the essays collected in this volume, Dorstewitz's does the most to explain Dewey's continuing relevance; its insightful analysis of Deweyan inquiry as intersubjective, contextually situated and temporally ongoing helps address deficiencies of Thomas Kuhn's binary model of normal and revolutionary science. Pietarinen's essay on Dewey's pluralistic universe touches on a rarely-discussed topic, but is marred by the unfortunate (mis)appropriation of Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog and fox analogy for different styles of thought: hedgehogs, recall, pursue one big idea, while foxes constantly shift focus. Pietarinen lets this distinction guide to a fault his discussion of monistic (hedgehog-ish) versus pluralistic (fox-ish) worldviews. While it is true that Dewey fell in with the pluralists in *this* regard, it is also true that his work can be seen as pursuing a few big ideas (the primacy of the practical, the norm of 'growth', the overcoming of traditional conceptual dualisms) or a multitude of smaller insights (consider his numerous interventions in the public sphere and the variety of domains for social reconstruction he addressed) depending on one's perspective. Consequently, the use of this analogy is more distracting than helpful, a fact Pietarinen seems to eventually acknowledge (228).

The volume's final section, on society, boasts some of its strongest essays. Walter Feinberg argues for the salutary implications of Dewey's shift from religion to religious experience for the teaching of comparative religion; Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley measures up Dewey's conception of community against her preferred Roycean conception; Maciej Kassner skillfully argues for a Deweyan, 'positive' conception of freedom against the 'negative' conception in the work of Friedrich Hayek; and Gregory Pappas discusses the intersection of philosophical pragmatism with 'pragmatism' in popular political discourse, arguing that the upshot of the former is a contextual approach to solving political problems in the real world. Specialists will no doubt find things to argue about in these pages, but all four essays are fruitful openings for discussion about the use of Dewey's philosophy for present social amelioration.

In sum, much of *The Continuing Relevance* will be profitably read by those already acquainted with the philosopher's work, and several of the essays are particularly good. Readers new to Dewey will still gain more from the introductory collection edited

by Hickman entitled *Reading Dewey* (Indiana 1998). *The Continuing Relevance* is clearly not meant to function in the same way, however, and is to be especially commended for delving deeper into important aspects of Dewey's thought with work from an international group of specialists. A stronger editorial hand would have been appreciated both in contextualizing various aspects of Dewey's thought as well as in more mundane things like copyediting: to be charitable, typos are not infrequent—including one in the back cover's blurb (which promises to show 'the place of Dewey's thought *on* the philosophical arena'). This quibble notwithstanding, this volume's greatest fault may be its nearly \$100.00 sticker price, a decision by the publisher that virtually assures this work will only be available to institutions with exceptionally deep pockets. Rodopi of Amsterdam should rethink its price points.

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