

# In Dewey's Wake

Unfinished Work of Pragmatic Reconstruction

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*Unfinished Work  
of Pragmatic Reconstruction*

Edited by  
William J. Gavin

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*For Cathy*

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# Introduction

## *Passing Dewey By?*

WILLIAM J. GAVIN

While some philosophers write for eternity, others are more humble, or perhaps more anticipatory, offering outlooks which stem from particular contexts. For the latter group of thinkers, any sense of becoming timeless stems from enduring *through* time rather than transcending it. One of the latter thinkers is John Dewey, whose work consistently alluded to and affirmed the importance of context. Contextualism is the opposite of certainty, that is, of the assumption that an apodictic point of view exists, or is even desirable. In opposition, Dewey has told us that “the most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to neglect of context.”<sup>1</sup>

Taking this statement seriously requires several things on our part. By far the most important of these is realizing that contexts by their very nature are limited, and therefore in some sense and at some time they change and so must be “passed by.” Applying this observation to the works of Dewey himself forces us to ask when, and in what sense, he should be passed by. To be sure, if done at all, this task should be approached respectfully, for Dewey’s work remains at the pinnacle of the American tradition in philosophy. Still, Dewey himself would encourage us to take on this task; failure to do so would result in pragmatism degenerating into a form of antiquarianism, that is, a study of the past without realizing that the future will be different. In contrast, Dewey was constantly about the task of telling us how things have changed, for example, in a post-Darwinian universe. Going further, Dewey is best viewed as a social reformer, and his philosophy, as social criticism, is designed to be passed by, that is, to lead to some form of action. Philosophy for Dewey is mimetic; it reflects and perfects the concerns of a



community, albeit it in a critical manner. It is “formed,” and then it is “formative.” “The distinctive office, problems, and subject matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life in which a given form of philosophy arises, and . . . accordingly, its specific problems vary with the changes in human life that are always going on and that at times constitute a crisis and a turning point in human history” (MW 12:256). Once again, such a stance places upon the reader the responsibility of not letting Dewey’s work exist merely as “text,” but rather of undertaking the task of uncovering how the text relates to contemporary *contexts* in the new millennium.

A comparison here may perhaps be enlightening. At the end of book one of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra says: “Many die too late, and a few die too early. The doctrine still sounds strange: ‘Die at the right time!’”<sup>2</sup> This is a somewhat tricky matter; no bell goes off to let one know just when the right time has arrived. In theory we know what characterizes the right time, i.e., when your death can function as a “spur and a promise to the survivors.”<sup>3</sup> On the face of it, Zarathustra has given his gift (of uneasiness) to his disciples, and asked them to love the earth in its flawed entirety. Now it is time for him to go: “verily Zarathustra had a goal; he threw his ball: now you, my friends, are the heirs of my goal; to you I throw my golden ball.”<sup>4</sup> But having said as much Zarathustra does not leave, asking his disciples to “forgive me for that.”<sup>5</sup> His nondeparture forces the reader into reflection, thus insuring that s/he too is made uneasy. Zarathustra has urged his disciples to “pass him by.” But as the text “progresses” it becomes more and more difficult to accomplish this task. For Zarathustra himself does not stand still long enough to be passed by, as he continues to take upon himself the seemingly impossible task of becoming the *Übermensch*, and affirming eternal recurrence, a task initially thought to be reserved for his successors. Hence the significance of the book’s subtitle: “A Book for All and None.”<sup>6</sup>

Dewey’s texts, like Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, should be viewed as a spur or a prod. This is but another version of the pragmatic stance which stresses the interpenetration of thought and action. The thoughts and criticisms contained in Dewey’s works are not meant merely to be studied, though that of course is necessary. The text is also meant to be directive in nature. But in order to do so the texts must tell a story, a narrative. Dewey is constantly telling the reader the tale of how we got from “there” to “here”—in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and in “The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy,” for example. By the time of Dewey’s “Reconstruction As Seen Twenty-Five Years Later,” written as a new Introduction to *Reconstruction in Philosophy* in the 1940s, the story has become more urgent, and Dewey calls for the reconstruction *of* philosophy rather than merely reconstruction *in* philosophy, saying that “the need for

reconstruction is vastly more urgent than when the book was composed” (MW 12:256). In other words, the *context* has changed.

There is a sense in which we can feel urged to pass Dewey by, analogous to that urged by Zarathustra. With Nietzsche this sense becomes more formidable as it becomes apparent that Zarathustra’s disciples will not be able to pass him by, and that he himself is being asked to become the over[wo]man. Analogously, it can seem easy and somewhat straightforward to suggest that Dewey be passed by; but doing so may prove more difficult than initially appeared to be the case. For Dewey himself anticipated and took on, to a remarkable degree, many of the issues now being debated in contemporary philosophy. Dewey, like Zarathustra, did not stand still, waiting passively to be “passed by” by a group of successors. Though in a sense he urged his followers to surpass him for good pedagogical reasons, Dewey also was remarkably anticipatory of some of the new “problems”<sup>7</sup> on the horizon of the new millennium.

In the following essays several Dewey scholars take up the issue of just how, and to what extent, his work is to be “passed by.”

For one set of authors, Dewey’s contextualism remains intact, requiring more to be amended than radically changed. Thus, in “Advancing American Philosophy: Pragmatism and Philosophical Scholarship,” James Campbell considers the pragmatic meaning of philosophical scholarship at the present time, a time when many suggest that we are *preserving* rather than *advancing* American philosophy. Campbell begins with a formulation of this issue, and then compares efforts to advance American philosophy with what might be done to advance the American classical musical tradition. In a final section he “advances” matters significantly, by showing how a Deweyan approach might be effectively utilized in dealing with the contemporary issue of abortion. In “Dewey’s Limited Shelf Life: A Consumer Warning,” Michael Eldridge argues that Dewey’s most significant contribution is his advocacy of “social intelligence.” Using the latter, however, requires that we be sensitive to particular contexts. As a specific example of his point here, Eldridge argues that we not unqualifiedly accept an endorsement of unions in all situations—or assume that Dewey himself would do so in the context of the new millennium. In “New Directions and Uses in the Reconstruction of Dewey’s Ethics,” Gregory Pappas argues that, although we do not find an ethical theory *per se* in Dewey’s writings, nonetheless there are new functions for an ethical theory which are not at odds with Dewey’s criticism of traditional ethical theory. Rather, there is available from Dewey an alternative position which lies *between* divorcing ethical theory completely from moral practice, and on the other side, the pretensions of some normative ethical theories to dictate our moral conduct in a noncontextual manner. In “Contexts Vibrant and Contexts Souring in

Dewey's Philosophy," William Gavin notes that neglect of contexts and contextualism was deemed "the most pervasive fallacy in philosophic thinking" by Dewey. Contexts should be "fat" rather than "thin," offering a rich naturalism. Going further, contexts can go wrong or "sour" in several ways: by reducing the *context* to the text alone; by turning interaction into control or domination; by replacing the environment of interaction with one of interacting with narcissistic "pseudo-events"; and by not realizing that the *content* of a *context* has changed.

For a second group of authors, Dewey's work needs significant revision if he is to be relevant in the new millennium. Thus in "As Dewey Was Hegelian, So We Should Be Deweyan," Ray Boisvert faults Dewey's attempt to extend the method of the physical sciences to politics, education, and morals. While such a goal may have been comprehensible at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is not feasible in contexts confronted with "AIDS-type" issues. Dewey's attempt to universalize scientific method overgeneralizes from the specificity of different contexts and, going further, it immerses him in a "fresh start" view, that is, a new approach through science, which should be avoided. Dewey still has much to offer however, in the areas of "lived experience" and in his view of mediation which assumes "co-response" as primordial. In "(Re)construction Zone: Beware of Falling Statues," Shannon Sullivan argues that Dewey neglected the issues of race and racism in his philosophy. This, for Sullivan, is more than a mere gap or hole in his thought, for it perpetuates the conceptual and theoretical "whiteness" of his philosophy. Nonetheless, some resources do exist in Dewey's pragmatism which can be of assistance in going beyond it on the matter of race. The most powerful of these is "habit," understood as an organism's predisposition to transact with its physical, social, political and natural worlds in particular ways. In "Between Being and Emptiness: Toward an Eco-Ontology of Inhabitation," Tom Alexander argues that the thought of John Dewey is of exceptional value in relocating the quest for "knowledge" back where it belongs, that is, within the context of the general issue of "wisdom." Dewey dominates the twentieth century as the only thinker to articulate an eco-ontology compatible with democracy. Alexander offers a marriage of Dewey with the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, especially as refined by Nagarjuna.

Still a third group of authors included here argues that we should not be overhasty in passing Dewey by, for he has much to offer that has still, even as we enter the new millennium, gone unnoticed or unappreciated. Thus, in "On Passing Dewey By: The New Millennium and the Climate of Pluralism," Sandra Rosenthal argues that Dewey's philosophy and his understanding of self offer a more useful balance of community and pluralism than do the more exclusive alternatives put forward by Alasdair

MacIntyre, John Rawls, and Richard Rorty. In contrast to Dewey, each of the latter philosophers offers a view of the self which seems unable to exercise its anointed community task. In “Pressing Dewey’s Advantage,” Joseph Margolis shows how the work of Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam tend to cancel each other out. Each is a decisive critique of the other’s particular form of relativism without, however, ever showing how relativism might be formulated in a coherent and defensible manner. In contrast, Margolis suggests that a coherent account of constructive relativism can be offered, one which is quite compatible with Dewey’s realism stemming from *Experience and Nature*. In “Improving Life,” John Lachs shows how Dewey’s idea of “‘means-end’ integrated actions” promises permanent improvements to the human condition. Rather than dispensing with undesired labor for a few people only as in, for example, Aristotle and Hegel, Dewey offers a strategy that is, in general, universally available. Rather than offering attitudinal change as in the Stoics, Dewey presents a way of objectively reconstructing our relations with our activities. But Lachs charges that Dewey’s own account can offer only moderate progress, enabling us to achieve some, but by no means all, of the little improvements of which the human being is capable. In opposition, he suggests that we retain the “utopian” ideal that there are activities every element of which is rich in consequences and rewarding in experience. Finally, in “In the Wake of Darwin,” Vincent Colapietro argues that Dewey is best viewed as a “critical traditionalist” who constantly emphasized the need for a pluralistic approach to the past. He turns to those occasions when Dewey mourned the loss of colleagues, such as James, Mead and Hocking, by reenacting the ritual of recollection, in order to emphasize that unbearable loss is oftentimes something that must be “worked” through. Dewey is indeed a “spur” for Colapietro, that is, he is a thinker who invites and demands further critical reflection, but one whose work must be married to Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche as we move into the future.

Hopefully, the “pragmatic upshot” of this pluralistic tapestry of approaches is a rich narrative—one indicating both where the context has changed, and also what needs to be preserved and nurtured in Dewey as we advance into the future.

## NOTES

1. John Dewey, “Context and Thought” (LW 6:5). All references to Dewey’s work in this volume are to the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953* edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–91), and published as *The*

*Early Works: 1881–1898* (EW); *The Middle Works, 1899–1924* (MW); and *The Later Works, 1925–1953* (LW). These designations are followed by volume and page number. Quotations in this section are cited from *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953: The Electronic Edition*, edited by Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, Va.: IntelLex Corporation, 1996).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 183.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 186.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 103.

7. Though Dewey was perhaps too ready to conceive every “situation” as at least potentially “problematic” in character. On the important difference between “having a problem” and “having trouble,” see John McDermott, Introduction, *William and Henry James, Selected Letters*, ed. Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), xxii.

## PART ONE

# Changing Contexts

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## ONE

# Advancing American Philosophy

## *Pragmatism and Philosophical Scholarship*

JAMES CAMPBELL

### INTRODUCTION: PRESERVATION VERSUS ADVANCEMENT

The American philosophical tradition is a rich and varied one that offers to the historically oriented philosopher a limitless amount of potential research. There are numerous aspects of the tradition in need of study: questions to be addressed, themes to be reinterpreted, figures to be recovered, new developments to be incorporated. Much of this analysis is carried on in conjunction with the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP). It seems, however, that commentators on the history of American philosophy often feel themselves in a bind about the usefulness of further historical inquiry. I am not referring here to the mindless doubting of the value of historical efforts in any form, the belief that all important philosophical work is contemporary. Rather, my concern is the more specific question of the value of additional historical examination on pragmatism, the central strand in the American philosophical tradition. If, as non-pragmatists might suggest, the purpose of philosophical inquiry is to uncover truths about ultimate questions, then there is no problem with endless speculation; but, if the purpose of philosophical inquiry is to make the world a better place—a description that would seem to fit pragmatism—then we are led to wonder about the actual value of continuing historical scholarship about pragmatic (or any other) philosophy. At some point, it would seem, we have learned enough about the commentaries on *The Principles of Psychology* and the background to *A Common Faith*; now it is time to try to change the world. At some point, we need to move beyond “mere philosophizing.” We philosophers need to stop



talking to each other about the concepts of ‘fuller experience’ and ‘moral growth’ and to try to do something to expand the range of fuller experience and the likelihood of moral growth in our communities. As pragmatists, we need to resist the temptation to continue to reformulate our ideas until we think that they are in perfect shape. We must fight this temptation, so powerful to individuals of an intellectual bent, because we know that such endless refinement will keep us from any practical applications. We need to remind ourselves that our philosophical work has an overall purpose, and that our attempts to advance American philosophy must further this purpose.

In our search for the pragmatic value of philosophical scholarship, we can consider two initial stances, each of which has some value. On the one hand, there is merit to the position that in our work we cannot simply repeat what has been done so many times before. There would seem to be little need, for example, for an additional exposition of Peirce’s essay on the fixation of belief, an essay that was never extremely hard to understand in the first place. There would similarly seem to be little value in yet another attempt to repair James’s troubled essay on the will to believe, an essay that philosophers by the score have already repaired to their own, if not to each other’s, satisfaction. Continuing to work on these and similar topics, topics that have either been settled adequately already or that give all indication of defying any possibility of settlement, makes of our philosophizing a kind of intellectual history in which our endless tinkering distracts us from any larger obligations. The pragmatic scholar recognizes that well-written intellectual history is a valuable product, but one that does not represent the full range of our potential activities as inheritors of the American tradition. On the other hand, there is merit to the position that extraordinary and valuable insights were achieved by past American philosophers and that these need to be passed on—explicated and made relevant—to the next generations of American thinkers. Evidence for the severity of the need to better understand the American philosophical tradition can be found in almost every philosophy journal and at almost every philosophy conference. Moreover, even when we leave this narrowly academic emphasis aside, there is still the need to engage our general undergraduate populations (and broader public audiences as well) on issues of great human importance like the source and justification of human valuing. Here the insights of the many figures in the American philosophical tradition would, if better known, provide valuable suggestions. To pass on these insights in the classroom requires instructors who are well grounded in the tradition. It requires, in other words, good intellectual history by scholars who are dedicated to putting their ideas to work to advance social goals.

The need to consider the pragmatic value of historical scholarship is particularly vital at present because the historical and pragmatic emphases

have grown so different. The predominate mood, largely influenced by Richard Rorty, seems to be to abandon historical work and to concentrate on the latter task. Rorty himself has confessed that he does not really understand the tradition for which he has become the leading spokesperson;<sup>1</sup> and, further, his relaxed and playful style suggests that worrying over the historical niceties is wrongheaded. The pragmatic value of the American philosophical tradition, however, reveals itself fully only to those with a firm grounding in that tradition. I am not suggesting, of course, that Rorty's work is without value or that he does not have a place somewhere in the American philosophical tradition other than at the head. Even as uninformed as he is about the tradition, his work might draw individuals working outside it to reconsider the works of figures whom they had neglected or forgotten; and his work might result in the creation of new insights among those who are more solidly grounded. Still, the question remains whether recent developments demonstrate the advancement, or the kidnapping, of the American philosophical tradition.

What does it mean to advance the American philosophical tradition? How would this differ from attempts to preserve it? The *preservation* of a philosophical tradition would seem to be an easier task because the goal in preservation is simply to capture and embalm a set of ideas in its present state so that it remains available to others at a later date. Preserving philosophical traditions is certainly better than forgetting them; and, at times, we need to remind ourselves that SAAP was born at a particular time and in relation to a particular situation in which even the preservation of the American philosophical tradition was in doubt. At present, it would seem that this situation has changed for the better; now we can and must think about fulfilling the potential implied in "advancement." As might be expected, *advancement* is a much more complex and demanding task than preservation. Advancing the American philosophical tradition involves moving beyond negative aspects of the inherited tradition—minor ones like its ambivalence about esthetics and major ones like its lack of inclusiveness—while at the same time preserving the valuable aspects that are to remain vibrant in the reconstruction. It involves a close familiarity with the tradition that is being reconstructed so that it winds up being advanced rather than kidnapped. So far, however, I have barely scratched the surface. The goal of advancing American philosophy leaves us at present with many unsettled questions.

## TWO PARALLEL CASES

We can consider the issues involved in advancing American philosophy in the light of a parallel case: the (fictional) Society for the Advancement of

American Music (SAAM). The question that I want to focus upon is what would distinguish such an organization from the (equally fictitious) Society for the Preservation of American Music (SPAM)? What would it mean to *advance* rather than *preserve* American music?

The work of SAAM would have to include a number of tasks. One of these would be to keep before the interested public the works of those American composers who have long been recognized to be central to the American classical tradition. I have in mind such individuals as: Charles Ives, Walter Piston, Howard Hanson, Virgil Thomson, George Gershwin, Roy Harris, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, William Schuman, and Leonard Bernstein. Another of the tasks of SAAM would be the work of building contemporary audiences for the compositions of other figures who have been largely forgotten over time. Here, part of the interest of SAAM would be in refamiliarizing the listening public with works that once had a fairly wide audience. Some examples here would be the compositions of George Whitefield Chadwick, Charles Martin Loeffler, Edward MacDowell, and Charles Tomlinson Griffes. At the same time, SAAM would also need to build the audience for composers who, for whatever reason, failed to garner the sort of critical regard during their lifetimes that these figures did. I have in mind here such neglected composers as William Dawson and Amy Marcy Cheney Beach, whose *Negro Folk Symphony* and *Gaelic Symphony* (among other works) deserve wider regard. SAAM should also work to expand the abilities of audiences to better appreciate those composers who have worked more on the fringes of the American classical tradition like: John Cage, Alan Hovhaness, Philip Glass and John Adams. Ranging a bit further, SAAM should attempt to foster the “serious” appreciation of composers like Scott Joplin, Louis Thomas Hardin, and Edward Kennedy (“Duke”) Ellington.

So far, it would seem that the tasks of SAAM and SPAM would be virtually interchangeable. Both organizations would work to make the American classical music tradition more popular with contemporary and future audiences. Rather than just preserving the historical content of the American classical tradition, however, SAAM would go further at this point and attempt to expand the body of works that makes up the tradition. These efforts to advance the tradition would most likely include competitions of various sorts that would result in performances, broadcasts, publication, and recordings of the new works that would make the victorious composers better known. The primary goal of these competitions would be to ensure that the tradition come to be understood as open-ended and evolving.

A fourth task of SAAM would be more indirect. This would be the deliberate attempt to pass on an appreciation for the tradition, as it had

been enhanced in the efforts to satisfy the first three tasks, to the students who are to become the American musicians of the next generations. A major part of these efforts to increase appreciation would involve the establishment of workshops and master classes to foster personal interactions between these students and those interpreters of the American tradition—the composers and performers and commentators—who have helped to advance the tradition in the past. The goal here would be to pass on those elements of musical style that are in some sense extratextual. More than the words and notes on the page are the ideas, the references, and the intentions that shape the choices in composition and in performance. It is these intangible aspects of the tradition that, when passed on in a face-to-face manner, can help to create a skilled performance group and an informed audience that will advance the American classical tradition. And, it is these intangible aspects that, if neglected, will hamstring efforts to carry the tradition into the future.

With this analogy in mind, we can now consider SAAP in its task of the *advancement* of American philosophy; and, for the most part, the transference would seem to be quite straightforward. One task of SAAP would be to provide a forum for the evaluation and appreciation of the ideas of such central figures as Peirce, James, Dewey, Royce, Santayana, Mead, and Whitehead, who have long been seen as being at the center of the American philosophical tradition. Leaving aside questions of the relative emphases among them, SAAP seems to be doing quite well with regard to this task. A second task would be to develop greater interest in the neglected or forgotten works of the lesser known figures in the American philosophical tradition. The list of such individuals is not short. It would include, to offer just a baker's dozen of the more recent figures, such philosophers as: Hartley Burr Alexander, John Eloy Boodin, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, Mary Whiton Calkins, James Edwin Creighton, Irwin Edman, William Ernest Hocking, Elijah Jordan, Alain Leroy Locke, Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, De Witt H. Parker, Edgar A. Singer, Jr., and James Hayden Tufts. While there may be legitimate reasons why these philosophers fell out of favor, an initial survey of recent SAAP activities would suggest that much more could be done to grant them all another hearing. With regard to the third task of SAAP, the attempt to develop and expand the body of ideas that comprises the American tradition through the fostering of new works, SAAP has done even less. Without any funds of its own to commission major new works or to subsidize their publication, SAAP can do little more than open its programs as a forum where individuals can present their novel ideas. Experience suggests, however, that the programs are molded to favor the historical over the novel, serving more to preserve than advance the tradition.

With regard to the fourth task, the indirect task of passing on a greater regard for the tradition to those who are to be the philosophy teachers of the next generations, SAAP has been very successful. The cause of American philosophy is very strongly advanced by the ability of young scholars to interact with individuals who have long worked with the figures and ideas that have come to interest them. In my own case (and I am surely not alone here), I was able even as a young scholar to interact on an equal footing with any number of individuals whose articles and books were then powerfully active in my mind. (The equality of this relationship was due primarily to their graciousness.) Leaving aside those who are still prominent at SAAP meetings, I remember with great fondness and gratitude the interactions I had with such philosophers as: Elizabeth Flower, Darnell Rucker, and Ralph Sleeper. It is these interactions, during the sessions and in the hallways and at the meals, that make SAAP meetings high-energy seminars for American philosophy. By means of these interactions, young scholars reap many gains: direct answers to specific questions about written works; explanations for puzzlements that had not yet become problems; interpretations alternate to those that had been learned in graduate school; suggestions about where to look for further assistance; and so on. The particular impacts here may be slight since the words on the page remain the same; but these differences of emphasis and mood and shading can have a cumulative effect, leaving the resulting product greatly improved. As in the case of the fourth task of SAAM, what is transmitted in this face-to-face manner is a sense of the whole tradition that is broader and deeper and more diverse than is likely to be gained in the normal course of graduate studies. The primary result of fostering these intangible continuities is a new generation of scholars and teachers who can work within the developing American philosophical tradition and advance it.

#### ADVANCING THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

This inquiry into the advance of the American philosophical tradition, and more broadly into the pragmatic value of philosophic scholarship, is based upon the assumption that there is some value in the American tradition that has manifested itself to us in our attempts to solve our philosophical problems and that will be of assistance to others. We cannot offer any antecedent proof for this claim. We believe with James that “every philosopher . . . whose initiative counts for anything in the evolution of thought, has taken his stand on a sort of dumb conviction that the truth must lie in one direction rather than another, and a sort of preliminary assurance that his notion can be made to work. . . .”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this belief is shared in a

general way by all the members of any pluralistic philosophy department. In such a department, all the philosophers have the feeling that their own perspective is the one that yields answers to the serious problems of living; yet, at the same time, each recognizes that the others in the department have their own dumb convictions that the truth lies in other directions. As a department, these philosophers hope that, by presenting their students with a number of approaches to philosophical inquiry, the students will both find one that helps them to deal with their inchoate philosophical problems and develop respect for other approaches to philosophizing.

This consideration of the nature of philosophical traditions and the means to their advancement indicates that a necessary component of advancement must be some element of novelty. The process of advancement requires the development of new ideas, or the application of old ideas to new situations, or their interaction with new rivals. As examples of each of these, we can consider an attempt to expand upon the ideas of Mead to explicate better than he was able to the social origins of the self, or an effort to apply the insights gained from the study of Dewey's ethical thought to a contemporary problem like abortion, or an encounter between Royce's understanding of community as a social process and the more geographically based understanding of community present in the work of Wendell Berry. Without some element of novelty, the American philosophical tradition, or any tradition, would not be advanced but simply preserved. Still, it remains important to remember that what is being advanced is a philosophical tradition, an historical entity with its own profile and contours and inertia. As such, a philosophical tradition must be mastered before it can be advanced. Otherwise, elements of it are simply being abducted and put to another purpose.

In the examination of the question of pragmatism and scholarship, Dewey's work has a special sort of primacy because of his own direct consideration of this issue. In "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" of 1917, for example, he pointed to the widening distance between the problems of philosophers as an academic group increasingly focused on its own internal professional issues and the problems of ordinary people; and he suggested that this trend toward greater separation needed to be reversed. As he wrote, philosophy will recover itself "when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men." While at present avoiding the problems that arise "in the vicissitudes of life" by busying ourselves with problems that are "supposed to depend upon Reality as such, or its distinction from a world of Appearance, or its relation to a Knower as such" might not be as popular as it was in 1917 (MW 10:46–47),<sup>3</sup> the possibility for philosophers to avoid the problems of ordi-

nary people by dealing with philosophers' problems remains. Among this latter class would seem to be the problem of scholarly hyper-preparation that we considered early on.

Dewey, at times, may have failed to appreciate the importance of the tradition of which he was a part to his own way of thinking. Moreover, it is surely unnecessary to point out that philosophers are persons very much like nonphilosophers, with many interests and problems that are in no way narrowly academic, and that one of the fundamental tenets of all philosophers in the American tradition is that no individual lives more than a shadow life without an ongoing component of philosophical inquiry. Still, there remains something of great importance to his position. As Dewey develops this theme in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* in 1920, he emphasized the need for philosophers to select very carefully the problems on which they are to work. Evaluation among philosophical problems is just as important as evaluation within them. As he writes, "the task of future philosophy is to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day." Rather than continuing to puzzle over issues inherited from their philosophical tradition, philosophers should devote themselves to "enlightening the moral forces which move mankind and . . . contributing to the aspirations of men to attain to a more ordered and intelligent happiness" (MW 12:94). In this way, Dewey hoped that philosophical work would not be devoted to preserving its present status in our inherited culture but rather to earning a place in the ongoing life of society, thus advancing both social life and itself.

An initial attempt to translate Dewey's position might be through a separation of the philosophers' academic task into two large groups. On the one hand, there is the need for them to teach undergraduates. These students for the most part will take only one course, almost always at a general or introductory level; and teachers need to select a level of historical precision that will build student interest. Here, our attempts to advance the American philosophical tradition would seem most successful if we emphasize the *spirit* of pragmatic inquiry. Consequently, instead of doing explicitly historical work, we should try to "cash in" our concepts and ideas in terms of our students' experiences. Further, we should make it a central point of our inquiry to examine and challenge our students' ideas and values to see both what these ideas mean in the contemporary world and whether they have retained any value. What value does marriage, for example, retain in our emerging world? Is it possible to see the course of nature as containing a plan? What is the contribution of song, and other forms of art, to human life? These are issues that matter deeply to our students and issues with which a grounding in the American philosophical tradition can help us. Similarly, it is necessary to challenge the growing belief



that information and data are enough to settle our social questions. This popular, if mistaken, belief rests on the unfounded assumption that science has uncovered—or soon will uncover—all the answers that we need to live our lives and organize our social practices. It is admittedly hard to see, except perhaps occasionally, how our efforts at this level would do much to advance American philosophy. In most of our work with undergraduates, our primary interest must be to advance society.

Still, in addition to undergraduate teaching, academic philosophers have an obligation to carry their discipline forward in a more direct fashion. For those who are interested in American philosophy, this obligation requires ongoing research in the primary and secondary literature of the tradition to understand what has been done in the past and what needs to be done in the future. By writing their own interpretations of what has happened and contributing their own thoughts to the process—by, as Santayana suggests, “joining the procession wherever one happens to come upon it, and following it as long as one’s legs hold out”<sup>4</sup>—these philosophers do their part to help the tradition advance. Whether their efforts are directed to increasing our understanding of the central figures of the tradition, or extending our familiarity with those who are currently neglected, or presenting their own novel ideas, these philosophers can advance the tradition. Moreover, if they are very fortunate in their academic situation, they can contribute directly to the preparation of the next generations of philosophers interested in American thought by personally introducing advanced undergraduates and graduate students to the inherited ways of thinking that constitute the tradition. In dealing with these students, they may even be justified on occasion to undertake expositions of “The Fixation of Belief” and to ask students to attempt to repair “The Will to Believe.”

We also need to consider directly the relationship of this academic work to the larger interests of society. Here, much of what needs to be said can be pulled together from what we have already seen. Philosophers, as citizens, have obligations of service to their broader communities. Philosophical scholarship, although important in itself, must be evaluated among the other goods of society. More important than what interests me is what I ought to be interested in, and here the criteria must be social. Our conceptual work needs to incorporate wider social experience, and our tendency to play with ideas must be countered with our recognition of the needs of our social situation. Of course, our attempts to pass on the insights contained in the American philosophical tradition—understanding the nature of community and its problems, understanding the nature of the self and the good life, and so on—will go a long way toward validating the pragmatic value of historical scholarship.



## A DEWEYAN APPROACH TO ABORTION

So far, this examination of pragmatism and philosophical scholarship has been devoted to a general consideration of largely informal methods for advancing the American philosophical tradition. It is also possible to consider a more formal method. What I have in mind is to attempt to address a contemporary issue through the voice of one of the central figures in the American tradition. How, for example, might Dewey deal with a problem like abortion? Any attempt to answer such a question is, of course, largely speculative. We cannot *know* how Dewey might address any contemporary problem. We can, however, attempt to extrapolate upon what we believe to be the basic core of his work; and explicating this core is the point of the exercise. Whether in the form of an individual or group writing assignment, or of a critique of a document with which they are presented, this sort of teaching device might help advanced students to climb inside the tradition and try it out as a means for dealing with their problems. A discussion of the issue of abortion, in the style of Dewey, might run as follows.

At the present time, America is in the grips of a major crisis centering around the issue of abortion. Politicians and the media, religious and civic groups wrestle with facts and values, definitions and procedures, surveys and predictions. In spite of all of this public activity, the two centers of contradictory opinion remain as divided as ever. This polarity of opinion would seem to leave the inquiring individual unable to make use of the values of one position without condemning the other position out of hand. On one side stand those who are “pro-life”—the defenders of human life in any form or degree possible. They identify personhood with the *conceptus* and consider any prevention of maturation and birth to be “murder.” Since the “rights” of the “child” are seen as primary, the circumstances of the situation need hardly be considered. From the child’s point of view, after all, poverty or disability is a small price to pay for life. Circumstances only cloud a very simple situation in which a “person” is either allowed to live or prevented from living. Within such a mind-set, to have an abortion is purely and simply to commit murder. On the other side stand those who maintain that to have an abortion is a woman’s prerogative whenever she chooses to do so. Current medical technology has made early abortion a simple and safe procedure, far safer in fact than carrying a fetus to term. Whereas for those who are pro-life, no justification for abortion is good enough—no reason could condemn an innocent child to death—for those who are “pro-choice,” no justification is needed. The body of a woman is her “property,” and what she does with it is exclusively her own business. The fetus is perhaps a person of some sort, but it has no right to make the serious demands of pregnancy on any woman.

Each of these positions demonstrates an understanding of abortion so simple in nature that the failure of one side to grasp the other's position defies intellectual analysis. This perhaps explains each side's emotional condemnation of its opponent as "immoral" or "totalitarian." But as far from each other as they may be, and as radically different in their conclusions, the two positions share a common assumption. This joint starting point is the belief that the abortion problem has *an* answer. This answer may be either that abortion is wrong—and therefore never to be permitted—or that abortion, while not a positive good, is not wrong—and therefore permissible when a woman desires to obtain one. The essence of both cases, however, is that there is a fixed answer: abortion itself is either right or wrong.

The weakness of this right/wrong approach is that it makes the abortion problem all too simple: the only problematic aspect is how to deal with the recalcitrance of the opponent. In both instances, the answer to the question arises *outside of the situation*. Certain possible outcomes to the question are rejected out of hand as wrong without any knowledge of the situation itself. This approach falsifies the actual situation because it speaks of goods and evils prior to our analysis: and, prior to analysis, there are only goods which compete as means for our ends-in-view. Life is good. Children are good. Motherhood is good. Freedom and a career are goods. None of these in itself is an evil. "The worse or evil is a rejected good. . . . Until it is rejected, it is a competing good" (MW 14:193). People then do not deliberate over goods and evils, but over what they experience as competing goods. "Choice is not the emergence of preference out of indifference. It is the emergence of a unified preference out of competing preferences" (MW 14:134). Moral choice is not the adoption of some inherent good and the rejection of many inherent evils.

Traditional morality opposes abortion, equating it with murder. This position seems extreme to many; but, rather than simply denying that abortion is murder (as the pro-choice position does), we should try to see how abortion came to be equated with murder. Then perhaps we will be able to deal rationally with the absolutism of the pro-life position. We must realize that there were reasons why abortion came to be seen as an evil that society had a legitimate interest in preventing, and may still have an interest in preventing in some cases. In an attempt to evaluate the history of the abortion question, we must first consider the role of medical factors. If abortion is now safer than full-term pregnancy, it has only become so in the last few decades. At the time that traditional morality evolved its prohibition against abortion, obtaining an abortion was risking death. Moreover, the desire of traditional morality to prevent abortions grew out of sociomedical conditions under which all too frequently the child died anyway. When our control over life and death was often no more direct than