

Some Remarks on Dewey's Metaphysics and Theory of Education¹

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Introduction

In a famous and much misunderstood passage in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916/1980) proclaims: "If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-men, philosophy may even be defined as *the general theory of education* (338; emphasis in original). My article examines some of what he means by this statement.

We know Dewey as the philosopher of reconstruction. His most ambitious and overlooked reconstruction is that of Western metaphysics, which disrupts the entire framework of western thought and is a major source of the deep discomfort many have with his philosophy of education. I approach Dewey by examining the standard ingredients of western metaphysics that he rejects or reconstructs. They are: Fixed form or essence (*eidos*), ultimate origin, foundation, or first principle (*arche*), completion or purpose (*telos*), the state of completion, perfection, or complete actualization (*entelecheia*), and substance or subject (*ousia*). I will also consider actuality, activity, or function (*energeia*) and potential for change (*dynamis*).

Metaphysics seems recondite and remote until we ask such existential and educational questions as: What is the ultimate essence of a human being? What is the absolute foundation of human development? What is the *telos* and perfection of a human life? What are the limits of human potential? What actualizes human potential and how may we

use it to create a better individual and collective destiny? For Dewey, there is no fixed and final human essence, no ultimate foundation, no perfect *telos*, and no substantial subject. We have potential for change, but not latent potential. In my article, I urge the reader to acknowledge the educational inevitability and importance of these metaphysical questions, even if you completely reject Dewey's answers.

The elements of Western metaphysics tend to collapse into each other. Frequently substance is the essence that exists as an innate latent potential actualized through appropriate activities that allow the being to achieve its perfect *telos*. Many theories of educational development are like this. Perhaps the most influential of all is that of Jean Piaget. In his genetic epistemology, Piaget departs from a foundation of innate biological structures that undergo distinct linear stages of development, or what he calls "mental embryology," to achieve the perfect teleological actualization of the human essence; that is, a rational animal. Dewey completely rejects embryological metaphors of human development along with the hidden metaphysics that makes them so plausible. Dewey's social constructivism diverges widely from Piaget's subjective constructivism.

Dewey separates metaphysical existence from logical essence while insisting that language joins them. He urges us to avoid three fallacies. First, we should shun what Dewey (1925/1981) calls "*the philosophic fallacy*;" that is, the conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existences (p. 35). For Dewey, essences, *teloi*, foundations, substances, and so on are contingent social constructions of language and logic. Language provides us with meanings (e.g., there is a seven foot snake in this room). Logic, what Dewey calls the theory of inquiry, determines if we can, in fact warrant linguistic meanings as knowledge (hopefully, inquiry will show there are no snakes in this room). Dewey believes we get our ontology (essences, including the human essence) through the constructive processes of our language and logic, not the other way around. The second fallacy Dewey wishes us to avoid is "intellectualism," by which he means the notion that "all experiencing is a mode of knowing, and that all subject-matter, all nature, is, in principle, to be reduced and transformed till it is defined in terms identical with the characteristics presented by refined objects of science as such" (p. 28). Piaget's emphasis on logicomathematical psychological systems falls into this fallacy. For Dewey, all inquiry begins with immediate, qualitative experiences. We have and feel existence before we know it while much of it we will never name much less know. The last fallacy is dualism; Dewey rejects not only the mind versus matter dualism, but also the knower versus known, the self versus society, and the culture versus nature dualisms. We are participants in existence, not spectators. Piaget's Kantian influenced experimental epistemology is subtly dualistic.

Ultimately, Dewey (1928/1984a) thinks “the social” is “The Inclusive Philosophic Idea” and not metaphysics; hence the importance of education. All meanings, including all statements of essences, relatively stable foundations, purposes, actualizations, substances, the actual, and the possible are social. Dewey drains the swamp of metaphysics into the basin of socially constructed linguistic meanings and logical essences drawn from ordered discourse.

For Dewey, metaphysics is last philosophy not first philosophy; it is a product of language and inquiry. His so-called “generic traits of existence” are what all human inquiries, all domains of social practice, contingently turn out to have in common. These various inquiries include education, carpentry, engineering, jurisprudence, and such. He thinks every domain of inquiry struggles to render those aspects of events that sustain human existence “relatively stable” over the “precarious” events that do not. He also thinks all inquiries disclose the generic traits of interaction, diversity, and change. If there are generic traits common to every domain of inquiry then knowledge of them allows philosophy to become “a messenger, a liaison officer, making reciprocally intelligible voices speaking provincial tongues, and thereby enlarging as well as rectifying the meanings with which they are charged” (Dewey, 1925/1981, 306).² Dewey conceived philosophy etymologically as a friend of wisdom, where wisdom lies beyond knowledge alone. While the various cultural domains of knowledge are useful, it is a philosophical question to ask if they are good. My paper only examines the three generic traits of interaction, diversity, and change.

Dewey’s Reconstruction of Western Metaphysics

Ralph Sleeper (1986) remarks that Dewey clearly distinguished “the theory of inquiry and the theory of existence, as well as the theory of language that links them” (p. 6). “The subject-matter of metaphysics,” notes Sleeper, “is existence” (111). The subject matter of logic is essences and identities. Dewey (1925/1981) clearly stated that “there is a natural bridge that joins the gap between existence and essence; namely communication, language, discourse” (p. 133). Meanings, true or false, mediate between immediate existence, and the refined essences of inquiry. Here is how Dewey describes the relation between existence and essence:

Essence . . . is but a pronounced instance of [linguistic] meaning; to be partial, and to assign *a* meaning to a thing as *the* meaning is but to evince human subjection to bias . . . Essence is never existence, and yet it is the [logical] essence, the distilled import of existence . . . its intellectual voucher. . . .” (p. 144)

Jean Paul Sartre thought existence preceded essence only for human beings. For Dewey, the distinction includes all being, although only linguistic beings can bridge the gap. The educational implications are as profound as they are difficult to ponder.

In his *Logic*, Dewey (1938/1986) writes: “The name *objects* will be reserved for subject-matter so far as it has been produced and ordered in settled form by means of inquiry; proleptically, objects are the *objectives* of inquiry” (p. 122). Dewey transfers the functions normally associated with metaphysics and ontotheology to inquiry. For him, the existential task is to create a cosmos from chaos by transforming indeterminate situations in ways that promote long-term prosperity. Directing the course of events is the office of inquiry. I would like to add that what Dewey says here about the construction of objects by inquiry extends to the construction of social objects (e.g., persons) in the social and educational sciences as well as the humanities.

In “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” Dewey (1909/1977) boldly declares:

The conception that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge for two thousand years . . . rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final . . . In laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating forms that had been regarded as types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the *Origin of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics and religion. (p. 3)

Dewey might well have added metaphysics and education. Traditional metaphysics often places ultimate ontology beyond time, chance, and change. Dewey converts the primary subject matter of ontological metaphysics into the subject matter of inquiry. Essences, including the human essence, are constructed products of inquiry and not antecedent existences into whose immediate presence it is the task of inquiry, including educational inquiry, to conduct us.

A species is the ultimate ontological subject of evolutionary theory. Dewey did for all essences what Darwin did for species. He declares, “The conception of εἶδος, species, a fixed form and final cause, was the central principle of knowledge as well as of nature. Upon it rested the logic of science” (p. 6). After Darwin, Dewey (1920/1982) insists, “natural science is forced by its own development to abandon the assumption of fixity and to recognize that what for it is actually ‘universal’ is *process* . . .” (p. 260). A species is an *eidos*. Dewey (1909/1977) recognizes that often *eidos* is determined by *telos* in traditional metaphysics when he states that “the classic notion of species carried with it the idea of purpose” (p.

8). Those in education that embrace Dewey's notion of reconstruction do not always understand the depth from whence it comes

Estimates are that 99% of all species that have ever existed are now extinct.³ Dewey's realizes that what holds for biological essences also hold for logical essences, and for that matter, the human essence. Dewey (1925/1981) insists that "even the solid earth mountains, the emblems of constancy, appear and disappear like the clouds A thing may endure *secula seculorum* and yet not be everlasting; it will crumble before the gnawing tooth of time, as it exceeds a certain measure. Every existence is an event" (p. 63). Dewey's reconstruction of *eidōs* as forms (objects, logical principles, etc.) constructed as a consequence of inquiry renders it not only temporal and contingent, it also removes it from the domain of traditional metaphysics.

Existence for Dewey is an event. There is nothing fixed and final in a Darwinian universe. In Dewey's philosophy "nature is viewed as consisting of events rather than substances, it is characterized by *histories* Consequently, it is natural for genuine initiations and consummations to occur in experience" (pp. 5-6). For him, existence, the subject matter of metaphysics, is an event of events; it is about processes, not ultimate substances (*ousia*). There are no absolute origins or foundations (*arche*) and no fixed and final ends (*telos, entelecheia*). Dewey's Darwinian intuition is that everything, existences, and their distilled import, essences, is in flux, everything changes; whatever is constructed will someday be either intellectually deconstructed or physically destroyed. Human development is an event from conception, birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, maturity, and death. The task of the educator is to organize and structure activities (organism-environment interactions) that extract the most growth possible. Even the decision to bound the event of life between conception as the ultimate origin and death as the final *telos* is arbitrary.⁴ There is no ultimate origin or predetermined fixed end to human development; someday another species may praise our efforts even after we are extinct, just as we should praise those proto-hominids who shifted entirely to bipedal terrestrial living thereby freeing their hands for tool making and child care.

Dewey may have derived his thinking about essences from William James who rejects any notion of permanent fixed essence; for him there are only practical purposes. James (1890/1950) insists:

[T]he only meaning of essence is teleological, and that classification and conception are purely teleological weapons of the mind. The essence of a thing is that one of its properties which is so important for my interests that in comparison with it I may neglect the rest. (p. 335)

Although Dewey was less of a subjectivist than was James, one can still see that reinterpreting the purposes (values, theories, etc.) for which they were initially constructed can deconstruct any scheme of essences. There is a *telos* to pragmatic essences, but it is practical, temporal, and contingent, not metaphysical, atemporal, and necessary. Similarly, we practically create the human essence; we do not discover it.

Strangely, James continued to comprehend necessity and causation as metaphysical. Dewey does for them what James did for essences. Sleeper (1986) states "The explanation has not so much been 'discovered' as 'produced' by the process of inquiry. The character of 'necessity,' therefore, is 'purely teleological' and contingent" (p. 37). For Dewey (1893/1971), both contingency and necessity are moments in the continuously constructive movement of inquiry:

Contingent and necessary are thus the correlative aspects of one and the same fact Contingency referring to the separation of means from end . . . necessity being the reference of means to an end which has still to be got. Necessary means needed; contingency means no longer required--because already enjoyed. (p. 29)

Dewey understands necessity "only with reference to the development of [logical] judgment, not with reference to objective things or events" (p. 19). Expanding on James's treatment of essences, Dewey comprehends necessity as a logical and not an ontological concept. Necessary laws are dependent on the inquirer's purposes (i.e., they are theory and value-laden) and, therefore, are endlessly subject to reconstruction and, sometimes, even elimination. The necessary stages of development are Piaget's logical, and I believe cultural, construction and not an ontological necessity.

Dewey includes causation in his analysis of necessity: "We call it 'means and ends' when we set up a result to be reached in the future . . . we call it 'cause and effect' when the 'result' is given and the search for means is a regressive one" (p. 36). Again, he affirms "the supreme importance of our practical interests" (p. 36). As with formal essences (*eidōs*) and necessity (part of the *archē* for many), Dewey assimilates causation (including *energeia*, *entelecheia*, or *telos*) to logic not metaphysics. Dewey transforms metaphysics into language and logic, and along the way shows us that we should be wary of necessary causal laws, including educational laws, that claim to be good for all people in all places at all times.

In the following passage, Dewey (1909/1977) urges us to abandon the search for ultimate origins and endings: "Philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities in order to explore specific values and the specific conditions that generate them" (p. 10). There is no ultimate cosmic beginning or indubitable epistemological foundation

(*arche*) or fixed and final ending (*telos*) in Dewey's naturalistic Darwinian world. Origins and *entelecheia* are only comprehensible within the context of purposeful inquiry, not metaphysics. I only wish No Child Left Behind would realize there are no ultimate fixed and final perfect aims for education, only contingent cultural constructions. I would argue NCLB finds its practical *telos* in the culturally contingent "good" of refining human resources as standardized, interchangeable parts for the global production function.

Dewey rejects the quest for some ultimate "thing" outside our inquiries, what Derrida calls the transcendental signified:

Once admit that the sole verifiable or fruitful object of knowledge is the particular set of changes that generate the object of study, together with the consequences that then flow from it, and no intelligible question can be asked about what, by assumption, lies outside. (p. 11)

Objects of knowledge, essences, necessity, causation, etc., do not exist outside the experimental and symbolic operations that construct them. This is "the direction of the transformation in philosophy to be wrought by the Darwinian genetic and experimental logic" (p. 13). Dewey's naturalism refuses to extend itself beyond the contingent products of disciplined inquiry conducted for finite human purposes.

Dewey nonetheless emphasizes the importance of the relatively stable. This stance permits him to take critical positions more readily than postmodernists. Still, every construction is contingent as well as falsifiable in a Darwinian universe; hence, every construction is subject to deconstruction and reconstruction. Indeed, construction-deconstruction (or destruction)-reconstruction is the cycle of learning and growth for Dewey. In this process, Dewey, unlike say Jacques Derrida, puts the accent on the constructive and reconstructive phase more than the deconstructive; keeping our species from extinction is the constant task.

Consequences of Dewey's Metaphysics for Education

Since I am an educator, I want to derive educational conclusions from Dewey's metaphysics. That it is possible to do so suggests Dewey's metaphysics is not useless as some think. The nature of human potential and its proper development is a critical educational question. Dewey completely rejects the notion of "latent" potential; that is the notion that there is an inner something that unfolds through linear stages to actualize its essence. Dewey's (1916/1980) theory of development relies on his critique of western metaphysics:

There is a conception of education which professes to be based upon the

idea of development. But it takes back with one hand what it proffers with the other. Development is conceived not as continuous growing, but as the unfolding of latent powers toward a definite goal. The goal is conceived of as completion, perfection. Life at any stage short of attainment of this goal is merely an unfolding toward it. (p. 61)

Piaget's "mental embryology," for instance, postulates the unfolding of latent potential along an invariant sequence of stages that are the same in all cultures and lead to a predetermined, fixed, and final goal.

Dewey retains the notions of potentiality and the actuality, but radically reconstructs them within his theory of emergent qualities. There is no change without the potential for change and such potential involves diversity and interaction:

We never apply the term [potentiality] except where there is change or a process of becoming Anything changing might be said to exhibit potentiality with respect to two facts: first, that the change exhibits (in connection with interaction with new elements in its surroundings) qualities it did not show till it was exposed to them and, secondly, that the changes in which these qualities are shown run a certain [developmental] course. To say that an apple has the potentiality of decay does not mean that it has latent . . . within it a causal principle which will some time inevitably display itself in producing decay, but that its existing changes (in interaction with its surroundings) will take the form of decay, if they are exposed or subjected to certain conditions not now operating upon them. Potentiality thus implies not merely diversity, but a progressively increasing diversification of a specific thing in a particular direction. (1915/1979, p. 11)

Hydrogen is combustible while oxygen sustains combustion, yet H₂O extinguishes fire. This passage portrays *interaction* among *diverse* individuals as requisite for *change* and development. Instead of apples, let us now speak of human development.

Dewey (1940/1991) insists that any "individual is a temporal career whose future cannot be logically deduced from its past" (p. 107). Development involves unpredictable qualitative emergence. He concludes:

When the idea that development is due to some indwelling end which tends to control the series of changes passed through is abandoned, potentialities must be thought of in terms of consequences of interactions with other things. Hence potentialities cannot be *known* till *after* the interactions have occurred. There are at a given time unactualized potentialities in an individual because and in as far as there are in existence other things with which it has not as yet interacted. (p. 109)

This statement about developmental potential and "things" includes human potential; it has a particularly important application in a pluralistic

democracy. For Dewey, otherness and difference is not merely something we should tolerate for the sake of social justice, it is indispensable to learning and growth. Dewey declares:

To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means [to the end] of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life. (1940/1991, p. 229)

This passage is taken from Dewey's essay, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us." For Dewey, pluralistic democracy is all one with his tentative metaphysics of diversity, interaction, and change. Diverse interactions release creative human potential.

Here is one of the most important questions philosophers of education address: What is the aim of education? This is also a metaphysical question about the *entelecheia* of human being, of the species essence. Developmental theories like Piaget's give the typical post-Enlightenment answer. We have seen that Dewey dramatically reconstructs the notion of potentiality, so we should not be surprised that he gives a remarkably original answer to this critical question. Dewey (1916/1980) declares: "Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself" (p. 58). The aim of education is growth and the meaning of life is to make more meaning.

Educational theory, including developmental, pedagogical, and curriculum theory, tends to ignore the creative making of meaning in student and teacher transactions. A great deal of curriculum theory and practice relies heavily on sequential theories of development (Piaget, Erickson, Kohlberg, etc.) and the accompanying notion of developmentally *appropriate*. The danger is that we will coordinate the curriculum with an abstract, standardized, linear notion of "age appropriate" in ways that ignore the individual child before us with their unique potential, passions, and cognitions. It assigns meanings rather than creates them as the occasion requires. As Harriet K. Cuffaro (1995) writes, "is it not clearer, more accurate, to speak of having a developmental perspective or orientation, or being 'mindful' of development" (p. 103). Too much teaching and curriculum is as unseeing as it is mindless. It merely matches a formal category of developmental appropriateness with predetermined curricular content. The actual child is invisible because unneeded. A Deweyan view of development demands moral perception; that is, the necessity of perceiving the unique child as a one-time-only event in a unique one-time-only situation to which we must respond in terms of their unique potential. Determining right response is a matter of the

context and dependent on the specific relation between student and teacher. It is therefore a moral act. It is also an aesthetic act, because the response will require making meaning between student and teacher. It is a metaphysical act as well, because both student and teacher will actualize each other's potential, for growth or, alas, decay. Eventually, in teaching as in life, it is more important to be somebody in relationship to others than to know something, however important curriculum and pedagogical knowledge may be.

Those genuinely committed to life long learning will agree with Dewey: "Since in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education" (p. 56). I think this insight reveals Dewey's interpretation of the universe. For him, we are creative participants whose unique and unrepeatable actions, including student and teacher transactions, leave an indelible mark on in an unfinished and unfinishable universe. We are not spectators of a complete or completable cosmos. Existence, including human existence, will evolve forever.

Notes

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the many helpful comments of two reviewers.

² Recently, I have tried to explicate Dewey's ground map of generic traits as a map of culture; see Garrison (2005). For other work on Dewey's metaphysics see Garrison (1985, 1995, 1999).

³ See Parker (1992), 57-58.

⁴ Those in the West tend to place the origin (the *arche*) of human development at birth.

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