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Review of "Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy"

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Book Review | *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*

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Some of us remember the TV show, “Meeting of Minds,” in which Steve Allen interviewed historical figures. When possible, the actors used the actual words that had been written by the figures. One could imagine Allen asking John Dewey to be interviewed, but rather than having him simply say what he had already had written, Allen pressed him to discuss what had gone wrong with modern philosophy by employing a cultural interpretation of its historical development, urging him not so much to take a radical break from this previous work but to try to make sense of his views from an special perspective and to give further insight into his naturalizing philosophy. An extended conversation might have produced this recently published book by Dewey.

John Dewey died in 1952, having a book manuscript that he thought had been left in a taxi; however, it recently was found in the Dewey Papers at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. The manuscript was written, with one exception, between the summer of 1941 and late 1942. In a wonderful job of editing, Phillip Deen worked with the manuscript; because it was not a finished, Deen moved some material around to make the book more coherent, although the basic chapters remain from the manuscript. The book title and most of the chapter titles are Dewey’s; Deen gives an excellent Introduction.

Dewey set out to write a social history of philosophy. The first part of the book aims to give an overview of the development of philosophy from the Greeks, showing both that philosophy retained assumptions from previous eras, and also that the movements in philosophy were affected by contemporaneous social influences. In the second half of the book, Dewey gives his own account of what a truly modern philosophy would look like.

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There is no radical discontinuity in Dewey’s thinking in this book from his previously published works, but Dewey not only offers a deeper argument about the history of philosophy but also makes further progress in his mature thinking about a naturalized theory of knowledge.

“Theoretical reflection arises in a social medium,” (15) Dewey writes. Beginning his argument that philosophy is influenced both by one’s culture and the tendency to retain ill-suited beliefs from previous ages, Dewey contends that modern philosophy still retains baggage from the Roman-Hellenistic and Medieval traditions. In particular, the idea of a dynamic center of awareness that is separate from nature—the idea of an atomic self and introspective psychology—requires a certain social organization, not yet attained in ancient religions, but perhaps began as early in Europe with the advent of Christianity. Since one “casts his imaginations in material drawn from tradition and from the peculiar context of his day and place.” (15) as well as carries the baggage of former traditions, philosophy can understand these forces and adopt an appropriate method if it is cognizant of these influences and follows scientific methods. His assumption, of course, is that the science gives us the appropriate method to deal with issues in a naturalistic way, but the former traditions have prevented naturalistic methodology from being adopted in modern and contemporary philosophy.

Dewey begins his cultural analysis in Chapter two by discussing the Greeks, whose great intellectual triumph was to conceive of nature, not in the sense of modern matter, Dewey says, but via a naturalistic story of the transformation of elements. It was nature in the sense of “the original and abiding force” (25). Dewey points out that there was no discussion of consciousness or of subject and object but rather simply of nature, with reason being responsible for the order of things. As Greek society progressed, so did the development of the arts and reflection on the arts (medicine, drama, etc.), which, in turn, developed two customs, the agrarian and the mechanical. These two streams continued in philosophy with the emphasis on things growing and nature as vital on the one hand, and nature as mechanical on the other hand. Since the agrarian tradition is older, Dewey asserts that it was natural for the philosophical tradition to find a home in that tradition, in which the ideas of social prestige and justice by nature were found. Dewey ends this chapter in a stirring rejection of the modern view that philosophers come to the world as a blank tablet, with no human interests and out of time, and conceive of the universe objectively. Rather, “The philosopher is first and last a human being with his own intellectual and emotional habits who is involved in concrete scene having its own color of tradition; its own occupations and dominant desires; its own overhanging problems and preferred ways of meeting them. His intellectual response is a function of these two variables.” (33).
Chapter 3 tells the story of rational discourse. Once having stepped outside of the daily activities to conceive of nature, Plato continued this idea and proposed a reality beyond the version of nature as had been conceived up to that time. In Plato’s vision, logic “was elevated to a metaphysics,” (41), uniting with a cosmology to create a metaphysics that has influenced Western philosophy until today. Even if the Platonic turn was wrong, as Dewey believed, nevertheless European philosophy followed this path where a corrupt world could only be tamed by a supernatural realm of disciplined reason (with special revelation taking the place of reason within Christianity). Add to this view the Aristotelian position that knowledge was isolated from practice and the superiority of contemplation, and you have a position in which nature was forced to fit into a framework of discourse, with Greek logic corresponding to Greek discourse.

The Medieval search for salvation marks the next philosophical turn for Dewey. A logical precondition for salvation was the introduction of subjectivism, an individual who could be saved by faith. The Skeptic, Epicurean and Stoic schools provided the foundation for this turn, with the separation of the moral from the political and the legal, as well as the internal from the external. These Greek and Roman philosophies influenced Christianity and through the institution of the Church continued to exert influence on Western culture through doctrine, exerting imaginative and emotional appeal on Western culture. On the one hand, an internal subject with the faculty of will was developed, along with, on the other hand, the beginnings of a notion of nature that was no longer clothed in human and moral traits.

The move Dewey makes in Chapter 5 is a pivotal one in his explaining how modern philosophy got off track. His argument is that the progress of science proved the human capability for moving knowledge forward, especially juxtaposed to what the old institutions of the medieval period produced, and thus those institutions and their magnification of cosmic power were viewed as the foe to be defeated if progress was to continue. To counter such power, the new sense of human power became enshrined in the metaphysical principle of the individual, a self-sufficient source of truth. Rather than the sovereignty of the cosmic, the new science proposed the sovereignty of the individual, the self, the ego, which could be set over against the polluting influence of the old institutions. What was essentially a social statement became a metaphysical doctrine. The notion of cosmic nature from the Greeks was transferred to the notion of human nature, which was no longer part of the cosmos of the ancients. “The result was a subjectivism and individualism of philosophical theory and of ethics, politics, and economics” (72). Natural rights and natural law were transferred from cosmic nature to human nature. The resulting individual was “a manifestation of the changes that were taking place in socio-cultural conditions” (72). The more the Aristotelian based world view in which the human was intimately a part of nature was replaced, the
more explicit became the emphasis on human nature as the seat of the faculties of mind, and the issue of how and what to know was changed into the question of whether knowledge of the external world was possible at all, which, Dewey says, is the modern Problem of Knowledge. With time, these views became articles of popular belief that affect today not only what and how we study but even what we perceive: over time, such “chains” become so natural “that they are not even felt” (257). Thus, the modern social problem for philosophy is to become aware of the habits and established dogmas that institutionalize the dualisms of subject and object and reject them so that our knowledge can become appropriately naturalized.

Dewey asserts that if it had not been for the intervention of supernaturalism, the new science might have been able to employ the psychology of Aristotle, in which human knowing was part of the process of nature, to develop the kind of naturalistic method of knowing that Dewey approves. But, given the new Problem of Knowledge, focus was placed on what one could know of the external world, developing such notions as sense-data—and today creating we is referred to as the Hard Problem in the Philosophy of Mind—issues which are the results of modern philosophy taking the wrong turn.

This modern approach to knowledge with a focus on certainty is vastly different from the actual practice of experimental science, but the power of tradition blinds us to this discontinuity, something Dewey thinks we must overcome to advance knowledge. Even those who disavow belief in the supernatural nevertheless are caught in this tradition that is dependent on medieval supernaturalism. I take it that Dewey is saying that the problem is not that modern materialism has abandoned one side of Cartesian dualism but that the whole dualistic system should be abandoned, a system that is a result of medieval supernaturalism and the Renaissance belief in the power of humans, which in turn created the metaphysical system of Descartes and the Problem of Knowledge. In Dewey’s view, the problem of knowledge should be concerned with “knowledging (as in ac-knowledging) concrete cases with all methodologies available, realizing that knowledging is an ongoing process that is self-reflective and self-correcting, an approach found in the sciences. We live in a natural world (as distinct from a material world—that concept is a part of the legacy of subject and object), and the methods should be naturalistic.

I have focused most of this review on the first part of Dewey’s book because it illustrates his cultural history of philosophy (as opposed, he says, to a traditional history of philosophy), an approach he describes with insight and focus that is not found previously in Dewey’s work. The second part of the book attempts to give an account of what a truly modern (as distinct from the present unmodern) philosophy would look like, a naturalized view of knowing. The surviving manuscript is more incomplete in this stage of the book,
and thus we find only a partial proscriptive reinterpretation. Further, since a more functional, naturalized approach can be understood not only by looking at science but by examining the present state of philosophy, Dewey returns to many of the arguments found in the first part of the book, albeit in the service of illuminating inadequate concepts such as persons, minds, sensations, and knowledge, among others.

Take for instance the notion of a personal self, which traditionally has been interpreted as an individual subject. Personal factors, Dewey argues, are social in origin and operation. It would be strange to try to describe a friend to someone without mention any description of bodily characteristics, for instance, and yet philosophers (in Dewey’s time, at least) continue to think of selves as purely subjective and of emotions as purely internal. Persons are those entities that we see in action, and it is only a false turn in thinking that has led us to differentiate persons from things and misuse the concept. (As an example, and on this point Dewey is prescient, he discusses the Supreme Court’s limited ruling that a corporation is a person, a decision Dewey says was enacted for the interest of finance-capitalism (188).)

Philosophers have had a tendency to convert adjectives into nouns, to interpret interactions (or transactions) as metaphysical objects; we talk about” persons” rather than “personal,” “minds” rather than “mental,” “reason” rather than “rational,” and “sensations” rather than “sensing,” and all of these nouns are thought to be descriptive of the individual subject. However, Dewey argues, these are not the highest faculties of individual subjects but they describe certain organic and environmental interactions. Life, Dewey says, is a constant transaction between organic structures and environmental conditions. Knowing becomes a mode of technology in which metaphysical dualistic distinctions fall away. In fact, he recommends replacing the notion of pragmatic “instrumentalism,” which he has emphasized before, with the notion of “technology,” although he realizes that this term may also face the same misunderstanding and criticism. Humans and environment are both part of the same nature, and knowing is simply the process of meeting obstructions, formulating specific problems, making theories, meeting and trying to resolve the problem.

Reacting to the accusation that his views are too focused on the practical, Dewey spends a chapter discussing the distinction between the practical and the intellectual and calls into question the radical distinction, saying that it is based more on history and the preferences of social class. In fact, scientific knowledge is always pressing forward. In typical fashion, Dewey says, “conclusions reached are capital to be invested not beds upon which to repose” (279). Likewise, the distinction between the material and the ideal are not metaphysical notions but a reflection of social differences, with those in the esteemed class concerning themselves with the ideal. The difference between the two concepts is merely functional in the process of knowing, not differences in entities. The split exists, but as a society we are
better off when we do not denigrate the material or practical but accept both activities as useful. The job of philosophers, Dewey reminds us, should be to engage in clearing up the conceptual mess that modernity encapsulates, a mess that philosophers are largely responsible for, and generally to make clear the assumptions that are encapsulated in our inquiry and are so lasting and common that they are taken for granted.