RENEWING THE DEWEYAN RESPONSE TO RUSSELLIAN CRITICISM

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Introduction

Bertrand Russell was an interesting and, at times, delightfully insightful thinker who lived a colourful life and fought for many important causes. Certainly he was, and still is, an inspiring figure for some philosophers, humanists, social activists, and educators. Unfortunately, on several occasions, he demonstrated only a limited understanding of the depth, complexity, and subtlety of John Dewey’s pragmatic project for philosophy, education, and society. Doubly unfortunate, the Russellian critique of John Dewey articulated by Michael Rockler carries on this misinformed tradition. Thus, I contend, the Russellian criticisms offered by Rockler are at best superficial, at worst seriously misleading.

This paper responds to Rockler’s Russellian criticisms of Dewey and attempts to take the dialogue between supporters of these two thinkers beyond knee-jerk criticisms. First, by offering an introduction to John Dewey’s mature philosophy and twelve of his major works, my hope is that a clearer understanding of his integrated philosophical project will develop. Next, by building on some key points of Dewey’s mature philosophy, I will attempt to show how Rockler’s Russellian criticisms have consistently missed the mark. Let’s first turn to some introductory thoughts about John Dewey and his philosophical project.

Dewey’s Philosophical Project

To begin with the obvious, John Dewey experienced much during his ninety-three
years of active living. Born the year *Origin of the Species* was published and dying the year Eisenhower won the presidency, his lifetime covered from before the Civil War to after World War II. Because he had much to say and copiously put his reflections to paper in a variety of formats, he has been the object of study by philosophers and educators for the last hundred years. However, even though he was a down-to-earth person and a public intellectual interested in the examination of shared experiences, coming to terms in a non-superficial way with the enormity and essence of his written work is often a difficult task for at least three reasons.

First, Dewey was an actively involved public philosopher who took context and evolution seriously. As such, he wrote for a variety of audiences - philosophical specialists, teachers, and the general public. For each of these groups he attempted to use an appropriate style with suitable examples. And so, ideas and examples Dewey presented should be seen in terms of the specific audience and occasion addressed. In addition, Dewey's ideas evolved over the eight decades of his academic writing. Although there are themes and threads connecting his thoughts, there are also important changes. The idealism of his early Hegalian period evolved into the instrumentalism of his middle years which matured into the pragmatic naturalism of his later philosophy. Thus, when reading something Dewey wrote it is important to ask, "When, and for whom, was this written?"

Second, Dewey chose to use commonplace words in new ways in attempting to reconstruct our orientation to the reality and possibilities of everyday life. His use of words such as "experience," "intelligence," and "democracy" is at variance with the usual parlance of an individualized market society. Dewey had a different vision of individual and collective possibilities and chose to ground this view in a reconstructed language of connections to things near and dear. Thus for Dewey, experience can be conceived as the totality of our transactions with our physical and social environment. What we experience goes beyond what we know, but experience is the source of our knowledge and reconstructed experience is the destination of our thinking. Intelligence is a method of inquiring into, for the sake of deepening, experiences. Inquiring intelligently involves reflection, analysis, imagination, experimentation, observation, and
judgement qualities that are modelled in the best of scientific and aesthetic judgements. Intelligence thus represents a disciplined thoughtfulness about experience. Democracy is a mode of associative living which enables us to grow and develop by using our intelligence to communicate and thus further extend our experiences. And so, Dewey's democracy is based on the deepening quality of communication, intelligence, and experience that comes to fruition as a result of the many and varied interactions that occur within and between members of groups. This intimate connection of experience, intelligence, and democracy, the core of Dewey's philosophy, takes some time to understand and appreciate.

Third, often in his books Dewey is "doing philosophy," that is thinking aloud, as he writes. He used his writing as a dialectical instrument to attempt to probe and build on the subtleties and nuances of deep-seated notions embedded in the issues of people experiencing, thinking, and collectively living together. His writing style needs to be seen in the spirit of his method of inquiry - open to exploring the unique aspects of current problems and self-correcting according to the evidence presented. Although the polish may not always be there (some of his books did seem to go to print a little early), Dewey often dealt in a unique and penetrating way with concerns that were not meant to be glossed over. This was especially true at the height of his philosophical thinking.

During a twenty-two year period (1916-1938), when most people his age (57-79) are winding down, Dewey was most active. At this time he wrote much, travelled and spoke throughout the world, and also participated in a variety of political projects. To provide a feel for the substance and breadth of Dewey's mature philosophy, I have chosen to briefly describe and use quotations from twelve important books he wrote then. Each quotation is then followed by a key point related to the text. Let's now turn to the first of this dozen.²

(1) 1916 ... Democracy and Education. This classic in philosophy of education represents what Dewey said was for many years the best presentation of his social philosophy. For Dewey, education in and for a democratic society focuses on communication so we can hold worthwhile things in common and live in community. Dewey's emphasis on the philosophical relevance of everyday life is a vital feature in all
his philosophy.

If a theory makes no difference in educational endeavour, it must be artificial. The educational point of view enables one to envisage the philosophic problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance or rejection makes a difference in practice.³

Point 1. For Dewey, philosophy is organically connected to education and both build on the experiences of everyday life.

(2) 1920 ... *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. This book developed from eight lectures Dewey presented in Japan. Later Dewey said that this book should have been titled *Reconstruction of Philosophy*. Here, Dewey’s philosophical reconstruction means the incorporation of the method of self-correcting inquiry into the problems of social life. Philosophy for Dewey was not a contemplation of some absolute, but rather a way of better understanding ourselves and our historical moments so we can act intelligently.

Philosophy, let it be repeated, cannot solve the problems of the relation of the ideal and the real. That is the standing problem of life. But it can at least lighten the burden of humanity in dealing with the problem by emancipating mankind [sic] from the errors which philosophy has itself fostered—the existence of conditions which are real apart from the movement into something new and different, and the existence of ideals, spirit and reason independent of the possibilities of the material and physical.⁴

Point 2. Dewey sought to remain idealistic in a down-to-earth way and fought against the philosophic tendency to give up either side of this equation.

(3) 1922 ... *Human Nature and Conduct*. This book is an expansion of lectures Dewey gave at Stanford University in 1918 and was written after his return from the Orient. Sub-titled "An Introduction to Social Psychology," this text showed the place of habit, impulse, and intelligence in conduct and the social nature of Dewey’s psychology and philosophy. Individual and social possibilities are fundamentally linked through our bio-social nature. The seamless web of Dewey’s philosophy is made explicit here.

We have depended upon the clash of war, the stress of revolution, the emergence of heroic individuals, the impact of migrations generated by war and famine, the incoming of barbarians, to change established institutions. Instead of constantly utilizing unused impulse to effect continuous reconstruction, we have waited till an accumulation of stresses
suddenly breaks through the dikes of custom.⁵

Point 3. Dewey was a meliorist, seeking to use intelligence to make necessary social changes so that the quality of human life could develop in more fruitful ways.

(4) 1925 (Second edition, 1927) ... *Experience and Nature*. This is Dewey’s major work in naturalistic metaphysics. Staying true to form, this book on the nature of nature does not go outside of experience to describe the generic traits of existence. The universe Dewey describes is amenable, and perhaps even friendly, to the democratic development of experience. Intelligent interactions provide the vehicle for deepening experience.

Things interacting in certain ways are experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object - the human organism - they are how things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference.⁶

Point 4. Dewey emphasized working within and through experience in an attempt to more fully understand, deepen, and integrate the transactions of life. He developed an approach to inquiry that was compatible with the transactions of events of nature.

(5) 1927 ... *The Public and its Problems*. Dewey was a radical democrat who believed in the necessity of political participation. This book was written in response to Walter Lippmann’s book, *The Phantom Public* in which Lippmann argued that a realistic appraisal of modern American life necessitated the continuance of a form of democratic elitism and non-participation by the many. Dewey argued however, that the construction of, and democratic participation in, publics was now vital for human development. Democracy was a regulative ideal, loss of which would seriously diminish the quality of our individual and collective lives.

No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few. And the enlightenment must proceed in ways which force the administrative specialists to take account of the needs. The world has suffered more from leaders and authorities than from the masses.⁷
Point 5. For Dewey, democracy is a practical ideal that depends on the continual construction and reconstruction of methods that enable all people to articulate their needs and work persistently and intelligently toward their realization.

(6) 1929 ... *The Quest for Certainty*. Based on Dewey’s Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology at Edinburgh University, this book is a study of the relation of knowledge and action and continues his critique of absolutism and philosophical escape artistry. This quest for certainty and its concomitant dualisms are obstacles to living intelligently. The sooner we realize the importance of valued social practices in concrete situations, the more we will see the possibilities inherent within experience.

Our depreciatory attitude toward ‘practice’ would be modified if we habitually thought of it in its most liberal sense, and if we surrendered our customary dualism between two separate kinds of value, one intrinsically higher and one inherently lower. We should regard practice as the only means (other than accident) by which whatever is judged to be honourable, admirable, approvable can be kept in concrete experienceable existence.  

Point 6. Dewey sought not merely to make intelligence, practical but also to make practice, intellectual. Using the wisdom of intelligent practices, we can build on valued social experiences and get beyond the preoccupation with philosophical certainty.

(7) 1930 ... *Individualism Old and New*. As a social philosopher concerned with the experiences of the person in modern life, Dewey wrote this book to show the importance of developing democratically reconstructed forms of individualism and society. Arguing against the massification and pecuniary nature of modern society and the inadequacy of retaining earlier notions of the individual, Dewey developed the case for a type of liberalism that connects our democratic ideals with our social realities.

There is a danger in the reiteration of eternal verities and ultimate spiritualities. Our sense of the actual is dulled, and we are led to think that in dwelling upon ideal goals we have somehow transcended existing evils. Ideals express possibilities; but they are genuine ideals only in so far as they are possibilities of what is now moving. Imagination can set them free from their encumbrances and project them as a guide in attention to what now exists. But save as they are related to actualities, they are pictures in a dream.
Point 7. From a Deweyan perspective, individuals and societies grow in concrete ways by creatively using ideals that extend actualities found in experience.

(8) 1932 ... *Ethics*. Co-authored with James Tufts, this textbook is a revision of their 1908 publication. Emphasizing the importance of using practical intelligence in a changing world, Dewey and Tufts provide an analysis of the beginnings and growth of morality, a theory of the moral life, and a guide to the world of action. The social nature of intelligence along with its possibilities to probe issues vital to individual and collective life are once again brought home.

The self should be wise or prudent, looking to an inclusive satisfaction and hence subordinating the satisfaction of an immediately urgent single appetite; it should be faithful in acknowledgement of the claims involved in its relations with others; it should be solicitous, thoughtful, in the award of praise and blame, use of approbation and disapprobation, and, finally, should be conscientious and have the active will to discover new values and revise former notions.  

Point 8. The self that Dewey emphasized is fundamentally connected to social life and depends on character development and creativity for concrete ethical functioning.

(9) 1934 ... *A Common Faith*. This is Dewey’s controversial book dealing with the philosophy of religion. Critiquing the notions of religion and supernatural knowledge, but retaining, albeit in reconstructed forms, the words "religious" and "God", Dewey attempted to deepen the possibilities in experience and social action. Never one to totally discard an idea and always seeking to find the useful and motivating in that which he is critiquing are two of Dewey’s personal and philosophical differences with Bertrand Russell.

Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it. Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant.

Point 9. The Deweyan quest to unify the actual and the ideal in a down-to-earth way exemplifies an attempt to put to positive use people’s religious impulse.
Art as Experience. Aesthetics was a vital area of concern for Dewey in his latter life. This book was his major contribution to aesthetics and showed how his philosophy of experience was much more than a form of instrumentalism. Arguing that the opposite of the aesthetic is not the ugly but the anesthetic, Dewey attended to the processes by which we construct enlivening experiences.

Ultimately, there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—imagination and art.

Point 10. For Dewey, aesthetic experiences are connected with and extend present actualities. By creatively building on aesthetic experiences we enhance the processes of living more fully and integratively.

Liberalism and Social Action. Written during the depression, this is Dewey's reaffirmation of a liberal way of life. Showing the history of, crisis in, and a renascent version of liberalism, Dewey pointed to a method of intelligence that moved beyond mere acceptance of the depressed status quo or the automaticity of a violent revolution.

Intelligence after millions of years of errancy has found itself as a method, and it will not be lost forever in the blackness of night. The business of liberalism is to bend every energy and exhibit every courage so that these precious goods may not even be temporarily lost but be intensified and expended here and now.

Point 11. Dewey's liberalism is a form of self-correcting social intelligence that focuses on specific problems at particular times.

Logic. This book, which is subtitled "The Theory of Inquiry" was, by Dewey's own admission, some forty years in the making and some thirteen years in the writing. Dewey's examination of the biological and cultural matrices of inquiry along with his analysis of the structure of inquiry and the construction of judgements provided the depth and sensitivity to intellectual processes needed for a full-fledged pragmatic approach to knowledge. The implications of this empirical approach to logic have only begun to be explored.
Since scientific methods simply exhibit free intelligence operating in the best manner available at a given time, the cultural waste, confusion and distortion that results from the failure to use these methods, in all fields in connection with all problems, is incalculable.\(^1\)

**Point 12.** For Dewey, open, sustained, self-correcting inquiry, as exemplified in science, is a method of intelligence that needs to be applied to all areas of life.

Obviously, this is only a selective sample and interpretation of Dewey's writings during this twenty-two year period. At this time he also wrote or revised several other books and published scores of articles. The intention here, is to provide a feel for the essence and direction of Dewey's pragmatism and its vital connection to education and society. Let's now deal with some of Michael Rockier's Russellian criticisms of this approach.

**Russellian Criticisms**

The preceding sketch of John Dewey's mature philosophy stressed his emphasis on the process of living a well-rounded, ethical, and sensitive life in which experience is deepened by inquiry and democratic modes of interaction. It also portrayed Dewey as an evolutionary philosopher with a biological-anthropological approach to experience, inquiry, and education. Although there are many facets to Bertrand Russell, his philosophical quest for certainty on the one hand and his active but philosophically underdeveloped approach to education and democracy on the other are at variance with key Deweyan themes previously mentioned. I will now look at some of the specific criticisms presented by Michael Rockler and present my interpretation of a pragmatic response based on Dewey's mature philosophy.

In his critique, Michael Rockler mentions at least eight inadequacies he believes are present in Dewey's approach to philosophy, education, and society. In the order presented, he states that Dewey: supported unqualified democracy in education; did not come to terms with the troublesome nature of induction; felt that truth was merely what a majority believed and thus gave in to a type of "herd instinct" democracy; implicitly
supported a "dead level of uniformity" through his emphasis on democracy in education; believed in democracy as a result of the uncritical socialization he received in the American public schools; naively applied science to all realms and was thus out-of-touch with the qualitative aspects of life; became a follower of Rousseau and thus did not focus heavily on the acquisition of knowledge; and finally, had merely a negative theory of education. This is quite a mouthful, and is especially difficult to swallow for those who have seriously read "Dewey's Dozen" and seek to carry on his democratic educational project. Let's now go through each of these criticisms in turn.

First, Dewey was not an unqualified educational democrat, if that means teachers and students equally decide everything. From a Deweyan perspective, that would not make best use of a teacher's mature experience and intellectual judgements. The Dewey Lab School certainly taught participatory virtues and was more cooperative than most schools. This is an important part of preparing students for their self-rule in society. However, as Amy Gutmann points out, the Lab School was an embryonic democratic society because it elicited a commitment to learning and cultivated the prototypically democratic virtues among its students, not because it treated them as the political or intellectual equals of its teachers. Democracy for Dewey was thus a moral ideal we can use to think with and strive for, not an actuality we can presume.

The certainty of induction is also something Dewey did not presume. He, as opposed to Russell, was not seeking an indubitable method of inquiry. As was pointed out earlier, for Dewey this quest for certainty is a dead-end and deceptive goal. Sense data and abstract reason are not our actual starting points in our everyday life situations. Neither one should be given privileged primary status. Rather, Dewey felt we would do better to begin with how we solve actual problems in real situations and use this approach in a self-correcting way. Thus, knowledge is developed through inquiry into events occurring in specific contexts. There is no ultimate vantage point through which we can claim to have reached certainty; inquiry can begin and proceed in many ways. Thus, rather than certainty, Dewey was attempting to build on the good judgements we develop
as we attempt to learn from experience. Certainly, even if induction is not logically irrefutable, we can learn from, in, by, and for experience. This is what I assume Michael Rockler's colleagues to mean when they refer to the "wisdom of practice." It might be of some value for him to look further into the meaning and implications of this phrase.

Likewise the wisdom of practice does not mean that what a majority believes is "true." That would not be very wise, or even very practical. Obviously, we have learned from experience that majorities can be wrong, dangerous, and less than moral. Rather, in practice pragmatists are looking for assertions that are warranted and applicable to the problem at hand. The problem at hand can vary from a specific everyday irritation to a complex philosophical problematic. As Richard Rorty points out, sometimes the very notion of truth gets in the way of inquiry. That is why Rorty, building on the Deweyan tradition, says a better question than "What is the truth?" is "What is the alternative?" The latter question invites further inquiry, communication of the warrant of our perspectives, and the realization of the hypothetical nature of our responses. Certainly, these are desirable qualities for a community of inquirers.

Imagine we were a community of inquirers attempting to understand, question, and build on each others' perspectives so we could arrive at common ends and desirable means. Would there be a "dead level of uniformity" in such a group? I think not. The attempt in Deweyan schools is to authentically integrate the differentiation of individual perspectives with acceptable common ends. These common ends are both principled and flexible; principled in the sense that they are based on warranted values; flexible in that there are many ways to put these warranted common values into action. In this way both the individual and group grow. This is no easy task, to be sure, and may not even be possible in every instance. However, as a moral ideal it points us in the direction of seeking to more fully communicate in order to more adequately understand and better work together. Done correctly, this is not "dead level uniformity;" rather it is live level creativity.

This live level creativity needed for deeper individual development and community inquiry, however, was not a characteristic of Dewey's public schooling
experience. Dewey was not particularly happy with his schooling experiences. When he went to the University of Chicago in 1894 he further realized the inadequacies of the then present, and already obsolete, educational system for dealing with the escalating social problems. Something had to change and he felt that schools were a good place to start. His Lab School was thus a thoughtful deviation from his socializing Vermont schooling experiences and needs to be seen as an attempt to move democracy in a new and more social direction.

The new democratic direction Dewey attempted to advance was not based on some scientistic method mechanically applied to all areas of life. Rather, it was the attempt to develop the sensitivity, skills, and judgements cultivated in valued, self-correcting social practices. The practice of science is a good exemplar of a valued, self-correcting social practice. However, so are the practices of artists and judges. The goal of each of these is to develop self-correcting approaches to inquiry and production that enable us to attend to and extend the qualities we find worthwhile in experience. It is ironic that Michael Rockler points to the work of Elliott Eisner as an example of counter-Deweyan qualitative inquiry, for Eisner goes out of his way to cite Dewey’s *Art as Experience* as a basis for his perspective. In unequivocal terms Eisner states:

> The roots of such ideas [qualitative inquiry and qualitative thinking] can be found in one of John Dewey’s last major works [Art as Experience]...It provides a view of mind, meaning, and method that could serve well those interested, as I am, in broadening the ways in which we think about inquiry. 

Thus by now I hope it is clear that Dewey was not some scientistic romantic (this seems oxymoronish) who believed that by eliminating rules we automatically free children from the chains of an oppressive society. Dewey’s primary focus was on the positive freedom to associate, differentiate, communicate, inquire, produce, enjoy, and evaluate. This approach to education certainly builds on the interests of students, but also uses an understanding of the best knowledge available and its relationship to individual and social problems. However, in attempting to use the best knowledge available, it is important for students to also understand how this knowledge was ascertained and reflect...
on how it might be put to use. In the process of putting knowledge to use in relation to students' interests and social problems, the educative process and the practice of living a fulfilling life are progressively extended. These seem to me worthwhile goals for all students in the public's schools. This I claim is not some negative theory of education but rather an attempt to develop the positive virtues, practices, and structures necessary for individual development and democratic participation. It also should be noted that in a 1938 book not mentioned in the "Dewey Dozen," *Experience and Education*, Dewey went out of his way to make even more explicit the genesis and consequences of this perspective. In Russell's educational move from Watson to Freud, it would have behoved him to stay and delve further into Dewey's pragmatic, democratic, educational, humanism

**Conclusion**

In spite of what I perceive to be many misfirings on the part of Russell's Rockler (and Rockler's Russell), I do think there is some benefit to the gadfly effect he provides. As Michael Rockler has shown, Russell can be a clearly jolting writer; he can bring to the surface and question points that others have learned to live with. This jolt can be of value to pragmatists who may have learned to live with some of the difficulties of Dewey.

Certainly those who have studied Dewey and are interested in democratic education are aware of difficulties experienced in dealing with his work. To mention a few: Democracy is not as easy as he sometimes made it seem; There are costs and constraints that need to be articulated when we move in democratic directions; Constructing democratic publics requires some middle range political strategies that Dewey neglected; Not all students (or parents or teachers) may be moved to participate in democratic schools; Both advocates and detractors of Dewey can become entrenched in some one-dimensional interpretations of his work. Those working within a Deweyan perspective may put aside these issues when facing criticism about the very nature of
their work. Difficulties put aside, however, can live on and on.

Obviously, Dewey felt there were difficulties with how his approach to education was interpreted by some progressivists of his own time or else he would not have seen fit to write *Experience and Education*. However, even the publication of that book has not sufficiently cleared the air. Michael Rockler has demonstrated that surprising and questionable interpretations of Dewey are still with us, even by people who are generally sympathetic. Perhaps then, a continual task for some members of the John Dewey Society will be to construct new and creative ways to communicate a defensible Deweyan perspective, warts and all, to a variety of audiences. One can hope that this challenge, undertaken often enough, will become progressively less necessary.