

Book Review

Dewey: A Beginner's Guide

Raymond D. Boisvert

David Hildebrand, *Dewey: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008. 247 pp. ISBN 978-1-85168-580-6. \$14.95 (pbk.)

John Dewey's early exposure to Hegel left a "permanent deposit" on his thinking. Dewey's Hegelian side does not emerge in the usual sense of someone predicting the march of Spirit through history. Rather it is as the complete philosopher seeking, above all else, to leave nothing out. Such a philosopher criticized reified abstractions, reinstated the centrality of relations, emphasized the importance of thinking ideas together with their history, and insisted on the interpenetration of individual and social. This Hegelian inheritance, when passed through the filter of *praxis*, identifies, for some interpreters (I plead guilty) the strength of Dewey's philosophy.

Coexisting with this dimension was another nineteenth-century strand, more consistent with *theoria*, the fascination with scientific method. This manifests itself as the attempt to articulate a philosophy which would match scientific achievements. For some pragmatists (once again, I plead guilty), moving forward means highlighting the Hegelian dimension and jettisoning the single methodology fascination. Most committed Deweyans, though, resist jettisoning anything. They seek, instead, a way to keep both dimensions smoothly interwoven. Such a seamless web approach is manifested in David Hildebrand's helpful book *Dewey: A Beginner's Guide*. The volume, from Oneworld Publications, makes up part of a series, Oneworld Beginner's Guides, joining other texts on the likes of Nietzsche, Aquinas, Wittgenstein, Hume, and Rawls.

General introductions to Dewey are important. Readers of *Education and Culture* will realize that Dewey was an all-around philosopher. In the wider com-

munity, where Dewey may be thought of exclusively as an educational reformer, it is necessary to provide reminders about how Dewey was, Hegel-like, a philosopher who sought to leave nothing out, someone as interested in art as he was in politics, education, and ethics. The strength of Hildebrand's volume derives from the way he provides a cogent, well-explained, easily readable introduction to the entire Deweyan corpus. In that way, his book joins others which have sought a similar overview, J. E. Tiles' *Dewey*, Jim Campbell's *Understanding Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence*, and my own *John Dewey: Rethinking our Time*.

Two major themes emerge, both of which recognize the Dewey-as-Hegelian dimension. The first is announced in the earliest pages. Dewey, says Hildebrand, offers us a twenty-first-century "philosophy of sustainability." This is not to be thought of as a philosophy of stasis. Rather, Dewey's orientation allows us to "adapt, survive, and grow" (x). By calling it a philosophy of sustainability Hildebrand effectively blocks the tendency to think of change for change's sake. Sustainability emphasizes the *aufhebung* dimension by which Hegel sought to move forward while preserving what was best from the past. So, for Dewey, a philosophy that embraces change and growth will be one rooted in experience (here is where we find the praxis at the root of pragmatism). It is not rooted in abstractions that remove us from our concrete lived situation.

Hildebrand emphasizes another Hegelian dimension, that of contextualism or pan-relationalism, by describing Dewey's philosophy as "ecological." In this way we recognize how "mind, body, and world are created by their mutual interaction" (21, 44, 150). Dewey then becomes the philosopher for those who accept that our situatedness in the world is marked by "ecological transactions that fund all types of experience" (150). Those transactions, in turn, culminate in the optimal combination of experiential wisdom and experimental approaches to change, that is, sustainability, in the best sense.

A philosopher does not arrive at sustainability and ecological transactions haphazardly. There are no more important choices for elucidation than identifying a thinker's point of departure. As one of my teachers, Etienne Gilson, was fond of saying, we can choose our starting points, but we cannot choose where those will lead us. One of Hildebrand's great strengths is how carefully he lays out two keys to understanding Dewey: a "practical starting point," and a "melioristic motive" (4-5). Philosophy does not begin with artificial cutouts of reality. Instead, it begins by "accepting experience as it is lived" (4). This is the "radical empiricism" (i.e., full, complete, integrated empiricism) that Dewey inherited from James. Such a starting point allows Dewey to avoid many presuppositions and problems that plagued modern (Descartes to Nietzsche) philosophy, problems such as whether we can know the external world at all, or the question labeled by Hildebrand as absurd, "why be moral?" (64).

This emphasis on getting starting points right is reinforced by the sequence of chapters: "Experience," "Inquiry," "Morality," "Politics," "Education," "Aesthet-

ics,” “Religion.” These are followed by a brief “Conclusion: Philosophy as Equipment for Living,” in which the author sketches implications of a Deweyan approach in “healthcare and medical ethics,” “environmental ethics,” and “feminism.” As benefits an introductory text, Hildebrand typically identifies a standard position, then contrasts it with the Deweyan alternative.

In the chapter on experience, Hildebrand explores Dewey’s criticism of the “reflex arc concept,” an approach which reduces experience to simple stimulus and response. This model misdiagnoses what are the fundamental ingredients in experience, that is, where we start from. Instead of welcoming the data of a genuine, that is, radical empiricism, it atomizes the components, reifying them as an initially disjointed concatenation of parts. It also disregards our fundamentally active dimension. “No child is a passive spectator” (15). The neutral, detached spectator on which the reflex arc depends is another contrived cutout. It is a product of an artificially atomizing empiricism, not of what William James called a “radical” empiricism.

In the inquiry chapter, Hildebrand’s foil is modern dualism, the separation of mind from reality. Once committed to this starting point, certain questions become prominent. The most pressing is how a mind could “get beyond its own thoughts and feelings to know the objective world” (46). Alter the starting point, remove the cutout into mind versus nature, and this question fades in significance. Pragmatism replaces it with instrumentalism. Knowing now becomes “a natural function, continuous with the rest of experience.” The description of the knowledge situation shifts in the direction of praxis, emphasizing how “concepts and ideas are tools or instruments” (52).

When it comes to morality, the modern assumption is galvanized around the notion of a single biological motivation: self-interest. Then the question “why be moral” becomes pressing. In addressing this issue, philosophers have themselves sought a single pivot as the “one explanatory principle” underlying morality. Dewey’s radical empiricism, taking ordinary experience seriously, is not committed in advance to such monocausal explanations. He welcomes “multicausal (and empirically sensitive) explanations,” explanations which refuse the “disconnection of ethics from everyday life” (71).

Political philosophy has, somewhat surprisingly, been strangely rooted in remote, abstract, even ahistorical starting points (96, 99). Once again, this encourages the search for monocausal explanations. Dewey’s avowed task was that of reconstructing classical liberalism, rethinking its ideals in pluralistic, concrete, pragmatic terms. No longer are there a priori absolutes that have typically served to protect the privileged. Rather, a central question must always be “what present conditions need to be attenuated or removed so that individuals can flourish and grow?” (108).

Although often associated with progressive education, Dewey, as Hildebrand insists, rejected both traditionalist approaches and romantic ones. This latter, progressive education as Dewey sometimes labeled it, places “excessive reliance on the child’s present interests and purposes” (127). For his alternative, Dewey insisted,

in continuity with his criticism of the reflex arc theory, that children must be recognized as already “actively engaged agents in life’s ongoing dramas” (129). The teacher’s task can then not be the one identified by traditionalists: filling the passive empty mind with content. Nor can it be the romantic ideal of letting the children follow their own inner impulses. Instead, teachers must recognize the importance of inherited customs, practices, methodologies and cultural literacy, directing students’ impulses “toward fruitful expression in history, science, art, and so on” (127).

The opening section’s emphasis on experience is revisited in the book’s strongest chapter, that on aesthetics. Once again, traditional assumptions are challenged. In this case, it is the inherited dualism of rational versus emotional. Overcoming this opposition, Dewey “came to believe that art and aesthetics were central, not peripheral, to philosophy” (147). This is because art is paradigmatic with regard to understanding experience. Since the aim of philosophy is to “liberate and enrich human experience” the aspect of human life that most provides guidance about culminating experiences will be central to philosophy. Great art involves communication. It provides an “*enduring* capacity for intensifying and enlivening ordinary life” (177).

When it comes to religion, Dewey neither accepts faith-based creedal claims nor submits to hierarchical, antidemocratic institutional structures. At the same time, many people report having a religious experience, testimony which “pragmatists, committed to a radically empirical starting point, must not dismiss out of hand” (184). Faced with such a situation, Dewey articulated a position which made room for a “natural piety” (195) disconnected from “anachronistic beliefs” (188). What the religious sensibility most preserves is a sense of how human achievement does not occur in a vacuum, but rather develops in cooperation with both natural conditions and fellow human actors (195). Religious experience thus serves to encourage thinking in terms of the “whole self,” recognizing the interpenetration of person and world (192). In the end, religious faith is “one kind of moral faith,” one penetrated by a deep emotional tone and leading to an enduring transformation of character (195).

Such a comprehensive overview, providing a “detailed account of the widest possible range of Dewey’s philosophical views,” should be judged by how well it meets these aims. In this regard Hildebrand’s text offers a model accomplishment. The book’s limitations derive indeed from its strengths and depend, frankly, on possible divergences of perspective regarding the weaknesses in Dewey’s own positions.

Did Dewey, for example, draw out the full implications of his starting point in experience? Is he, in other words, someone who transitioned to a philosophy rooted in the primacy of praxis while remaining in many ways limited by commitments that were typical of modernity’s emphasis on *theoria*, an emphasis accompanied by the search for a method serving as neutral starting point? If the primacy of praxis is indeed central, then the model inquirer would be close to Aristotle’s *phronimos*, the individual with practical wisdom. This is, in important respects,

not at all the same as the individual committed to scientific method. The latter remains implicated within the philosophical orientation which privileges *theoria's* neutral starting point. It tends to minimize how value judgments are implicated at every level of decision making. This important point is appropriately emphasized by Hildebrand (57). What is not indicated clearly enough is how this understanding that value judgments go all the way down challenges the approach that privileges “parallels with scientific inquiry” (74). The concrete question here would involve making value judgments about which scientific inquiries to draw on as parallels: meteorology, ecology, biochemistry, geology, parasitology, mechanics? To claim, as Hildebrand properly does, that the similarity with the sciences involves insisting on the hypothetical and provisional nature of inquiries (74) is fine, so far as it goes. The emphasis on a “method of intelligence” (103) becomes problematic if the connotation is that some neutral framework for judging and decision-making, some framework beyond that of the practical wisdom approach, can be attained.

In a more minor way, the lingering privileging of *theoria* continues to be reflected even in Hildebrand's strong chapter on aesthetics. Here, after some careful claims about overcoming traditional dualisms, Hildebrand utilizes the surprising label “appreciator” (161) to identify individuals interacting with art works. “Appreciator,” and certainly “autonomous appreciator” (170) remain best suited for the museum conception of art that Dewey sought to set aside. When we think of art, as Hildebrand wants us to think of it, as an event a) of participation (147), b) of human communication (171), and c) of active, experimental engagements (180), the outside, detached spectator as suggested by “appreciator” seems inappropriate. “Participant,” “interlocutor,” or “collaborator” would more suggestively indicate the kind of serious interaction occasioned by artworks in the fullest Deweyan sense. Hopefully, these issues will be taken up as Hildebrand moves to articulate his own philosophy of sustainability for the twenty-first century.

Raymond D. Boisvert is Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Siena College.

Email: boisvert@siena.edu