

BOOK REVIEW

John Dewey's Quest for Unity: The Journey of a Promethean Mystic

Loren Goldman

Richard Gale, *John Dewey's Quest for Unity: The Journey of a Promethean Mystic*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2008. 215 pages. ISBN 159102630-X. \$32.98 (hbk.)

Richard Gale's slender monograph is a sometimes insightful, sometimes enervating and always personal reckoning with John Dewey's philosophy. Gale's basic thesis is that Dewey is a unificationist *malgré lui*, that despite being committed to empiricism and pluralism his pragmatism remains profoundly metaphysical in a non-naturalistic sense. This claim is hardly new or surprising. Thinkers as diverse as George Santayana, Richard Rorty and John Patrick Diggins, to name but a few, have also noted traces of supernaturalism and monism throughout Dewey's corpus. Moreover, recent works including Victor Kestenbaum's *The Grace and Severity of the Ideal* (Chicago 2002), James Good's *A Search for Unity and Diversity* (Lexington 2005) and Melvin Rogers' *The Undiscovered Dewey* (Columbia 2008) have addressed the intersection of Dewey's writings with spiritual and religious themes. Gale describes his own contribution as "a mere footnote" (26n9) to Steven Rockefeller's *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (Columbia 1992), an intellectual biography narrated in the long shadows of Dewey's evangelical upbringing. Where Gale's work stands out, however, is in its claim that Dewey's corpus is incoherent unless significantly modified. As Gale sees it, Dewey's work is shot through with a tension between his scientific metaphilosophy and the "metaphysical" bases and aspirations for his theory of experience. On the one hand, Gale argues that Dewey denies qualitative experiences any cognitive value; on the other, he offers that Dewey's privileged process of inquiry rests on intersubjective communication about qualitatively "felt" and ultimately ineffable problematic situations in experience. As such, Dewey's endorsement of scientific method is incompatible with his aesthetic conception of inquiry. Therefore, either his methodology or his metaphysics has to go. Gale recommends that Dewey drop his infatuation with science and own up to his identity as a traditional metaphysician.

The work's introduction explains Gale's systematic approach to Dewey's philosophy and briefly lays out the general argument. Gale reads Dewey's key con-

cepts of inquiry, moral democracy, communication and education as forming a pyramid “with growth as the summum bonum at its apex” (11). In Gale’s words, growth “involves the realization by an individual of ever richer and more extensive unifications, both within herself and with other persons, as well as with her natural environment” (11). Below this apex comes inquiry, the controlled and directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into a unified, meaningful whole (12). Inquiries are successful if they lead to greater harmony within concrete experience. Gale writes that inquiry “involves the realization of greater esthetic unification” (12). Moral democracy comes next, for it “will empower citizens to freely bring about their own growth, and to do so it must create the circumstances in which they will become effective inquirers” (13). Communication undergirds moral democracy, for “[c]ollective inquiry requires a community of shared interests and purposes” which can only be gleaned through “widespread communication” (14). Finally, education sits at the pyramid’s base, teaching citizens “how to engage in collective inquiry” (15). While perhaps somewhat forced (an image of a cone or cylinder rather than a pyramid seems more apt), Gale’s pyramidal schematization, whether one accepts it or not, reveals that the systematic aspects of Dewey’s work can be easily overlooked if one does not make a conscious effort to illuminate them. This image, moreover, allows Gale to make his dramatic claim that “Dewey’s grand pyramid is a glorification of humanity as a Promethean creator of meaning and value through the active control of nature by inquiry. . . . This one-idea fanaticism is both the glory and the misery of Dewey’s philosophy” (18). Cataloguing the errors of Deweyan inquiry is the task to which Gale applies himself in subsequent chapters. The rest of the book is structured in two parts composed of four chapters each. The first section, “Growth, Inquiry, and Unity,” develops the argument that Dewey is obsessed with unity. Gale scrutinizes his method of inquiry and tries to show how Dewey inappropriately applies it in all domains. The second section, “The Metaphysics of Unity,” concerns Dewey’s implicit worldview. Gale seeks to demonstrate that Dewey’s basic mysticism is a shaky foundation for the ostensibly verificationist demands of inquiry.

A constant theme throughout both sections of the book is that Dewey was a “Promethean mystic” (19) for whom human subjects alone can effectuate the unification Dewey desires. Though mentioned regularly, Gale does not directly argue for this claim. Despite the book title’s promise, Dewey’s Promethean quest for unity remains a background assumption throughout the work. While it would take more space than a review affords to trace all of Gale’s arguments, the thrust of his book’s first section is simple: inquiry in Dewey is not what it is claimed to be. Gale is skeptical of Dewey’s position that we are always already involved in inquiry, and accuses Dewey of employing an aesthetic model of collective problem-solving that makes the successful conduct of inquiry nearly impossible. Three reasons why inquiry is incoherent form the core of Gale’s first chapter (42): 1) Dewey diagnoses experiences as problematic and hence in need of inquiry-based solution based on the subjec-

tive, qualitative feel of disequilibria, and yet inquiry is predicated on the possibility of intersubjective communication; 2) Dewey defines problematic situations as unique, and hence we can presume they are incommunicable for the same reason; and 3) Dewey's determinate situation that concludes inquiry aims at an ambitious Hegelian synthesis that far outstrips the modest demands of resolving a particular indeterminate situation. The rest of Part I deepens these claims. The second chapter examines Dewey's ostensibly Hegelian approach through an extended treatment of *Art as Experience*. The third chapter sheds doubt on inquiry's ubiquity. The fourth is critical of Dewey's intersubjective understanding of growth, which Gale holds "cannot make room for individuality and human creativity" (102).

Obviously these are controversial claims. Gale's economical mode of argumentation and his weighty conclusions for future Dewey scholarship warrant detailed engagement. For present purposes, I begin with the observation that some readers will be sympathetic to the idea that (intersubjective) inquiry is not as ubiquitous as Dewey thought it was. Nevertheless, Gale's reasons for this skepticism are unconvincing. Consider his three foundational claims (noted above). First, is ineffability really a stumbling block in Dewey's account in the way Gale imagines? Physical pain is an intimately personal feeling, and is thoroughly ineffable insofar as no description can enable another to feel my pain. And yet clearly we can communicate the fact of pain to another—for instance, to a doctor—and the listener can recommend courses of action for relieving the pain. Here Gale seems especially uncharitable in his reading of Dewey, for ineffability in Dewey's sense of pre-discursive qualitative feels is hardly a barrier to inquiry. Neither is uniqueness. Every problematic situation is conceivably unique in the sense that the particular constellation of events and agents has not and will never occur again. Yet it is far from clear why this banal fact precludes meaningful problem-solving activity; at best, it suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to diverse problematic situations. However, this is rather less than the complete breakdown of inquiry that Gale espies. To give another example, musical notes are unique, but that hardly means that the same song played in two different recording sessions is unidentifiable. My tone-deaf experience of hearing "Sophisticated Lady" undoubtedly differs from my friend with perfect pitch's experience. Yet it would be absurd to suggest that we would have no way of sensibly communicating our respective listenings to each other. As for the claim that Dewey has an unworkably "aesthetic" conception of knowing once a problem is solved, I must admit that I miss the force of Gale's argument. For one, given the concerns voiced in this paragraph, it is hard to see why the fact that individuals ultimately judge the success of inquiry based on whether the solution feels right is corrosive to Dewey's account. Gale appears to demand of Dewey precisely what Dewey rejects, namely an infallible and absolute conclusion to inquiry measurable by some autonomous and objective standard. Furthermore, Gale also contends that relating Dewey's conception of inquiry to Hegel is a knock-down argument against

it. Leaving the question of Dewey's residual Hegelianism aside—I am doubtful that the holistic aspirations Gale sees pulsing through Dewey's later work is on the same plane (or planet) as Hegel's totalizing cosmology—this criticism is only trenchant if Hegel is wrong, an assumption for which Gale never argues.

The second part of the book turns from inquiry to Dewey's metaphysics, focusing on what Gale calls Dewey's quest for "intellectual mysticism," or his yearning for undifferentiated oneness with the universe. Each chapter takes up a different aspect of Dewey's philosophy. In brief, chapter 5 details the tension between Dewey's verificationist-empiricist metaphilosophy and his own questionably verifiable claims about experience's "generic traits." Chapter 6 argues that Dewey's concept of time is too romantic to plausibly satisfy the hard-nosed needs of inquiry. Chapter 7 criticizes Dewey's "Humpty Dumpty Intuition" that if philosophy begins with the assumption that humans are distinct individuals, then the individualistic world it envisions cannot be made into a collective whole once again. Chapter 8, finally, argues that Dewey's aversion to mysticism is rooted more in his aversion to the anti-democratic tendencies of traditional religions than in any coherent philosophical objections.

As with the book's first section, there are many complicated claims here that warrant careful scrutiny. However, I will only raise concerns about Gale's treatment of Dewey's so-called "Humpty-Dumpty Intuition," since the bulk of his argument rests on this account. Gale appears here to fall to the myth of the given, for the argument that the world *is* fundamentally comprised of discrete individuals is advanced simply because it *could* be so. Dewey would not deny this, for any claims he makes about numerical individuality or moments of felt oneness with the universe are fallible. Yet Dewey had good reasons for privileging ontological continuity over separateness. Reconstructing individuals ecologically, according to their social-genetic context, enabled Dewey to address the meaningfulness of experience as filtered through our reconstructable habits of conduct. Dewey's point is not that we cannot be seen to be separate, but that significance is always already embedded in a social structure of meaning. Starting from the whole rather from the individual allows Dewey to argue for the necessarily intersubjective and social aspects of meliorative reconstruction denied by atomistic philosophies.

Something must finally be said about Gale's style. *John Dewey's Quest for Unity* was originally a series of lectures, and the text's amiable chattiness and rhetorical snubs might rub some readers the wrong way. From likening Dewey to a "Madison Avenue huckster" or the mustachioed "derelict" who once accosted him on a street corner (84, 134), to talk of hand jobs and the universe's bowel movements (90, 171), Gale's penchant for provocation and crude humor can detract from the seriousness of his endeavor. Occasionally Gale makes utterly bizarre claims, for instance, that Dewey's writings have "a preachy quality, which would have been offensive were it not for the fact that they reeked of sincerity the like of which has never been matched, not even by Elvis Presley" (10). Finally, Gale could have chosen his ex-

amples with greater care: I cannot make sense of his reference to El Cid's *Passion of Christ on the Cross* (56)—the painter and painting simply do not appear to exist (perhaps Gale meant “El Greco”?).

In short, Gale is far from proving his case that Dewey was an intellectual mystic constrained by a positivistic straightjacket. For all the defects in his arguments, however, I do not mean to denigrate the value of this entire work. Sympathetic writers rarely take Dewey to task to this extent. Thus, pragmatism scholars will find in Gale's book a bounty of material to fruitfully argue with. It is to Gale's credit, then, that he does not claim to have made an incontrovertible case. Rather, he writes that his interpretation is “an interesting and original one that has reasonable textual motivation, at least as good as any rival . . .” (164). Gale has thrown the gauntlet down, and other Dewey readers are invited to answer.

Loren Goldman teaches political theory in the rhetoric department at UC Berkeley. His articles on pragmatism and German idealism have appeared in *Political Theory*, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, and *William James Studies*. E-mail: lorengoldman@berkeley.edu.