Book Review

Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism

Lynda Stone


Introduction

Larry Hickman’s latest book on the philosophy of John Dewey is a compilation of presentations and published pieces from across several decades of his illustrious career. From the Introduction, the premise of the text is that there still is much to understand and use in the writings of the Classical Pragmatists by contemporary philosophers. More specifically, interpreting from neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty, Hickman asserts that Dewey “will be waiting at the end of the philosophical road of postmodernism” and thus is “post-postmodern” (p. 2). The larger story of the book is one of inquiry and of reading philosophy today. Moreover, because the writing is prime Hickman, the collection is appropriate for Dewey experts and novices alike: the prose is clear and down-to-earth, with delightful phrasing and enough repetition and development of key themes to be educative. While the book is not especially for education readers, there is mention of this central Deweyan domain in several chapters. This, however, in no way detracts from its educational utility.

Needing no introduction to Dewey scholars, Hickman is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He is author of several single-author and edited collections as well as editor of numerous Dewey resources, including the electronic edition of the Collected Works and Dewey’s Correspondence. His own interests in technology and the environment—topical sections in this book—are found throughout his writings.
Hickman holds several honorary doctorates and has been elected President of the
John Dewey Society, the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, and
the Society for Philosophy and Technology.

In the overview of the parts of the book below, thematics with central con-
cepts are briefly described, material that in the text receives a comprehensive, rich
treatment. Following the summary, the final section in this review provides an as-
essment of the book in "A Different Reading."

Overview

Four thematic sections organize the book chapters: postmodernism, technology,
the environment, and classical pragmatism. Each contains an array of philosophi-
cal projects, from general discussions of philosophy to focused studies of persons
and topics, from detailed treatment of Dewey's position to comparisons and con-
trasts with other authors.

Part One, Postmodernism, is comprised of three chapters; its purpose is to
initiate discussion of Hickman's general thesis, which is that classical pragmatism,
especially from Dewey, was already postmodern—indeed, post-postmodern—
more than a century ago. The first chapter describes postmodernism along with
Dewey's treatment of key elements. Responding to modern theory, he includes end
of the grand or systemic narrative, rejection of foundational certainty, and reinter-
pretation of philosophy and science out of traditional metaphysical and positivist
orientations. The second chapter elaborates on Dewey's classical pragmatism for
the specific topic of global citizenship. Herein comparisons are to peers William
James and Charles Sanders Peirce rather than to progeny such as Rorty and other
postmodernists. A conception of pragmatic method is central with emphasis on
experiment, continuity and commonality, agentive self, and aesthetic diversity;
and significantly, what these elements offer both to the contemporary formation of
global publics and for cultural conflicts. Returning to Rorty, chapter 3 continues a
broad discussion but with specific attention to differences between Dewey's classi-
cal pragmatism and Rorty's neo-pragmatism. These include relationships between
art and science and between experience and discourse, and, as well, the broad role
of philosophy. If, as Hickman maintains, philosophy for Rorty is to be the mere
equivalent of literature, for Dewey it is to serve as "liaison officer," relevant for its
function of rendering diverse disciplines intelligible to one another. It is clear that
Hickman's philosophy echoes this vision from Dewey.

Part Two, Technology, begins a discussion of a significant topic that continues
through much of the rest of the book. It is comprised, first, of three chapters that
offer specific comparisons of Dewey's pragmatist view to those of, respectively, Jür-
gen Habermas, Andrew Feenberg, and Albert Borgmann, including their critical
theory roots and developments from Marcuse and Heidegger. These are followed
by a wonderfully synthetic chapter on Dewey's philosophy of technology, that is,
his "doing and making in a democracy" (p. 112). For Hickman, Dewey and Hab-
ermas disagree over the relationship of scientific technology and human sciences,
respectively, as aligned or distinct. Related and important, however, their methods of philosophical inquiry are analogues, with Habermas’s three interests and their specific methodologies assumed as phrases in Dewey’s holistic inquiry. Especially focused on technology, Dewey and Feenberg are even more in sync. Following an overview of Frankfurt School critical theory, the focus of this chapter is a shared Instrumentalism. Its position is antifoundational, constructivist, contextualized, means and ends related, public, and potentially democratized. Moving on, in the next and one of the most technical chapters of the book, Borgmann’s neo-Heideggerian theorizing is overviewed, especially his emphasis on focal things and practices. Here Hickman is at his own philosophical best as he offers a pragmatist stance toward a reinterpretation of Borgmann—through the latter’s ”Focaltechnics” and his own ”Pragmatechnics.” Rather than devices and essences, the new emphasis is on invention, development, and the deliberate use of a general sense of tools for solving problems. Utilizing two of Hickman’s favorite Dewey texts, Experience and Nature (1925) and Art as Experience (1934), the final chapter in this section provides a philosophically emblematic synthesis of Dewey’s comprehensive conception of technology. This includes glosses of a history from the Greeks to the moderns, from thinking to doing, from machine to organism, and from fruits of to methods of science, for inquiry and communication that is at once technological and political.

Part Three, The Environment, is comprised of two chapters that continue themes especially from Part Two and the pattern of specific comparisons to Dewey—one to Aldo Leopold, and another on Green Pragmatism. Binding Dewey and Leopold through their naturalism, Hickman poses Dewey’s comprehensive theory of inquiry as it is applied to a concept of ”nature-as-culture” (p. 134). Out of Instrumentalism there is special attention to radical empiricism and fallibilism along with other characteristics from previous chapters. This is followed by specific comparisons to Leopold’s land ethic, concepts of management, community and communication, and especially interesting, introduction to valuation. The last chapter is an update of comparisons to a set of contemporary environmental philosophers. Of particular interest here is the historic consideration of Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy to that of the realists and idealists of his day and his application of inquiry as ”critique of critiques” to technology. Work by Bryan G. Norton, J. Baird Callicott, Michael Zimmerman, and Holmes Ralston III is introduced.

Part Four, Classical Pragmatism, is comprised of five chapters of diverse topics that continue the development of central themes. Scheler (ch. 13) and Peirce (chs. 10 and 14) receive special attention; and the general topic of inquiry crosses through all. Chapter 12, on Theory of Inquiry, is another useful example of broad synthetic overviews from Hickman. Ten subtopics are picked up, reviewed and expanded upon, some from preceding chapters. They include logical objects, propositions, and judgments. Chapter 10 concerns Dewey’s iconic preoccupation with the number three across his forms of inquiry that include arts and ethics. Chapter 11 is still another overview, on the religious as itself a form of pragmatist inquiry; in it core themes of experience, quality, choice, testing, and truth are discussed. The
final two chapters return first to technology, in a comparison with Scheler (with reference to Bergson), and to production, control, science, and as a focus, habit, in a careful reading of Peirce.

**A Different Reading**

By now it should be clear that Hickman's *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism* is an excellently crafted set of essays by a talented and insightful philosopher—one especially who desires that American pragmatism assume its appropriately central place in contemporary intellectual life. In this final section, I turn to "a different reading" as a way of indicating our theoretical distinctions. At the outset, I, too, have often read Dewey's ideas as similar to those of some current social philosophers. My own stance has been to see him as prescient, as perhaps on the cusp of postmodernism. Further, I have attempted to see how specific neo-pragmatists such as Rorty have updated his ideas. My present approach, however, differs from that of Hickman in working from a strong historicist stance, emphasizing distinctions between Dewey's time and thought and this time. In doing this, I work from a different concept of postmodernism and a somewhat different approach to reading philosophy.

Having written about postmodernism in the past, today I am uncertain about the efficacy of the term. In my view, it names an extensive, current cultural moment in which there are many manifest differences from past times: these are seen in social, economic, and political ways of life, and especially in such domains as communication. It is also a specific era of intellectual change, bringing with it the difficult task of delineating past practices from ones present. To do this, I now employ poststructuralist insights (Hickman's literary French postmodernists). Each author, in this tradition as with the classical pragmatists I understand as unique: this stance echoes Drucilla Cornell that there is no poststructuralism. The irony here is that in the book, Hickman is always careful to distinguish specifics in the ideas of Dewey, James, and Peirce, but not of the postmodernists. Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva and their peers and progeny need to be read in their philosophical differences even as conceptual similarities can be evoked. Another reason to substitute specific poststructuralisms for postmodernism is that most writers in the tradition just named would not identify as such and much of their writings blurs modern and postmodern categories and concepts. The labeling is largely American, by the way. One last reason to focus on poststructuralists is to see strong differences between their work and that of the Frankfurt School critical theorists. I view the latter as strongly modern, systemic, and probably foundational. Habermas, for instance, does not want to be labeled "post."

Saying this, there is much of use in reading Dewey with and against individual theorists, including the poststructuralists, and indeed Hickman can be read in this way. Doing this serves as an exemplar for the general stance that philosophy across times and traditions is always comparative. The point is to write acknowledging comparisons: difficulties, uncertainties, limitations of judgment—differences. A last elaboration is that reading for difference is more difficult the closer in time
philosophers have written and do write. This makes reading Dewey for today (how different is his era from this one?) a special challenge to which Hickman continues to provide significant contributions. We may read differently but I continue to learn a great deal from him.

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