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Was Dewey (Too) Modern? The Modern Faces of Dewey

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Although John Dewey continues to be a source to which scholars look in order to address contemporary social and educational issues, others have suggested that Dewey may be too implicated in the project of modernity to be acceptable in educational theory and practice today. To what extent Dewey was modern, and what we make of the question of his modernity, depends on our reading of Dewey and on our understanding of modernity more generally. I will argue that a broad reading of both Dewey and modernity helps us avoid treating Dewey either as education's saviour or as inimical to our present purposes. First, I examine Dewey's own conception of modernity and then broaden its scope by bringing into view four aspects of Western modernity: economic modernization, the struggle for justice, individualism, and naturalism. Second, I show how Dewey can and has been read as representing one or more of these aspects, but also from the perspective of one or more of these aspects. This generates what I will call Dewey's four "faces": Dewey as engineer, Dewey as activist, Dewey as Romantic, and Dewey as naturalist. This mapping offers a way of making more sense of the diverse readings of Dewey that exist in the secondary literature. Finally, I make a case for Dewey's ongoing relevance because of his capacious view of the goods of modernity and his distinctively educational philosophy.

Scholars continue to read John Dewey as a source of inspiration for addressing contemporary social and educational issues (e.g., Stitzlein, 2019). However, David Waddington (2020) has recently suggested that Dewey may be too involved in the project of modernity to be acceptable in educational theory and practice today. The basic problem is familiar: there is a broad and growing consensus, particularly in educational studies, that there were and are major ethical, political, and epistemic problems with some of the frameworks for thought, feeling, and action that emerged in Western Europe over the past few centuries and gradually spread outwards. These frameworks generated (and continue to generate) immense suffering and injustice through, for example, colonialism and imperialism. They also in many cases legitimated (and continue to legitimate) the worst kinds of prejudices and the systematic destruction of the environment. In a word, the so-called Enlightenment had a dark side. Many scholars have dedicated and are dedicating their energies to surgically removing the influence of guilty modern ways of being and doing from educational theory and practice. This is an ongoing and significant project. Quite naturally, all this raises questions about Dewey: How implicated was Dewey in "the modern project"? Are we, say, perpetuating various forms of injustice associated with modernity by applying his ideas to education? Or can he help us overcome the modern injustices currently plaguing society? Given that Dewey is one of the most famous and influential philosophers of education (if seldom read comprehensively), these questions are significant for the field of education as a whole.

Of course, our judgement about "Dewey's modernity" depends on how we read Dewey and what we understand by "modernity" more generally. In fact, there is a sense in which this question – particularly in its categorical formulation; that is, was Dewey modern or not – is driven by a narrow reading of Dewey and a superficial understanding of modernity. Over the course of this essay, I will show that a "broad reading" (i.e., a more comprehensive and just reading) of both Dewey and modernity helps us avoid treating Dewey either as the saviour of contemporary education or as inimical

to our present purposes. There are genuine tensions in his work that derive in part from modernity, but we have much to learn about how he juggled these tensions – he is far from irrelevant to contemporary educational theory and practice. A second advantage of the kind of broad reading I am recommending here, which pays special attention to the complex theme of modernity, is that it can help make better sense of the diverse array of interpretations regarding Dewey that exist in the literature. This is in part[1] because both Dewey's cheerleaders and critics are for the most part also steeped in modernity, which colours their own readings of Dewey in certain ways. Carefully exploring the question of Dewey's modernity, then, also offers an illuminating perspective on the landscape of the secondary literature.

To accomplish these aims, I first examine Dewey's own conception of modernity, compare it with the sources Waddington uses, and then broaden the scope of discussion by drawing on Charles Taylor's work (1989). This brings out four aspects of Western modernity: economic modernization, the struggle for justice, individualism, and naturalism. Second – and this part constitutes the bulk of my paper – I show that Dewey can and has been interpreted as "representing" one or more of these aspects, but that these aspects also constitute "lenses" through which Dewey has been read. This dynamic generates what I will call Dewey's four "faces": Dewey as engineer, Dewey as activist, Dewey as Romantic, and Dewey as naturalist. There are superficial versions of each of these faces (masks, as it were), but more sophisticated versions do tell us something important about Dewey, including his strengths and limitations – even if they are ultimately partial. A Deweyan attitude of reconstruction towards his own work naturally suggests itself. My mapping thus helps make sense of some of the tensions in Dewey's work; but it also offers a way of organizing the incredible variety of interpretations of his legacy. Finally, I reinforce the case for Dewey's ongoing relevance to educational theory and practice, with reference to his capacious view of the goods of modernity and his distinctively educational philosophy.

Dewey on Modernity and Broadening Modernity

What did Dewey himself have to say about modernity? For Dewey, modernity was essentially related to the remarkable advances in methods in the natural sciences that had occurred in previous decades and centuries. The process of modernization implied extending those methods into all other areas of human life, including morality and philosophical reflection upon value. Modernity was therefore an unfinished project: "The genuinely modern has still to be brought into existence" (Dewey, 1948, p. 273). Philip Deen (2019) argues that Dewey's theory of modernity is similar to Habermas' in that both are hopeful that reason can be used to resolve the contradictions of modernity and improve the condition of the world. They are also both wary of crude instrumental reason serving capital, which they argue is one of the chief problems of the modern age.[2] I want to retain from Dewey this notion that we are *still in* the modern period, which I think is convincing, and which Dewey and Habermas share with Charles Taylor (1989) and other theorists of modernity. Because he saw modernity as an unfinished process, Dewey thought that humanity was in a major period of transition (Fairfield, 2009, p. 261).

Now, Waddington (2020) labels Dewey a paradigmatic modern thinker. He does this by showing that Dewey's thought matches with two influential accounts of modernity: one from Albert Borgmann (1992) and the other from Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984). For Borgmann (1992), modernity involves the domination of nature, methodological universalism, and ambiguous individualism. Waddington (2020)

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[1] Another reason for the staggering diversity of readings of Dewey is surely the sheer volume of Dewey's corpus, which makes it relatively easy to find support for a vast range of interpretations.

[2] There are of course important disanalogies between their thought, one of which is that Habermas follows a Kantian differentiation of reason into three domains (techno-scientific, moral-practical, and aesthetic), while Dewey holds a more undifferentiated but expansive conception of reason (Deen, 2019).

finds Dewey particularly aligned with the two first elements of Borgmann's conception of modernity: Dewey cited Bacon's writings on the domination of nature approvingly and thought the scientific method should be applied to all affairs of human life (pp. 33–34). For Lyotard (1984), modernity has to do with two metanarratives: the right of all to scientific education for liberation and the belief in a unified system of knowledge. Again, Waddington (2020) finds aspects of Dewey's thought that show his agreement with these two metanarratives (pp. 35–36). Dewey, then, Waddington concludes, is committed to the modern project.

I want to suggest that while Dewey's own conception of modernity, as well as ones employed by Borgmann and Lyotard, offers certain insights, it is somewhat partial, and this obscures the debate about the relationship between Dewey and modernity. Charles Taylor's (1989) work on modernity can help us here in two ways. First, it helps make sense of the somewhat confusing back and forth between pro- and anti-modernity positions. Second, it helps bring into focus a broader range of imperatives that drive Western modernity – some of which are absent from Dewey's explicit writings about the nature of modernity, as well as from the writings of some "postmodernists."

Taylor (1991) remarks that "Modernity has its boosters as well as its knockers" (p. 11). The "boosters" often have a nice, perhaps too-rosy picture of modernity in mind, while the "knockers" are fighting, not quite a strawman, but a somewhat debased version of modernity. Dewey can, in a sense, be seen as a kind of booster of one aspect of modernity – say, the advent of modern science. Borgmann and Lyotard, on the other hand, could be interpreted as knockers of one or more aspects of modernity, including some version of the aspect that Dewey has in mind.

Taylor also helps us keep a broader set of modern goods in view. Lyotard, for example, is clearly motivated by a very acute, modern sense of justice. Taylor would likely point out that his sense of justice has clear roots in modernity itself, and that his struggle for justice is in fact an essentially modern project. Modernity is not only about the advent of modern science, then; it is also about the struggle for justice. What complicates matters further is that some of the applications of modern science have led to massive injustices on an unprecedented scale. This is just one example of the contradictions that arise between two aspects of Western modernity. In fact, there are of course more than two major aspects. For the purposes of this essay, I want to distinguish between *four* aspects of Western modernity: economic modernization, the struggle for justice, Romantic individualism, and naturalism.

Briefly, economic modernization captures Borgmann's reference to the domination of nature and to methodological universalism, but refers more broadly to a conception of the world that places economic activity and efficiency at its centre and is concerned with endowing individuals with the practical skill of problem-solving, among others. The struggle for justice refers to the emergence and promotion on a wide scale of a certain understanding of a family of concepts, such as liberty, equality, democracy, and justice, and of practices and institutions that are meant to embody them. Romantic individualism is concerned with the feelings of the individual, with their authentic freedom and self-expression. Finally, the sensibilities associated with naturalism involve a kind of reverence for nature, as the object of either Romantic or scientific piety and awe. There are no doubt other ways of dividing up Western modernity, and perhaps there are even other aspects, but already this four-fold picture gets us beyond the relatively narrow conceptions offered by Dewey and upon which Waddington relies.[3]

I want to suggest that these four aspects of Western modernity shape Dewey himself, as well as historical and contemporary readings of his work. Applying this four-fold picture to Dewey's writings and to the secondary literature on him will help us get a better sense of the relationship between Dewey and modernity, and offer some insight into how we should approach him today.

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[3] I offer a similar four-fold account of Western modernity, but in more detail, in a forthcoming article in *Educational Theory*, entitled "A Transitional Conception of Modernity for Education."

Mapping Out the Different Faces of Dewey

In his celebrated history of competing efforts to reform the American curriculum between the end of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth, Herbert Kliebard (2004) identifies four "interest groups": the humanists, who were trying to retain some version of the traditional academic curriculum; the social efficiency group, who were concerned with making education more efficient and tailoring it to the workforce needs of society; the social reconstructionists, who emphasized the radical role of education in the transformation of society; and the child development reformers, who promoted a child-centred pedagogy. Kliebard's interest groups resonate with the aspects of Western modernity that I distinguished above: economic modernization is related to the social efficiency group; social reconstruction could be seen as part of the broader struggle for justice; and Romantic individualism is clearly connected to the aims of the child development group. Kliebard would probably have included naturalism among the ideas associated with the child development group, but I have separated it out.[4]

Now, Dewey's academic career spans almost the entirety of the 65-year period Kliebard (2004) reviews in his book (1893–1958; Dewey began writing in the 1880s and passed away in 1952). But where does he fit in this categorization of interest groups? In the preface to the first edition of his book, Kliebard mentions that he was initially "puzzled as to where [Dewey] belonged in the context of the interest groups" (p. xix). He eventually decided that Dewey "did not belong in any of them and that he should appear in the book as somehow hovering over the struggle rather than as belonging to any particular side" (ibid).

I agree with Kliebard that Dewey does not fit neatly into any of the four interest groups, which persist today under different guises. However, he is often *taken* to be a member of one or more of the latter three groups (social efficiency, social reconstruction, or child development). Those who take Dewey to fall into one or more of these three groups sometimes do so in order to bolster the efforts of those groups, with whom they themselves also identify. For example, a social reconstructionist might read Dewey as a social reconstructionist, recruiting Dewey to his team; such a reader would recommend Dewey to us as a solution to problems besetting modern education. Alternatively, educators may take Dewey to be a member of one of these groups as a way of blaming him (and the group in question) for the current (sorry) state of education. For instance, people have read Dewey as a mere promoter of social efficiency and thereby blame him (and others of his ilk) for current neoliberal trends in education; for these readers, Dewey is of no use to modern education and may even be harmful to read. We have, then, both boosters and knockers of Dewey – but they often have different Deweys in mind, and sometimes they have a rather superficial version of him in their sights.

My thesis here is that, while Dewey does not fit neatly into any of the three groups (or four aspects of Western modernity), his work reflects elements of each. Depending, then, on what features of Dewey's work one focuses on, or what one assumes about modernity, one will see a different Dewey. I show below that there are four modern "faces" of Dewey – Dewey as engineer, Dewey as activist, Dewey as Romantic, and Dewey as naturalist – each of which offers some genuine insight into his position, but none of which is complete by itself.

Dewey As Engineer

Dewey wrote a great deal about the scientific method, about experimentation, and what he called the method of intelligence, and argued that we needed to extend these ways of being, doing, and knowing to other realms beyond science and industry, in order to increase "social control" (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 38). Education, of course, should strengthen the ability of students to think, a process which was

[4] David Labaree (2004) identifies "pedagogical naturalism" as one of the core elements of progressive, child-centred education (pp. 138–140).

described in Dewey's popular text *How We Think* (1910/1997). One of the ways in which schools could do this, he argued, was by means of teaching children through occupations: a kind of learning by doing. This would also help them better understand some of the profound industrial developments of modern society. On one occasion, he said that "We may fairly enough call educational practice a kind of social engineering" (Dewey, 1929, p. 39).[5]

This is one of the faces of Dewey: "Dewey as engineer." It is, of course, a rather selective reading of Dewey, but it exists, and it has both boosters and knockers. Among the boosters, we have a number of early twentieth-century educators concerned with social efficiency, some of whom would later be labelled "administrative progressives" (Tyack, 1974). One of these was Paul Hanna, one of the founding members of the John Dewey Society, who produced a very successful series of social studies textbooks (Condliffe-Lagemann, 2002; Stallones, 2002; Tanner, 1991). It appears that Hanna's textbooks replaced the more social reconstructionist–aligned texts that had been in circulation. Waddington (2020) describes Hanna as a "socially conservative" (p. 27) administrative progressive; a fan of Dewey, then, but one who seems to have selectively drawn on Dewey largely for his own purposes. John Rudolph (2005) has also shown how publishers of school science textbooks drew on *How We Think*, particularly Dewey's famous list of steps in the process of thinking in order to illustrate the scientific method. Henry Cowles (2020) argues that these authors ended up largely simplifying Dewey's account of thinking, reducing the scientific method to a linear series of steps.

Others share this reading of Dewey as engineer, but, instead of championing him, are critical of his work (the "knockers"). Eamonn Callan (1990), for example, has argued that Dewey may have been insufficiently (or intermittently) critical of corporate capitalism, since he "stressed the value of education in improving productivity and creating more discriminating consumers" (p. 89). In Callan's view, due to ambiguities and tensions in Dewey's own writings, it is quite legitimate to conclude that one of the main purposes of education for Dewey was to prepare an adaptable workforce by endowing students with qualities needed by corporations, such as initiative and industry. The focus Dewey placed on occupations, Callan suggested, was in part in order to foster some of these qualities of the adaptable employee. Waddington (2008), however, has disputed these claims. He has argued that Callan's arguments rely on questionable textual evidence and that there are many indications that Dewey was *not* a partisan for corporate America. While there is some truth to Callan's account, then, it may lack nuance.

Is "Dewey as engineer," then, a myth? Are the boosters and knockers of this "face of Dewey" simply bad readers? "Dewey as engineer" is not, in fact, a myth, but more of a caricature. And, like any caricature, it emphasizes certain elements that can genuinely be found in the original. And some of these elements are good, while others are less desirable. With regard to the positive elements, one example can be found in Waddington's discussion of Callan's arguments. Waddington (2008) concedes Callan's point that Dewey felt that students should develop qualities such as initiative and industry,

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[5] The context of this quote, which is pulled from *The Sources of a Science of Education* (1929), is a broader discussion of the relationship between education, as an art and science, to other sciences, such as psychology and sociology. Dewey is comparing education to engineering in the sense that engineering is also an art and science that draws from other sciences (physics, etc.) to refine its practice (e.g., to build better bridges). If one reads a little further, it becomes immediately clear that Dewey does not have a mechanistic conception of educational practice (or engineering) in mind; that is, he is sharply critical of formulaic recipes for educational practice. And yet, that Dewey unflinchingly used a term like "social engineering" to describe education makes it easy for selective readers to see this particular "face." In "Education as Engineering" (1922a), he also compared education and engineering, but his focus here is the disanalogy between the two: namely, that engineering relies on well-established sciences, whereas education's "source sciences" are at a much earlier stage of development. In this context, then, Dewey warns against approaching educational practice in the same way as engineers today approach their work. However, it is important to note that, even here, his concern is not with engineering per se – he has only praise for the art and science of bridge-building – but with the immature state of education and its source sciences, which means that treating it as a kind of engineering is premature.

along with creativity and cooperation, all of which might be useful to employers, while pointing out that even if these qualities are compatible with corporate goals, this does not mean Dewey shared those goals (p. 61). I would add that those same qualities are in fact desirable aims of education – though not the only ones, of course. In fact, if education today is to help students address contemporary challenges (e.g., the environmental crisis), surely it needs to endow them with many of the qualities of a hard worker: diligence, perseverance, initiative, resourcefulness, etc. One needs these kinds of qualities to be a good worker, yes, but also to be good at nearly anything worthwhile. In this sense, we need Dewey the engineer.

On the negative side, while there is little to no evidence that Dewey was an uncritical supporter of laissez-faire capitalism, there is a more subtle form of materialism at work in his thought. The so-called London School philosophers of education – for example, R. S. Peters, Paul Hirst, etc. – were the most sensitive to this flaw in Dewey, though it must be said that some of them exaggerated this problem or dismissed Dewey too swiftly as a result. Their basic contention was that Dewey did not give objects of knowledge enough independent value and that, perhaps as a consequence of this, he over-emphasized method. While they acknowledged and agreed with many of his critiques of foundationalist epistemology, they worried that a purely pragmatic theory of knowledge did not contain the resources required to effectively help us understand how students and objects of knowledge might effectively interact. "The object must be left room to do its part" (p. 14), as Anthony Quinton (1977) put it in an essay on Dewey's theory of knowledge.[6] Regarding method more specifically, Hirst (1974) had the following to say: Dewey "considered the methods of enquiry found in science to be the foundation of all knowledge and thus wanted above all that pupils should master, not a subject, but the fundamentals of scientific method as he saw these" (p. 129). Hirst continued: "But if we take a wider view of what is to be learnt, even within science, we may well question whether the methodology of scientific discovery, assuming there is such a thing, should provide the bases of a general teaching method" (ibid).

More recently, Paul Fairfield (2009) has echoed the concerns of the London School, but in the context of a more charitable reading of Dewey. Fairfield points out that, especially later in his career, Dewey certainly emphasized the importance of educational content. It was not *all* about method for Dewey, though certain passages can certainly be read in this way. Nevertheless, Fairfield (2009) still perceives a lingering tendency in Dewey – perhaps especially in his early writings – to overemphasize scientific method in his account of experience (pp. 82–83) and to collapse all thinking into scientific thinking (pp. 134–136). In order to remedy these deficiencies, he suggests supplementing Dewey's thinking with insights gleaned from Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. Fairfield thinks it a pity that these thinkers did not interact with one another, since he sees many affinities between pragmatism and phenomenology. Gadamer's insights help broaden Dewey's concept of experience, emphasizing the responsiveness side of it, while Heidegger helps us consider a more diverse range of ways of thinking, all valid, but some of which cannot be placed under the umbrella of experimental inquiry.

There is, then, a degree of truth in the portrayal of Dewey as "engineer." And this face of Dewey's comes with both strengths and weaknesses. But it is far from Dewey's only face.

Dewey As Activist

The second face of Dewey is Dewey as activist. The organizing concept of his activism was, of course, his rather peculiar notion of democracy, which famously takes as its criteria the following two questions: "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and

[6] Paddy Walsh (1993) offers a version of this critique. He points out that if Dewey insists that objects of experience can have no value independent of ourselves, then "whence, in particular, the principle of impartiality that is implicit in is support for democracy?" (p. 109).

free is the interplay with other forms of association?" (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 87). For Dewey, social and political modernization *was* an ongoing process of democratization. In this sense, the democratic revolution was very much still a work in progress, which education should serve. He writes the following in 1937:

> The end of democracy is a radical end. For it is an end that has not been adequately realized in any country at any time. It is radical because it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural. A democratic liberalism that does not recognize these things in thought and action is not awake to its own meaning and to what that meaning demands. (Dewey, 1937/2021, p. 22)

The boosters of Dewey the activist find solutions to modern social and political problems in his writings. Robert Westbrook (1993), for example, charts Dewey's increasingly participatory democratic ideas over the course of his life, and recommends this vision to contemporary thinkers. For Westbrook, Dewey is *the* American philosopher of participatory democracy. Though he cautions against "an uncritical or wholesale recovery of Dewey's philosophy," he concludes his book by stating that "we could do worse than to turn to John Dewey for a full measure of the wisdom we will need to work our way out of the wilderness of the present" (p. 552). More recently, Sarah Stitzlein (2019) has drawn on Dewey's pragmatist conception of hope, arguing that it should be taught in schools in order to cultivate hopeful citizen-activists who can contribute to addressing the contemporary crisis of democracy. For these boosters, Dewey's thought is immensely relevant to our struggles today to bring about a more just and democratic society.

As for the knockers, they exist along the entire political spectrum. Conservatives have long painted Dewey as a kind of radical socialist, or at least as an enemy of old-fashioned liberalism (Waddington, 2008, p. 51). Rawlsian liberals have also taken issue with him, arguing, for example, that his vision for democracy cannot be taught in public schools because it amounts to a comprehensive doctrine, and therefore teaching it would amount to coercion by suppressing reasonable pluralism (Aikin & Talisse, 2017, pp. 100–108).[7] In a similar vein, Callan (1981) argues that Dewey's philosophy of education is ultimately illiberal because he does not "adequately appreciate the value of human individuality" (p. 175). Further left, there are many who feel Dewey is not *enough* of an activist or cannot help us out of our current political crisis, because he is, for example, insufficiently attentive to vital social issues such as racism (e.g., Peters, 2020).

Again, these divergent readings of "Dewey as activist" tell us something about the readers themselves, while also revealing certain tensions in Dewey's account – tensions that are deeply ingrained in Western modernity. The boosters of Dewey as activist tend to be attracted to his relative emphasis on the collective – that we need to learn to work together cooperatively and to deliberate with one another – and his concomitant condemnation of the "old" individualism – sometimes associated with corporate capitalism. Knockers, on the other hand, have worries about the character of the social unity that Dewey envisions. Does he mean uniformity? Aren't difference and even conflict an essential part of social and political life? What about the freedom of the individual or the rights of various minority groups?

It would be difficult to argue that Dewey wanted to supress individuality as such. A cursory look at an essay such as "Individuality in Education" (1922b) cures one of such an impression, which some of Dewey's critics may harbour. He called the principle of individuality "the measure of whatever is elevating in the rank of life in spiritual, moral and intellectual beings" (p. 171). Dewey abhorred uniformity and was a relentless critic of the way in which schools fostered it, even inadvertently, imposing a single and rigid way of doing things on all pupils. He exhorted teachers to pay attention to

[7] I should note that Aikin & Talisse (2017) do, however, find *some* insights worth preserving in Dewey's political theory. They are not, therefore, proper "knockers" in a strict sense.

the unique individuality of each student as opposed to imposing a single method on all (see, for example, "The classroom teacher," 1922c, pp. 180–189). And yet, he thought that true individuality (which was not to be confused with conceit or doing whatever one pleases) could only be fostered in a truly social context: "Only in social groups does a person have a chance to develop individuality" (Dewey, 1922b, p. 176). He goes on: "In the community life of the ideal sort, the family marked by a spirit of unity, the town, or the nation, the more you have of real social unity the more diversity, the more division of labor, and the more differentiation of operation there is" (ibid, p. 176). As many have pointed out, Dewey's "organic" strategy for reconciling the individual and the collective is partially a result of his somewhat naturalized Hegelianism (e.g., Feinberg, 1993).

Richard Bernstein (2010), following Westbrook, argues that Dewey eventually moved beyond the Hegelian image of the harmonious social organism, incorporating struggle and conflict into his picture of social progress. Bernstein describes Dewey's position as a middle way between a naïve or hegemonic commitment to frictionless organic totality and an all-out agonism that cannot interpret social life as anything but a naked contest of wills (pp. 84–85). Feinberg (1993), however, insists that there remain tensions in Dewey's thought between his residual Hegelian commitment to individual self-realization through social cooperation and the political thought and action of the New Left. I agree with Feinberg here that these tensions are real. At issue are fundamental questions about the purpose or aim(s) of justice and the kind of unity we envision moral and social progress is directed at – questions that Dewey said little about.

Dewey's wariness about "ends," and his focus instead on "method" (notice Dewey the engineer intruding), complicates matters. It is an open question whether the ends pursued by contemporary activists are compatible with Dewey's notion of "ends-in-view" and his emphasis on method. Kliebard (2004) gets to the heart of the issue in the following passage:

> For both Dewey and Bode, the road to social progress was much more closely tied to the ability of the schools to teach independent thinking and to the ability of students to analyze and to address social problems than it was to an organized effort designed to redress predetermined social evils. (p. 166)[8]

And yet, Dewey did, in a sense, "predetermine" *some* "social evils" in his own writings – for example, the "old individualism" of corporate capitalism. This is part of his attraction for the boosters. As for the knockers, some feel that he should have been even more circumspect (if their sense of justice is more attuned to pluralism and liberty), while others argue that his list of social evils is timid and incomplete, showing an inadequate commitment to social justice.

On the one hand, Dewey seems to offer certain ideas and tools that can fuel activism. On the other hand, his muteness on certain questions sometimes makes him an inconsistent or unreliable ally. He placed his hope in certain methods (scientific, democratic) that would lead to moral and social progress but was relatively vague when it came to describing what progress would consist of. In this sense, he is quintessentially modern: firmly committed to and hopeful about progress but worried that substantive accounts of the ends we seek might rigidify into oppressive certainties. The latter sensibility is often labelled postmodern, but, at least in Charles Taylor's analysis of Western modernity, it is better understood as a quintessentially modern concern, stemming from our modern sensitivity to injustice – in this case a kind of epistemic injustice, in which our professed certainties prevent further inquiry and progress, and impose limits on freedom of thought and action.

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[8] Boyd Bode was a disciple of Dewey's from Ohio State University (Kliebard, 2004, p. 164). Fairfield (2009) echoes this same idea: that Dewey was more interested in teaching students to think independently than inculcating them into a particular ideology (pp. 233–256).

I have pointed out two tensions in Dewey's work, emblematic of Western modernity, that are at play in the differing readings of Dewey as activist: the tension between the individual and the collective and the tension between a positive conception of progress and the fear of certainties.

Dewey As Romantic

Romanticism did not enter explicitly into Dewey's conception of modernity, which was more focused on science, industry, and democracy. And yet, he was astutely aware of it and at times discussed it in his writings – sometimes favourably, at other times critically (e.g., Dewey, 1925/1958, pp. 117–118). For a number of reasons, which I will explore below, he has often been classified as a Romantic. This is yet another face of Dewey's.

From early on in Dewey's career until today, there have been boosters and knockers of a rather superficial version of Dewey as Romantic. The familiar account states that Dewey's pedagogy is child-centred, that he thought educational content should not be imposed on children, that we should instead base it on their needs and interests, and that educators should take into account the whole child. Passages such as the following are often held up (out of context) in this connection:

> The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education. Save as the efforts of the educator connect with some activity which the child is carrying on of his own initiative independent of the educator, education becomes reduced to a pressure from without. (Dewey, 1897/2018, p. 36)

Isolating such passages from their immediate context makes Dewey appear completely in line with the typical rallying cries of progressive educators, the roots of which can be traced back to Romanticism (Labaree, 2004, pp. 140–141). This superficial version of Dewey as Romantic is embraced by some and criticized by others. In reality, this superficial version is a very bad caricature of Dewey's actual views, especially as laid out in *Experience and Education* (1938), which was written partially in response to what Dewey saw as certain extremes to which child-centred progressive education had gone. In fact, Dewey was wary of Romantic tendencies in education from the very outset of his career (Waddington, 2010).

However, we cannot brush away the reading of Dewey as Romantic. There is some truth here – it is genuinely one of Dewey's faces – but we need to look to more sophisticated readings of Dewey in order to get there. Though there are several (e.g., Goodman, 1990), I will focus on Naoko Saito's (2005) since she is more explicitly concerned with education.

Saito (2005) argues that there is a "recessive, Emersonian dimension in Dewey's pragmatism" (p. 3), which she brings out more explicitly and fully by putting Dewey into conversation with Emerson himself and Stanley Cavell. She acknowledges some of the typical critiques of Dewey's pragmatism (e.g., that it is overly optimistic and therefore naïve, that it is too reliant on narrow techno-scientific rationality, and that it is too naturalistic to serve as a guide for education) but then goes on to argue that Dewey offers a vision of Emersonian moral perfectionism that is a viable path for education, even in our neoliberal age. Emersonian moral perfectionism involves a kind of self-reliance that is not selfishly individualistic but rather relies on an openness and receptivity to the other. From this perspective, "education is the patient process of the conversion of the human spirit" (p. 142). Saito argues that Dewey's conception of intelligence was broader than scientific problem-solving and can be better characterized as *creative* intelligence (p. 146). Saito argues for a "transcendence from within" (p. 161), which involves rediscovering our personal "gleam of light" – a recurring metaphor in her book.

What is attractive in Saito's reading is what is brought out by the focusing of our attention on the "aesthetic" side of Dewey, which we find especially in *Art as Experience* (1934b) and in *Experience and Nature* (1925), but also in earlier work, such as the essay "Imagination and Expression" (1896). In many ways, this side of Dewey is in tension with Dewey as engineer, and, as we will see below, with Dewey as

naturalist. The notion of "responsiveness to the other," which Saito maintains can be found in Dewey, is particularly valuable for education. It helps remedy some of the concerns of the London School, which I mentioned above, that Dewey did not give objects of knowledge themselves enough reality – that is, did not leave enough room for the element of *receptivity* that is necessary for learning to occur. In other words, the image of the Baconian scientist, intent on social efficiency and control, is now moderated or complemented via Dewey the Romantic artist, alive to the currents of nature within and without. Questions no doubt remain about the compatibility of these two images, but it is clear that this element of responsiveness is a strength.

As for limitations, I will mention only one here. While Saito draws our attention to the Romantic in Dewey, she retains the Deweyan worry about fixed ends. Emersonian moral perfectionism, following Cavell, "is characterized by 'goallessness'; it refuses final perfectibility" (2005, p. 53). While I readily agree that we should think of perfectionism as an infinite process, which will never reach final perfectibility, I wonder whether it is possible to still hold onto the notion of perfectionism without some teleological or quasi-teleological idea of perfection as the "goal," or perhaps the "direction," even if perfection is ultimately unattainable. Iris Murdoch (1970) suggests the following in this connection:

> The idea of perfection moves, and possibly changes, us (as artist, worker, agent) because it inspires love in the part of us that is most worthy. One cannot feel unmixed love for a mediocre moral standard any more than one can for the work of a mediocre artist. The idea of perfection is also a natural producer of order. In its light we come to see that A, which superficially resembles B, is really better than B. And this can occur, indeed must occur, without our having the sovereign idea in any sense "taped." In fact it is in its nature that we cannot get it taped. This is the true sense of the "indefinability" of the good; which was given a vulgar sense by Moore and his followers. It lies always beyond, and it is from this beyond that it exercises its authority. (pp. 60–61)

It seems to me that Dewey was worried that the "authority" exercised by a "good" envisioned as "external" would become tyrannical. But this only happens if we become possessed by the hubris that we can "tape" the good, as Murdoch puts it, or define it fully and completely. That is the road to the foundationalism that Dewey rightly abhors.

I want to suggest that Dewey as Romantic *was* in fact sensitive to the idea of perfection. He struggled for pages and pages in his later works to try to articulate the mechanism through which we are drawn forward by this sensitivity, without trying to cede any ground to the foundationalist. But the full acknowledgment of what this sensitivity entails leads one inevitably to the conclusion that there exist "objects" outside of oneself that exert a rational and moral influence upon us. This conclusion does not sit very well with at least some versions of pragmatism, nor Dewey's naturalism, to which I now turn.

Dewey As Naturalist

Darwin's influence on Dewey is pervasive. This influence is at the root of the fourth face of Dewey: Dewey as naturalist. Though the precise nature of Dewey's naturalism is difficult to pin down, we can easily point to some of its telling features: his insistence that we should understand human beings and society as continuous with nature, therefore urging that the scientific method be employed to study the former as well; his refusal to countenance any kind of dualisms in reality (e.g., the dualism of mind and body); the naturalistic piety that emerges from *A Common Faith* (1934a; see, for example, p. 53); and, as has been mentioned already, his suspicion of the existence of anything – be it God, Plato's Forms, natural laws, etc. – transcending "nature" (i.e., supernatural), or perhaps "experience." Here is a short passage (among many) in which Dewey describes a few elements of his version of naturalism:

> "Naturalism" is a word with all kinds of meanings. But a naturalism which perceives that man with his habits, institutions, desires, thoughts, aspirations, ideals and struggles, is within nature, an integral part of it, has the philosophical foundation and the practical inspiration for effort to employ nature as an ally of human ideals and goods such as no dualism can possibly provide. (Dewey, 1930/1984, p. 74)

There are many boosters of Dewey as naturalist among philosophers, Richard Rorty being one of the most well-known, though most of these thinkers are interested in epistemology or philosophy of mind. In relation to education specifically, Eilon Schwartz (2010) has offered a spirited reconstruction and defense of Dewey's Darwinism. Part of his reconstruction involves recovering what he sees as a quasi-Aristotelian strand in Dewey's thinking, in which "the good" for human beings has to do with what is good for us as a species: a kind of harmonious and evolving development of our natural instincts into habits that are conducive to growth and the social cohesion of the whole.[9] The emphasis here is on the element of sociability in our nature – this element is what is "fit" at this stage in our development as a species. Though Dewey was wary of any form of essentialism when it came to human nature, he was certainly emphatic that we are ultimately social beings. Our good, then, is found in our identification with the greater whole of which we are a part: the human collective, but also more broadly with nature itself. Education should help children develop this identification, which is ultimately the democratic ideal. In doing so, culture was not an enemy, but an ally: a rich deposit of habits that had evolved over time and should be mined for gems that are of use today. This, in any case, is Schwartz's take.

While acknowledging that Dewey was a naturalist, other scholars take issue with this element of his thought. Some have pointed out, for example, that despite his naturalism, Dewey "was notably insensitive and unresponsive to the environmental discourse of his own time" (Thompson & Piso, 2019, p. 717). Another important critique is that Dewey is simply inconsistent: that he is not *enough* of a naturalist or did not carry his naturalism to its logical conclusion. These critics take issue with what they see as Dewey's lingering anthropocentrism. David Blacker (2019), for example, suggests that Dewey's secular humanism is "an apotheosis of anthropocentrism that seems subject to a flaw as deep as that of which it accuses religion: it does not account for its own normative underpinnings" (p. 169). Blacker points out that it is arbitrary for Dewey, given his commitment to naturalism, to "single out 'humanity' as the primary object of moral concern" (p. 170). Blacker seems to be more inclined towards the kind of post-humanist naturalism that widens the circle of moral concern to include animals, plants, and nature as a whole. One issue here, of course, is the very definition of naturalism as a position and what it entails precisely.

Once again, both boosters and knockers offer relevant insights. Blacker is right that if we hold Dewey strictly to (at least some versions of) naturalism, he may become inconsistent, unable to justify his moral focus on humanity (and his relative neglect of environmental issues). I think Schwartz knows this, and that is why he tries to detect and amplify an Aristotelian element in Dewey – a kind of evolving, species-level telos that can ground educational aims. One of the important strengths in Schwartz's account is his foregrounding the idea of sociability and the need for us to develop, through education, a commitment to the well-being of the whole.

Schwartz's Dewey offers important insights. But even if we brush off Blacker's critique, important issues remain, one of which I will mention here. Feinberg (1993) notes that Dewey operated under the assumption that there was a fundamental continuity between nature and ethics. He goes on to say that "it is not clear whether [Dewey] has reduced ethics to nature or elevated nature to ethics" (p. 204). I think Dewey tried to do both, elevating nature above a crude, reductive materialism, but also reducing ethics to a strictly this-worldly enterprise. I agree that we should avoid placing a disenchanted nature and a purely supernatural ethics in opposition to one another. The Deweyan insight that ethics is

[9] This could also be seen as a Hegelian motif, given Hegel's indebtedness to aspects of Aristotle's thought.

not "supernatural" – in the sense that it is not "unreal" or divorced from everyday reality – is a helpful one. However, there are dangers associated with the naturalization of ethics. For example, we may inadvertently distort the extent to which acting ethically may in some cases demand that we *resist* aspects of our nature – say, our self-centred inclinations. There is not much room in Dewey's picture for the existence of, for instance, what Murdoch (1970) called our "fat relentless ego" (p. 52). True, the communitarian character of Dewey's social philosophy may guard against some of the intrusions of this ego, but it seems to me that Dewey's conceptual tools – though admittedly very good at excising certain pernicious dichotomies – are somewhat clumsy instruments when it comes to understanding the inner dimension of our ethical lives (Schwartz, 2010, p. 74). I wonder, for instance, how Dewey would parse "purity of intention," an obviously important dimension of our ethical lives.

Reading Dewey Today

I have argued that Dewey has at least four faces: the engineer, the activist, the Romantic, and the naturalist. Each of these faces has been celebrated and critiqued. Sometimes, the commentary is directed at a rather superficial version of the "face" – at a caricatured mask, as it were. More sophisticated defenders and critics of Dewey, however, are able to move beyond these superficial versions and point to true strengths and weaknesses in Dewey's account. Some of these weaknesses, I want to suggest, arise from the difficulties associated with bringing together the various faces, which can be conceived of as aspects of Western modernity. It is hard to combine, for example, Romantic transcendentalism with pragmatism and naturalism. And yet I think this is what Dewey was, in a sense, after: he was trying to blend together important ideas he inherited from Western modernity, plus a few of his own convictions, into a coherent whole. Does this mean Dewey is of no use to us today, as we struggle under the weight of myriad problems, many of which appear to derive more or less directly from Western modernity? Again, we need to avoid the extremes of the boosters and the knockers. Dewey is neither our saviour, nor is he at the heart of the problem.

I will offer two reasons here why I think Dewey is still important to engage with today in philosophy of education: (1) his capacious vision of the diversity of goods that we should keep in view in educational theory and practice, and (2) his distinctively educational philosophy.

Dewey's Capacious Vision of the Goods of Western Modernity

Charles Taylor (1989) complains that "Modernity is often read through its least impressive, most trivializing offshoots" (p. 511), and that this kind of reading "distorts" (ibid). Critics may point, for instance, to a superficial version of Dewey the engineer and throw him in with the neoliberals. This distorts Dewey. Taylor suggests that "we have to avoid the error of declaring those goods invalid whose exclusive pursuit leads to contemptible or disastrous consequences" (ibid). There may be certain ideas or values (or "goods," in Taylor's terminology) that Dewey emphasized which, if exclusively pursued, would certainly lead to negative consequences. For example, his placing value on the child's experience can certainly lead to well-known extremes in progressive education if pursued exclusively (extremes which he himself pointed to in *Experience and Education*). But this only shows, Taylor argues, that the good in question "needs to be part of a 'package,' to be sought within a life which is also aimed at other goods" (ibid). Sometimes we feel that we are caught in a dilemma, between what are perceived as rival goods. "But a dilemma doesn't invalidate the rival goods. On the contrary, it presupposes them" (ibid).

Dewey is so interesting, and still very relevant today, in part because he tends to avoid this trap that Taylor highlights: of invalidating seemingly rival goods. His Hegelian instinct to overcome various dualisms is part of this. That he brings together so many different goods is one reason why there are so

many contradictory readings of Dewey (i.e., the various faces). Many readings will focus on how Dewey took up one particular set of goods, without paying much attention to his inclusion of others. But Dewey had a capacious vision of the various goods that an adequate philosophy of education needs to take up or keep in view. Bringing all of these pieces together into a coherent "package" is, of course, no easy task. And Dewey did not do this perfectly, as my analysis above suggests. No doubt, there are certain goods that fall outside even Dewey's capacious vision (e.g., our responsibility for the natural environment), and there may be better ways of bringing them together coherently (e.g., the idea of "growth" has its limitations). Nevertheless, we can certainly learn a great deal from his attempt.

Dewey's Distinctively Educational Philosophy

A second reason why Dewey should still retain an important place in educational theory is that his philosophy as a whole is distinctively educational. Dewey (1916/2001) famously wrote that "If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-men, philosophy may even be defined *as the general theory of education*" (p. 336). Philip Kitcher (2019), commenting on this passage and related ones, suggests that, for Dewey, "The end result of philosophical practice is to be the translation of its deliverances into educational insights, so that contemporaries … may re-form their fundamental dispositions for the better and so that the children of the future may have greater opportunities for living valuable lives" (p. 8).

That Dewey even paid attention to education makes him somewhat of an anomaly. In general, the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, particularly its dominant, analytic strand, has sorely neglected education. After pointing out a few notable exceptions (R. S. Peters, etc.), David Bakhurst (2020) suggests a number of reasons for this neglect: (1) the lingering influence of early modern individualistic approaches to mind that downplayed the role of socialization; (2) a dichotomy between the conceptual and the empirical, education being relegated to the latter sphere; (3) the popularity of a pernicious form of naturalism that reduces education; (4) over-specialization among philosophers, which makes them wary of a naturally interdisciplinary field such as education; and (5) the male-dominated nature of the field, which might cause disinterest in the development of children (p. 256). Dewey, on the contrary, criticized individualistic approaches to epistemology and philosophy of mind, wove the conceptual and practical together in his conception of experience, set aside reductive forms of naturalism, wrote in every major area of philosophy, and took great interest in the growth of children. That Dewey did not succumb to any of these prejudices marks him out.

Beyond simply addressing the topic of education or applying some philosophical concepts to the field of education, Dewey conceived of philosophy itself as intertwined with education. The concept of education was, for Dewey, immensely central to philosophical reflection. In a similar vein, Bakhurst (2020) argues that "It is hard to see how we can do epistemology, metaphysics and ethics – that is to say, do *philosophy* – without having education in view" (p. 257). Further, drawing on the work of Russian philosopher Evald Ilyenkov, he states that "'education' is the name not of some merely contingent process of the transmission of knowledge and skills, but of a constitutive element of the human life-form" (p. 257). I think Dewey would agree; and again, this view marks him out. While Bakhurst argues that this insight has long been neglected due to the above-mentioned prejudices, he mentions that things are beginning to change for the better. He suggests that "the time is ripe for a renewed conversation between philosophers of education and those in the 'mainstream,' who are beginning to perceive the philosophical importance of education" (p. 258). I think that Dewey, with his distinctively educational philosophy, is an important reference point in this "renewed conversation."

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