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Review

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REVIEWS OF BOOKS

The Quest for Certainty. By JOHN DEWEY. New York, Minton, Balch & Company, 1929. Pp. 318.

In a world like ours, where purposes are always mixed, complex, and partially unconscious, it would be difficult even for the author to be sure what it was exactly that he wanted most to do in writing this book. How much more rash for a reader to hazard an opinion! Yet the book suggests a primary motive in every chapter and the rashness of a guess may not make it the less appealing to the guesser. Mr. Dewey wanted, so far as lay in his power, to crumble into dust, once and for all, "the chief fortress of the classic philosophical tradition". Veteran of many battles, secure in rank and honor, he accepted the opportunity of the Gifford Lectures as a challenge to vanquish the enemy in the center of its fastness. One scarcely knows whether to admire most the daring of the attempt, the knowledge and experience brought to bear, the strategy employed, or the relentless energy of the attack.

The effect is tremendous. Dewey warns the reader that "the object of this criticism of historical theories of knowledge is not just to cast discredit upon them", but "to direct attention to the source of their errors". And the discussion bears him out. This however hardly improves the situation for the historical theories of knowledge or their proponents. They are subjected to such incisive and persistent criticism on page after page that the cumulative impression is one of stupendous destruction. Not a few readers, in all probability, will halt with this impression, either rejoicing at the havoc wrought in the camps of the classicists, idealists, and realists, or deploring what may seem a dogmatic and unaccountable insistence that everybody in the procession is out of step, save one. Even a sympathetic reader, proceeding steadily through the book, may, because of the sheer accumulation of refutations and denials, find himself inclined to the side of the views attacked, persuaded that the mistakes cannot be so uniformly and numerously on one side, and the truth so simply and completely on the other.

It would serve no good purpose to minimize the destructive nature of *The Quest for Certainty.* Any attempt to do so, aside from laboring against the plain facts, would becloud the issue to which Mr. Dewey

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gives attention. One of the conspicuous excellencies of the study is precisely the gathering together and focussing of traditional philosophic ideas and the subjection of this material to uncompromising criticism. The Greeks, Spinoza, Locke, Newton, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Spencer, modern idealists, realists, and others, are epitomized with conspicuous erudition. With uncanny ingenuity the basic errors which are said to have misled philosophers, and through them mankind at large, are lifted into prominence. And this slaughter of the giants (one almost slips into saying innocents) is, and one cannot help feeling was intended to be, the issue of the venture. At any rate, there they lie. Possibly they are not dead, only stunned; or possibly it is all an illusion, so that presently we may see them abroad again, their massive forms looming against the horizon of man's outlook on things and on life. But under the spell of the battle this appears very unlikely. As it concludes, knights who have borne great names in the philosophic tournament lie scattered and seemingly quite dead all over the landscape.

While it would be a mistake to minimize the destructive quality of the book, it would be a greater mistake to miss the deeper motive operative in this as in all of Mr. Dewey's writing. He is destructive, even in this volume which is so largely devoted to demolition, as a wrecking crew is destructive. Back of the din and the dust works a constructive purpose. Mr. Dewey is interested, as he says, in the establishment of "a kingdom of order, justice and beauty". This he believes can only be attained "through the mastery of nature's energies and laws", a mastery which depends upon the "operative thinking" developed in the field of natural science. But current philosophy in all its walks and ways goes back to a time when order, justice, and beauty were conceived to be supersensible in nature and when experimental science had not been thought of. Philosophic problems, ideals, and methods remain what they were in prescientific days, although the world man lives in and must deal with has utterly changed. Until philosophy as so conceived is demolished and a different type put in its place, not only have those who are bent upon the solution of vital human problems nothing to hope for from philosophers, but the great society which waits upon proper integration of human interests and natural forces is a vain hope.

Throughout Mr. Dewey's unwearied hammering at philosophic tradition this underlying interest is detectable. The negative phase of the discussion is obtrusive; but a second look discloses the positive motifs. Only a mind thoroughly at home in the story of man and

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impelled by a constructive intent could so remarkably summarize critical stages and epochs in the history of ideas, and suggest their significance for the worthy conduct of life. And, although as a systematic expression of a philosophy *The Quest for Certainty* is not to be compared with *Experience and Nature*, it is nevertheless so rich in statements of a positive character that a considerable book might easily be made of them. They are already contained, as to doctrine, in what seems to me, from the constructive point of view, unquestionably the greater book, but they appear in this one also, which as a destructive effort surely has few equals in the history of polemics. The recognition of this double aspect, this destructive-constructive drive, prepares the reader to appreciate the book's value as a contribution to present cultural needs, and at the same time to recognize what, in the light of these needs, seem to be certain shortcomings in the general standpoint which the author has advanced with conspicuous ability and life-long devotion.

In Mr. Dewey's view the career of philosophy was determined by an early choice. Man, he says, has not always thought of himself as living in a world, but he has always been in some manner aware of an environment. The reader is reminded that primitive man faced this environment in nakedness, both physical and psychical. He was alive to perils which threatened him, and he gradually learned to deal with these perils. Some things he found it possible directly to control, some not, and the division of the phenomena of experience into the ordinary and the extra-ordinary (later called the natural and the supernatural) reflects the sense of power in the one case and the sense of impotence in the other. In time this difference developed a realm of arts and a realm of religion, one inferior, and one superior. "The inferior", says Mr. Dewey, "was that in which man could foresee and in which he had instruments and arts by which he might expect a reasonable degree of control. The superior was that of occurrences so uncontrolable that they testified to the presence of powers beyond the scope of everyday and mundane things." But since they were superior powers it was all the more necessary to get into proper accord with them. To accomplish this, magic, rites, and ceremonies, came to be depended upon.

This was the state of social culture when philosophy began its career. According to Mr. Dewey, philosophy freely adopted this dualism, reflected upon it, gave it rational formulation, and justified it. Moreover, philosophy espoused the superior realm for its own. Human history would have been different, far different, had the early

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philosophers been able to choose otherwise; had they found it possible to turn their attention to the side of the arts. But philosophers committed themselves to the validation of traditional religious and moral beliefs and to a rationalistic method of procedure. "For over two thousand years", says Mr. Dewey, "the weight of the most influential and authoritative orthodox tradition of thought . . . has been devoted to the problem of a purely cognitative certification (perhaps by revelation, perhaps by intuition, perhaps by reason) of the antecedent immutable reality of truth, beauty and goodness." Philosophy having no rival, difficulties inherent in this procedure could be ignored. This happy state of affairs came to an end with the triumph of modern science. The coming of this rival into the field has set the problem for modern thought. How is the most refined and consequently successful form of knowledge, namely science, to be accepted and how, at the same time, are the higher values, the ideal and spiritual qualities essential to civilized life, to be conserved?

The answer to this question revealing, as it does, the heart of Mr. Dewey's contention, justifies a somewhat full quotation.

> If men had associated their ideas about values with practical activity instead of with cognition of antecedent being, they would *not* have been troubled by the findings of science. They would have welcomed the latter. For everything ascertained about the structure of actually existing conditions would be a definite aid in making judgments about things to be prized and striven for more adequate, and would instruct us as to the means to be employed in realizing them . . . The crisis in contemporary culture, the confusions and conflicts in it, arise from a division of authority. Scientific inquiry seems to tell one thing, and traditional beliefs about ends and ideals that have authority on conduct tell us something quite different. The problem of reconciliation arises and persists for one reason only. As long as the notion persists that knowledge is a disclosure of reality, of reality prior to and independent of knowing, and that knowledge is independent of a purpose to control the quality of experienced objects, the failure of natural science to disclose significant values in its objects will come as a shock. Those seriously concerned with the validity and authority of value will have a problem on their hands. As long as the notion persists that values are authentic and valid only on condition that they are properties of being independent of human action, as long as it is supposed that their right to regulate action is dependent upon their being independent of action, so long there will be needed schemes to prove that values are, in spite of the findings of science, genuine and known qualities of reality itself.

The procedure employed in the book may be illustrated by a typical example. "In some sense", we read in the first of the two chapters on ideas, "the cause of ideas, of thought, is felt to be that of the distinctive dignity of man himself. Serious minds have always desired a world in which experiences would be productive of ideas,

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of meanings, and in which these ideas in turn would regulate conduct. Take away ideas and what follows from them and man seems no better than the beasts of the field." As philosophers have reflected upon ideas they have divided into opposing schools. Mr. Dewey describes the antithesis in this way: "To the extreme right are those who, under the banner of Idealism, have asserted that thought is the creator of the universe and that rational ideas constitute its structure. . . . At the other pole is the school of sensational empiricists who hold that the doctrine that thought in any mode of operation is originative is an illusion." According to them, "ideas are pale ghosts of flesh and blood impressions; they are images, pallid reflections, dying echoes of first hand intercourse with reality which takes place in sensation alone." Having presented the doctrinal extremes, he points out that "in spite of polar opposition between the schools, they depend upon a common premise. According to both systems of philosophy, *reflective* thought, thinking that involves inference and judgment, is not originative. It has its test in antecedent reality as that is disclosed in some non-reflective immediate knowledge. Its validity depends upon the possibility of checking its conclusion by identification with the terms of such prior immediate knowledge. The controversy between the schools is simply as to the organ and nature of previous direct knowledge." For traditional empiricism reflective inquiry is valid only if it conforms to sensory impressions; for objective idealism it is valid only if it reproduces the work previously effected by constitutive thought.

This common premise connects both schools with the Greek thinkers, according to whom knowledge is a relation to something independently real. Through them it became embedded in tradition. Therefore, in spite of other differences, the opposing positions agree in resting upon a basic assumption which took form before the rise of experimental science. This gives Mr. Dewey the cue for philosophic advance. "Let us suppose", he suggests, "that all that we know about ideas is derived from the way in which they figure in the reflective inquiries of science. What conception of their nature and office shall we then be led to form?" Well, we find that experimental science does not proceed without "large and far-reaching ideas and purposes", but "is dependent upon them at every point". The important fact to note, however, is that "it generates them within its own procedures and tests them by its own operations". In scientific experience ideas have an empirical origin and status. They are plans of procedure, designations of potential operations and, contrary to philosophic tradition,

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are confluent with action, action which changes the face of the world. If this attitude toward ideas were generalized, as according to Mr. Dewey it should be, we should "have the earnest of a possibility of human experience, in all its phases, in which ideas and meanings will be prized and will be continuously generated and used. But they will be integral with the course of experience itself, not imparted from the external source of a reality beyond." The best appraisal of the importance of this shift from extra-experiential to intra-experiential ideas may be given in Mr. Dewey's words:

> It is not too much to say, therefore, that for the first time there is made possible an empirical theory of ideas free from the burdens imposed alike by sensationalism and *a priori* rationalism. This accomplishment is, I make bold to say, one of the three or four outstanding feats of intellectual history. For it emancipates us from the supposed need of always harking back to what has already been given, something had by alleged direct or immediate knowledge in the past, for the test of the value of ideas. A definition of the nature of ideas in terms of operations to be performed and the test of the validity of ideas by the *consequences* of these operations establishes connectivity within concrete experience. At the same time, by emancipation of thinking from the necessity of testing its conclusions solely by reference to antecedent existence it makes clear the originative possibilities of thinking.

After the same manner Mr. Dewey contends throughout the book; that is to say, he analyzes conflicting philosophies respecting crucial problems, finds in each instance a common point of agreement below the differences, finds this point of agreement to be a grave error, and finds the error to be due to a formulation which took shape and was engrained in tradition before the rise of modern science. When analyzed, the error always turns out to grow from the same root, the untenable separation of thinking and acting. So the next step is to bring thought and action into experimental coöperation as it is in science, and at one and the same time absolve the impasses in which the philosophies have been hopelessly involved and render possible the happy union of matter-of-fact knowledge with worthy purposes in all the phases of human living. The technique is simple enough, once it has occurred to mind, but an application of it such as is presented in *The Quest for Certainty* is a notable achievement in the intellectual history of man.

In view of the method employed and the doctrines promulgated in the book it is not calculated to win the hearty approval of the profession. The best that can be hoped for—and even this requires a stretch of faith—is that its frank, penetrating, scholarly critique will be sufficiently appreciated to bring about a thorough re-examination of current philosophic alliances. The degree to which, on the other

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hand, Mr. Dewey's discussion will satisfy the reader who is in general accord with his critique will depend, among other things, upon the extent to which the constructive phase of the argument appears to meet cultural needs. In my own case, disturbing doubts remain. They are accompanied by the uneasy suspicion that a better understanding of Mr. Dewey would relieve them; but, as things are, they constitute so many points of serious questioning. Of these doubts three may be mentioned and briefly considered. They concern, broadly speaking, (*a*) the relation of science to life; (*b*) the specific nature of values; and (*c*) the ability of philosophers to perform the task assigned.

For a number of years I have been under the impression that Mr. Dewey's attitude toward science is ambiguous. His wholehearted endorsement of science is notorious; and in the present work he leans decidedly towards physics. This being the case, and his whole book presenting a plea for the application of science to social problems, the question naturally becomes acute in what terms he intends the application to be made. Does he mean that men who deal with the various social questions should reduce their material to the type demanded in the physicist's laboratory, or does he mean that the experimental mood, conspicuous in exact science, should be extended to the field of social problems where so much is still left to haphazard? He means at least the latter; does he also mean the former? On one angle of the question there need be no misunderstanding. He has no sympathy with those who make a fetish of science. He does not credit science with getting to ultimate reality at the expense of other ways of knowing or other ways of experiencing. This job is so well done that it should not need to be done again. He insists, moreover, that genuine knowing is not reserved for natural science. No words could be plainer than these: "There is no kind of inquiry which has a monopoly of the honorable title of knowledge. The engineer, the artist, the historian, the man of affairs attain knowledge in the degree they employ methods that enable them to solve the problems which develop in the subject-matter they are concerned with." In spite of this declaration, however, made several times, the discussion as a whole, and certain passages which emphasize the superiority of physical science in the field of knowledge, encourage the conclusion that if things were as they should be all knowing would be strictly patterned on the model set by the physicist. If this is the doctrine, it is an important and, I think, unfortunate one at a time when new emphasis is being put on the necessity of reducing economics and

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sociology to quantitative studies, of making education and religion 'scientific', and of turning philosophers into mathematicians. I should like to be convinced that I have misunderstood the author in this matter.

The most meaty portion of the book, Chapter X, treating of "The Construction of the Good", is likewise the most tantalizing portion. The subject is one on which Mr. Dewey says profound and illuminating things, but in the saying of which he seems curiously shy. He recognizes as clearly as anyone could the contemporary want of authoritative criteria of conduct, and the confusion which grows out of the average man's attempt to be responsive to standards inherited from the past and to contrary demands made upon him by the exigencies of daily life. "Men hoist the banner of the ideal", he too truly says, "and then march in the direction that concrete conditions suggest and reward." And who more than he has insisted that what we need in philosophy is to be concrete and specific? Nevertheless, in the chapter devoted to the elucidation of value, a subject which he explicitly recognizes to be of supreme importance, he carefully avoids telling the reader what he regards as of real worth in life. Several times he seems on the point of doing so, but each time neatly avoids committing himself.

In a paragraph typical of this maneuver, Mr. Dewey says that "the formation of taste is the chief matter wherever values enter in". This prepares the reader to expect some definition or illustration of taste, without which the remark fails to illuminate the problem. But the expectation is disappointed. "Taste", the passage continues, "if we use the word in the best sense, is the outcome of experience brought cumulatively to bear on the intelligent appreciation of the real worth of likings and enjoyments." Now if only the phrase "intelligent appreciation of real worth" were transparent! Alas, it too needs elucidation, and consequently is ill-suited to do the vicarious work demanded of it. The paragraph comes to a close with a pregnant sentence which suggests much, yet leaves the reader just where he was: "The formation of a cultivated and effectively operative good judgment or taste with respect to what is esthetically admirable, intellectually acceptable and morally approvable is the supreme task set to human beings by the incidents of experience." Once more the insistence that taste in values is of supreme importance (which incidentally the reader does not doubt), and once more the refusal to indicate concretely what is implied.

Why Mr. Dewey should be so loath to be concrete is problematical.

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In his anxiety to refute the notion that there is some final place to go, he may lean over backwards and leave the impression that going is not concerned with places at all, though he should be the first to object that going, as such, without places to mark its progress, is meaningless. Perhaps he has some deliberate design in his silence, or perhaps his genius is adverse to entering upon detailed amplification of theory. In any case, he has done enough, heaven knows, to be excused from doing more. Nevertheless the fact is that on this crucial problem *The Quest for Certainty* is strangely hesitant. This hesitancy has characterized the author in other books, as a result of which he is widely supposed to hold that the aim of life should be to *go;* not to go anywhere in particular (God forbid!), but to keep on going nowhere. With the numbers in mind who mouth the language while ignoring the spirit and the thought, one wishes that the doctrine were less open to misinterpretation.

Taking the argument as it stands, up to the point to which Mr. Dewey develops it, I do not see how it can be refuted nor its significance over-emphasized. At present the theoretic alternatives offered are an appeal to so-called eternal values or to immediate satisfactions. He thinks the second to be nearer the truth than the first. "I shall not object", he says, "to empirical theory as far as it connects the theory of values with concrete experiences of desire and satisfaction." The idea that there is such a connexion appears to him as the only way by which "the pallid remoteness of the rationalistic theory, and the only too glaring presence of the institutional theory of transcendental values can be escaped". Values, however, "may be connected inherently with liking, and yet not with *every* liking but only with those that judgment has approved, after examination of the relation upon which the object liked depends. A casual liking is one that happens without knowledge of how it occurs nor to what effect. The difference between it and one which is sought because of a judgment that it is worth having and is to be striven for, makes the difference between enjoyments which are accidental and enjoyments that have value and hence a claim upon our attitude and conduct." In other words, the rationalists side-step the reality of desires, while the empiricists side-step the regulation of enjoyments.

This is the dilemma that is to be resolved, and to Mr. Dewey belongs the credit of having made the horns of it inescapable except through more adequate insight into the conditions which give occasion to the problem. An abstract solution, however, is not sufficient, since the problem is finally one of practice rather than of theory. Instrumen-

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talism must actualize itself in specific loyalties and deeds, unless it is to be mere talk or ideology. And the demand constantly being made by those who desire to live according to this philosophy is for concrete suggestions which will enable them to seek the good life with some confidence that they are on the right road. Mr. Dewey properly objects to the drawing up of "a hierarchical table of values at large once for all, a kind of catalogue in which they are arranged in an order of ascending or descending worth". But this does not rule out the possibility and the necessity of offering concrete suggestions, in a tentative manner, of some things the good man should aim to achieve and some things he should aim to avoid. Traditional views, if they were too rigid in their attitude, were at least definite in the programs they set before men, and there is no want of definiteness in the aims of the men and the institutions in contemporary life that are "in positions of privileged advantage", and, as Mr. Dewey deplores, utilize every modern achievement "to serve their own private or class end". Unless Instrumentalism similarly can attain definiteness enough to be depended upon as a way of life, its influence is bound to be limited and short-lived.

Finally, there is the question about the status of the philosopher. Mr. Dewey has him abandon "the search for absolute and immutable reality", and in place of it, has him act as "a liaison officer between the conclusions of science and the modes of social and personal action through which attainable possibilities are striven for". To me this seems not to go far enough. There can be no doubt that, as he declares, the meaning of science "in terms of the great human uses to which it may be put, its meaning in the possibilities of secure value, offers a field for exploration which cries out from very emptiness". And it may be conceded that philosophers should share in the discovery of this meaning. But to assign this function to them in any exclusive or monopolistic sense is to substitute wishes for realities. If one's analysis of the contemporary situation still permits the philosopher to be the supreme knower, who lays hold upon things as they really are, well and good. Once surrender this illusion, as Mr. Dewey has, and there is no stopping short of making the philosopher literally a joint venturer with all who seek knowledge or ideals. The need of the hour is not the training of thinkers who shall attempt to set authoritative goals for others to strive after, but the invention of ways and means for bringing together into active coöperation all those forces which have a bearing on the common welfare, material and cultural. For in the era that is upon us it is to such joint effort

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that we must look for the vital office which Mr. Dewey assigns to the philosopher: the obligation "to search out and disclose the obstructions; to criticize the habits of mind which stand in the way; to focus reflection upon needs congruous to present life; to interpret the conclusions of science with respect to their consequences for our beliefs about purposes and values in all phases of life".

The conclusion then is that the destructive work has been thoroughly done. If the philosophic heroes who dominated the past have survived Mr. Dewey's attack we may assume that they are invincible. It is improbable that some one else will find a vulnerable inch of heel which he has overlooked. And the route for positive philosophic advance has been magnificently projected. What remains to be done is the indication of specific constructive details, and these can only issue from the combined intelligence and aspiration of the men and women whose activities make up the ruling forces of society. It is at this point that those who agree with the instrumentalist standpoint must take up the task and the opportunity.

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The Greek Atomists and Epicurus. By CYRIL BAILEY. Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1928. Pp. x, 620.

In the first part of this book Mr. Bailey tries to discover the threads that lead from Thales to Leucippus. His results seem to have been shaped somewhat by F. M. Cornford, more by Lucretius, and most by Burnet. From the first he has taken the tendency to find theological or antitheological elements in early Greek philosophy, and from the second the division of the thinkers concerned into three groups and various criticisms of them. Burnet's reconstructions are present to his mind throughout, though he does not always accept them. The main thing that he has rejected is Burnet's account of Anaxagoras, which certainly seems arbitrary in excluding flesh and hair and the like from the seeds. Mr. Bailey's account is better, but has its own difficulties. He holds, if I understand him aright, that Anaxagoras held that every one of the substances of ordinary experience is a collection of seeds of all kinds, most of which have the same character as the whole substance; and that these seeds are themselves, not collections, but *fusions*, of every existing substance, though they have the character of one only. It is necessary to say not merely that the substances of ordinary experience have all kinds of seed in them, but also that the seeds themselves contain all stuffs, because Anaxagoras says not merely that "there is a portion of

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