Book Review

The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy

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Melvin L. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 328 + xxi pp. ISBN 978-0-231-14486-5. $50.00 (hbk.)

Sensitive readers of Dewey will note that his style and the confidence with which he expresses his views often obscure their radical nature. Dewey fully understood that Darwin overthrew both the necessity of human progress and the fixity of nature. Nonetheless, Dewey has been saddled by some critics with a naive intransigence about the hopeful prospects for human inquiry. Fortunately, Melvin Rogers has provided Dewey scholarship with a recovery of the Darwinian grounds of Dewey's philosophy and its broader consequences for Deweyan thought. Simply put, because the world is fraught with prospects for both failure and success, or evolution and extinction, this makes active inquiry into morality and science all the more necessary, not all the more hopeless.

Rogers's book, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy*, attempts two things. The first is to rescue Dewey from critics who see him as naively optimistic concerning the prospects of human inquiry. The second is to interweave this insight into the "historical framework in which Dewey's appreciation of Darwin is located . . . and distill his understanding of its epistemological and normative importance in guiding human life" (x). The book is divided into two parts, the first of which situates Dewey in America's confrontation with Darwin at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rogers recounts both pessimistic and optimistic accounts of the significance of Darwin for understanding whether or not

human moral progress is possible. The pessimists, exemplified in Rogers's narrative by Charles Hodge, deny that an evolutionary understanding of human nature can provide "something of substance" that can "bestow meaning and direction on our lives" (40). On the other hand, those whom Rogers dubs "liberal protestants" appropriate Darwin to provide a bulwark against scientism, which would be inevitable if Darwin were left in the hands of the scientists. Within this debate, Dewey appears as the philosopher who takes Darwin seriously in recognizing the contingency and flux of human and animal life, but who nevertheless "seeks to nurture an aestheticized notion of human action in crafting a meaningful existence"(52).

In chapter 2, the second half of part 1, Rogers gives a novel reading of Dewey in which the Aristotelian categories of knowledge are superimposed upon Dewey's own concepts of agency and inquiry. This superimposition reveals that Aristotle's distinction between epistēmē, phronēsis and technē are collapsed in Dewey's philosophy of action. Deweyan inquiry, like Arisotelian phronēsis, is a dynamic interplay between the self and the world, neither of which remains static if touched by the other. In the context of an "aleatory world" (87), the agent of practical wisdom negotiates its complexity by virtue of a sensitivity made possible only via the "second nature" acquired as a result of experience and enculturation. Thus, Rogers explains Dewey's philosophy of action through John McDowell's appropriation of Aristotle in which action and perception are always already normative and conceptual, respectively. Although normative and conceptual elements pre-exist any particular action, Dewey shows us how they are transformed in our transactions with the world. Rogers argues that an agent acquires practical wisdom at the moment she becomes cautious and humble in applying habitual categories to a problematic situation, always ready to revise these categories no matter how engrained. This cautious humility is integral to Dewey's new understanding of metaphysics. This metaphysics is directed toward the inquiring agent, where "experience is the primary touchpoint," not the objects experienced (100). The nature of the object is always contestable and changeable, but the usefulness of inquiry for the reflective agent confronting a world in which there are no eternal truths is not.

In part 2, "Religion, the Moral Life, and Democracy," applies Rogers's insights concerning Dewey's confrontation with contingency to religion, morality, and politics. Chapter 3 is an extended exegesis of Dewey's *A Common Faith*. What emerges from this extended treatment is an explanation of Dewey's religious naturalism and its relation to the ideals that guide our moral outlook and undergird our hope in the future. Rogers argues that ideals do not merely command intellectual assent; "their authoritative role in action ultimately runs ahead of evidentiary support or external authorization into a 'world of surmise, of mystery, [and] uncertainties'"(142). This, for Rogers, is the entry of the imagination into guiding our lives, for although the self is always incomplete and fractured, we may imagine ourselves as psychologically integrated wholes in full harmony both externally and internally. Our imagination directs us by giving us the means to imagine complete harmony within ourselves

and with our social and natural environments. This at once gripping and guiding vision is the faith which Dewey has in mind and which Rogers eloquently describes.

Rogers moves to chapter 4 with an appreciation of the significance of the imagination and the ideals which it engenders within our practical self-understanding, but the task for chapter 4 is to combine these insights with the "way the post-Darwinian development of Dewey's philosophy mitigates any presumptive belief in synthetic harmony"(146). Thus, our image of psychological and social harmony which animates our projects is threatened by the possibility of conflict in the conditions of pluralism. Rogers argues that this possibility does not signal any deep crisis in normative evaluation for Dewey. Rather, pluralism makes the mutual responsiveness of the moral domain all the more necessary. As Rogers elaborates via a close reading of "Three Independent Factors of Morals," this is no easy task because even moral concepts like goodness, rightness, and virtue are not reducible to one another. The domain of action and morality always registers competing demands and, hence, cannot be negotiated passively. Rogers's reconstruction of Dewey again marks the importance of the imagination in reaching decisions that cannot be reduced to a mere hedonic calculus or a set of pregiven ends. Moral agency, and the perceptive condition it requires, do not rest upon calculations or principles. Rather, principles inform the agent's construal of the salient aspects of the situation, allowing for a more informed imaginative rehearsal of "the unfolding of our habits and the solutions to which they would potentially commit us" (181). This simultaneously allows the moral agent to appreciate the complexity of the situation while giving her critical distance without transcendence. But even this formulation is too narrow:

> Thus far we have been filling out the ideal perceptive condition by pointing to the narrative quality of judgment and the way it reveals how things matter to us, the role of the imagination, and the place of principles in helping us to note the salience of the situation. The final element is the recurrence of mutual responsiveness. When Dewey comes back to mutual responsiveness, especially in thinking about deliberation, it appears through the concept of sympathy. (179)

Here, Rogers introduces the importance of sympathy for extending the scope of deliberation that allows for a situated yet impartial perspective on the value of competing goods in moral conflict. True to his task, however, Rogers again reintroduces the possibility of tragic choice into the highly complex moral landscape. Rogers seems to relegate the question of incommensurable values as something to be discovered in inquiry, but he denies that Dewey is naive in assuming all deliberations will result in a sufficient reconstruction of our moral landscape to transcend conflicts within the self or with others. Even if we are successful, there may be looming feelings of loss and regret that terminally evade unification into a coherent psychological or social whole. Dewey's experimental stance can accommodate both persistent conflict and tragic choice, but to Rogers, Dewey underplays their importance because of their rarity. Tragedy does not await us at every turn.

Chapter 5 turns to the political consequences of Dewey's philosophy of action and inquiry. As is de rigueur in Dewey scholarship, Rogers discusses the Dewey-Lippman debate. While this is well-trod ground, Rogers evinces a rich discussion that successfully captures the contours of Dewey's response by including an alternate conceptual space for democracy provided by Richard Wolin. On Walter Lippman's account, the masses are not omni-competent citizens capable of making informed decisions in complex societies, so the only place for democracy is periodic selection of elites to guide the technocratic regime. On Wolin's account, given regimented forms of representation and governance, the only place for democracy resides outside constitutional channels so that people may harness the revolutionary zeal required to undercut the power structure from outside. By placing Dewey's account between these two poles, Rogers prepares a middle ground for Dewey to inhabit. While elites will play a role in modern governance, their knowledge does not have the multiperspectival character necessary for negotiating the myriad situations in which citizens are embedded. Hence the public's contestatory role in managing power relations impedes domination while the emergence of new publics, like social movements, facilitate emancipatory social criticism for challenging and transgressing the bounds of ordinary and habitual political life. Dewey's vision of the public allows for both their situatedness within a given regime and constitution as well as their emergence in new situations that overstep the boundaries of existing political arrangements.

All in all, Rogers's book is a welcome addition to the literature on Dewey. Despite its focus on contingency and Dewey's appropriation of Darwin, it retains an expansive scope that makes it suitable for suggested reading on syllabi for advanced undergraduate and graduate students. The book foregoes long discussions about education, however, so it is probably better suited to an audience with explicitly philosophical interests. This being said, there are a few respects in which the book falls short. Rogers's focus on the Aristotelian categories of knowledge and wisdom is more suitable for a stand-alone article or even another book. Indeed, Rogers has a stand-alone article on this topic.[1] Here it unnecessarily complicates the account of inquiry because although Aristotle appreciates the imprecision of ethical inquiry and its contextual nature, Dewey is an appreciative but consummate critic of Aristotle. This leaves the reader the task of sorting out the precise extent to which the analogy between Deweyan practical intelligence and phronēsis holds. Likewise, Rogers seems to muddy the water with the notion of immanent normativity. The sophisticated allusions to Brandom and McDowell that specify this notion are highly instructive, yet they fall short of a full-fledged philosophical explication of Dewey's take on the eternally contentious and dense issue of normativity. Still, these criticisms only underscore how very suggestive the book is for future scholarship. Rogers's book opens these vistas with surprising clarity and philosophical acumen.

Note

1. Melvin L. Rogers, "Action and Inquiry in Dewey's Philosophy," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 43, no. 1 (2007): 90-115.

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