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Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION

Book Title: Faith in Life

Book Subtitle: John Dewey's Early Philosophy

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Published by: Fordham University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvh4zdrh.5>

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## INTRODUCTION

This book is the first full-length study of John Dewey's early philosophy. Most scholars entirely ignore Dewey's early efforts in favor of his later, more mature thinking. Those scholars who do explore Dewey's early work, most notably Jim Good and John Shook, who are pioneers in this area, consider the early efforts solely in terms of how they relate to Dewey's later thought.<sup>1</sup> There has been no single study devoted to understanding and interpreting Dewey's early philosophy as a whole, taken on its own terms as a sustained philosophical endeavor.<sup>2</sup>

The justification for such a project—a project that might help us better understand one of America's greatest thinkers—would hardly be required, were it not for the predominance of what I call the standard view of Dewey's early thinking, which holds that his early ideas are hopelessly naïve and not worth considering.<sup>3</sup> Until recently, the standard view has been so firmly in place that it has dissuaded most scholars from exploring Dewey's early efforts. Shook and Good have gone a long way toward challenging the standard view, however. They

have shown in various ways how Dewey's early ideas are worth considering, particularly because these ideas seem to anticipate some of his best pragmatist insights.<sup>4</sup> By demonstrating that Dewey's early ideas are actually interesting and forward-looking, rather than hopelessly naïve, Good and Shook have done much to make us feel the need for a fuller and more detailed examination of Dewey's early philosophy. Building on their insights, I seek to fill this gap in the literature by presenting the first comprehensive examination of Dewey's early philosophy.

My main claim in this book is that by taking this comprehensive approach we gain surprising results. My examination will show that Dewey's early contribution to philosophy is significant in its own right, by which I mean that it is significant as a philosophy, independent of what it tells us about Dewey's later efforts or his overall philosophical development. Against the standard view, and going further than even Good and Shook have gone, I argue that the "young John Dewey," to borrow the phrase historian Neil Coughlan used to title his study,<sup>5</sup> was already a philosopher of real importance, someone who developed a new version of philosophical idealism that is still relevant.

In my reading, Dewey's primary concern at the beginning of his career is to overcome philosophical pessimism and to show that life is meaningful. The philosophical pessimism of Dewey's day, espoused by such thinkers as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, held that the universe is inherently devoid of meaning, so that human beings (who crave meaning) can never be at home within it. Dewey's response is to argue that the universe is meaningful after all. He wants to show that we can have faith in life—that we can regard it as significant and worthwhile, harboring meanings and values conducive to human beings.

To develop this idea, and to instill faith in life, Dewey draws heavily on Hegel, as one might expect. But in my reading, he advances beyond traditional accounts of Hegelianism and creates his own unique version of idealism. For the early Dewey, *rupture*,<sup>6</sup> and not *harmony*, is the primary source of meaning; it is on this point that he

differs from traditional Hegelianism. More specifically, for the early Dewey, it is the longing for the Absolute, and never its attainment, that creates ideal meanings for human beings. This longing for the Absolute creates ideal meanings by *disrupting* every actual event, compelling us to seek beyond the event for its higher significance, especially the higher significance (again, never to be attained) of belonging to a single unified whole that supports us. In short, it is our striving for the ideal—and our refusal of every partial instance of it—that gives life what ideal meanings it possesses. This position is what is new and compelling about Dewey's early philosophy, what takes him beyond any traditional account of Hegelian thought,<sup>7</sup> for which, typically, reconciliation or harmony is the primary concept. Moreover, as we shall see, how this position plays out at the social level, the level of creating a truly meaningful human culture, is what renders it most significant.

Dewey's view of meaning-formation is not only original, but it also anticipates the more radical readings of Hegelianism as a philosophy of rupture and transition that have become available only in comparatively recent decades, in the work of such philosophers as Theodor Adorno, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Slavoj Žižek.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Dewey's early position goes beyond these figures in that it presents what is perhaps the first systematic approach to philosophy resting on this basis. Dewey's early idealism therefore adds to the tradition of philosophical idealism a much-needed breadth of insight concerning the concept of rupture, beyond the merely suggestive offerings of recent Hegelians. For in *Psychology*, a major work of his early period, Dewey applies the concept of rupture to the whole gamut of philosophical problems, something these other figures never do. He applies the concept to questions ranging from the nature of sensation, perception, thinking, feeling, and willing, in all their various forms and shapes, up to the meaning of God, presenting us, in the end, with a thoroughgoing philosophy of rupture that amounts to a joyful affirmation of transition in all of its phases.

Moreover, and surprisingly, Dewey's early focus on rupture poses a challenge to his own later naturalism, which relies on the opposite

concept of continuity. For one thing, this focus on rupture provides grounds for seeing Dewey's earlier and later philosophies as distinct positions.<sup>9</sup> And given some of the strengths of Dewey's early position that I will articulate, it cannot simply be assumed that Dewey's later philosophy is in every instance the more compelling one. The success of the challenge posed by Dewey's early philosophy is uncertain, but the challenge itself reinforces the idea that his early work deserves more consideration as a significant philosophical endeavor in its own right.

I will not venture to say in the present book whether Dewey's early position is correct or not. My approach is rather to offer a sympathetic reading of Dewey's early thought, so that we might first appreciate what it is trying to accomplish. Later commentators, if they like, can challenge Dewey's arguments. My task is one of recovery. I try to show what Dewey's arguments are and to present them, initially, in a favorable light. Above all, my aim is to build on the work of Shook and Good, to investigate Dewey's early philosophy at length, and to show that his early philosophy deserves fuller attention than it has received—fuller attention, especially, from scholars in American philosophy who have tended to ignore it, as well as from anyone interested in a new form of idealism appearing on the scene.

I want to stress that although my task is one of recovery, and I present Dewey's arguments as best I can, it does not follow that I agree with them. I do clearly believe that these arguments, whether or not they turn out to be correct, make an important contribution to philosophy. If my work helps anyone to understand Dewey's overall philosophical development, so much the better; but promoting this understanding is not my goal, which is merely to consider Dewey's early philosophy in its own right in a sustained fashion. Except in one important place in chapter 7, I have therefore confined my observations concerning any connections that may exist between the earlier and later philosophies to the last chapter of the present work. In that final chapter I emphasize the differences, in order to highlight what is distinctive about the early philosophy.

My examination of Dewey's early philosophy begins, in chapter 1, with a general description of Dewey's project. I examine some minor works surrounding the *Psychology*, on the grounds that in the build-up (and aftermath) to something momentous, one can often detect significant motives. I focus, in particular, on a little-read piece about nihilism that Dewey wrote with uncharacteristic force and passion. In "The Lesson of Contemporary French Literature,"<sup>10</sup> Dewey bemoans the deeply rooted pessimism of his times and is at some pains to characterize its precise contours, in order to know best how to combat it. I also focus on "The Present Position of Logical Theory" (EW 3: 125–41), an article in which Dewey settles on one main cause of pessimism, namely, the confrontation with scientific materialism that seems to render the universe (and human beings within it) barren of meaning, merely "the playground" of indifferent "natural forces" (EW 3: 42). Dewey is vitally concerned here, as I try to show, with how human meaning is possible in the world.

More specifically, I show in chapter 2 that Dewey is concerned to address and overcome what we would now call *modernism*, the cultural condition or malaise in which we believe there is an unbridgeable separation between human meaning on the one side and brute, indifferent nature on the other. In a neglected article titled "Poetry and Philosophy" (EW 3: 110–24), Dewey holds that pessimism is a cultural condition that leads to the belief in the utter meaninglessness of the universe, and it must be overcome.

In chapter 3 I turn to the *Psychology* (EW 2: 1–366) and show that it consists in an attempt to overcome the main philosophical presuppositions of modernism. I argue that the book's main concern is not, as many scholars suppose, to develop a science, but rather to show how meaning occurs in the world. This is a point that Dewey stresses repeatedly in the *Psychology*: that he is showing us how meaning is made, and is actual and present in the course of things. The book therefore fits nicely into Dewey's project of combating pessimism. I also describe Dewey's method in the *Psychology*, and provide a brief outline of the book.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6 I examine in some detail Dewey's account of the process of meaning-making in the *Psychology*. Chapter 4 considers the conditions of knowledge that Dewey insists upon: "apperception" and "retention" (EW 2: 78). I show that Dewey gives a convincing argument for the existence of these powers of the human mind, powers that allow us to negate external facts and to transform them into sensations, which already begin to have an ideal content and out of which we construct the world, considered as an organized and meaningful whole.

In chapter 5 I discuss the nature of knowing proper, in which the conditions of knowledge examined above are activated and begin to produce a world of known and meaningful objects. Here we see how the mind builds up an entire universe of known objects out of its sensations. The key to Dewey's account of both knowledge and meaning is the notion of relational terms. The idea is that "*meaning* always takes us beyond the bare presentation, to its connections and relations to the rest of experience" (EW 2: 121). Dewey argues that knowledge and meaning occur only when the self (which he defines as an activity, not a substance) negates the given and takes it up into its own pre-existing system of interrelated meanings. The self does this in various ways, not only through reference of the given object to previously known objects, but also through how the object makes us feel and relative to what we will or intend with respect to it. In knowledge, feeling, and will, the self creates in the process of its apprehension of objects an ideal arrangement of things that is conducive to its own needs. Going beyond bare, isolated particulars, the self creates a meaningful whole of interrelated moments in which it can find a definite place for itself. It satisfies its deepest need to belong by constructing a world in which it does belong.

Dewey, in effect, rejects all forms of foundationalism and presents us with a new coherence theory of truth. It is a theory whereby we come to know objects (and to find our place among them) by detachment from the given and by organized growth away from it—a theory of truth that, uniquely, makes room for feeling and will, as well as knowledge, in its conception of things (a point I will emphasize in

chapter 6). In Dewey's view, we never simply accept the world as given. Instead, we always create a world in which we can feel at home.

Negation,<sup>11</sup> or detachment from the given, is thus the key to knowledge and the ideal formation of meanings, and it is an endless process. The self always displaces one term in favor of another as we build up and enlarge our experience based on our ideals. Dewey calls for us to embrace this never-completed, ever-growing process of meaningfulness as the very basis of life itself. He shows us how meaning occurs by enlarging us, shattering our former selves, to be sure, but at the same time installing in our experience of the world meanings that are conducive to our knowledge, feeling, and will.

Pessimism, therefore, can be overcome because at the heart of our experience of the world exist ideal meanings, which we ourselves have put there, and which therefore guarantee that we experience the world with our own meanings and values within it. Said another way, there is no "world" for us in which our meanings and values do not exist. Any world we experience has already been shaped and formed by our ideals. True, this does not mean that the world in the end will ultimately harbor our meanings and values. But this is where Dewey's concept of faith comes in. Seeking an ideal version of things,<sup>12</sup> and not resting content with any finite determination, we are driven on to create ideal meanings and to keep the process of meaning-making going. Because there *could be* an Absolute meaning at the conclusion of all things, we are always compelled to keep going on to create further meanings in the hope of reaching the Absolute. We are thereby creating ideal meanings precisely in our failure to produce the Absolute ideal meaning, which escapes beyond us. Faith, for Dewey, means driving toward the ideal, toward making it actual, a process that actually does allow us to produce meanings in the world.

One of the most important ideals we possess is the ideal of a genuine community—an ideal that Dewey believes we should strive to realize above all others. In chapter 7, drawing on his *Outlines for a Critical Theory of Ethics* (EW 3: 237–388), I show how the early Dewey conceives of this community ideal, and how he uses it in particular to combat modernism considered as a problematic form of cultural life.



Modernist thought insists on the socially detached individual, one who must draw on his or her own inner resources alone to determine how to live. Society can be no guide, for it is ultimately indifferent to the individual's concerns. The heroic, isolated self must give itself its own law in opposition to society. Armed with his new idealism, in which the negation of one term leads to another, or in which the movement between the two terms gives them their meaning, Dewey argues for a new form of social life that relies on the interplay and continual movement between individual and society. On the one hand, the society requires that individuals perform certain "functions." On the other hand, individuals who perform these functions develop capacities as individuals, who in turn contribute something unique to the society. In the ideal community life, individual and society mutually enrich and enlarge one another rather than work antagonistically against one another. Each person will have found a definite place for himself or herself in the society, and the society will benefit as a result. A meaningful whole will exist to which each person belongs, and to which each contributes, rather than a society that exists as an alien and indifferent force opposing each person in his or her individual life and development (EW 3:303–4; 320).

This is an ideal, for Dewey, that is worth fighting for. In fact, the key to overcoming pessimism is to find joy in life in the struggle to create this meaningful world—a single, interconnected world in which each unique individual has his part to play in the whole and is not merely cast out and ignored by indifferent forces. This is the ultimate message of Dewey's early philosophy: life is worth living in the pursuit of this ideal of community life.

After presenting this comprehensive reconstruction of the early ideas, I then turn in chapter 8 to discussing their significance. I seek to show, in particular, that Dewey's view comprises an original version of idealism that contributes to both nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinking. I first show that Dewey's idealism differs from that of his teacher, George Sylvester Morris, with whom he studied Hegel and who scholars often think is responsible for Dewey's Hegelianism. Morris, according to Dewey's own citation of his words, holds that "the very sense of philosophical idealism . . . is to put and represent

man in direct relation with the Absolute mind'” (EW 3: 9).<sup>13</sup> Yet Dewey's idealism argues for an indirect connection to the Absolute, with disruption or rupture serving as the fundamental trait of our experience of it. Dewey thus advances beyond Morris' quaint nineteenth-century idealism toward a more relevant twentieth-century Hegelianism, where discord and disruption seem to be more appropriate categories of description.

I next show how Dewey's idealism differs from that of Hegel himself, making it clear that the early Dewey is not simply a blind follower of Hegel, as many scholars suppose, but in fact advances a novel version of idealism—an idealism with Hegelian inspiration, to be sure, but not one reducible to Hegel's philosophy as such. Hegel holds in the lesser *Logic* (section 23) that thought immerses itself in the object and in this way thinks the true nature of things.<sup>14</sup> But, as we shall see, Dewey holds that we never obtain a grasp of the given object, but instead from the beginning always move off away from the object in the development of its ideal formation. In this way, he goes beyond Hegel's philosophy of circles, in which the direction of thought merely returns to its starting point in the object. The early Dewey moves beyond a traditional reading of Hegel's philosophy towards a more open-ended philosophy of uncertain progression.

In this study, I also contrast Dewey's idealism with other nineteenth-century philosophies that also make pessimism a central focus and concern. I have in mind here both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who both advocate for their own versions of pessimism. Against the embrace of pessimism by these figures, I show how Dewey's early view creates a space for the affirmation of rupture (and its movement) as an affirmation of life itself. Unlike Nietzsche's pessimism, which finds life to be indifferent yet says that we should embrace it nonetheless, Deweyan idealism renders life no longer indifferent, but filled with meanings and values, especially for individuals in genuine communities, and *on this basis* says life is worth embracing. Deweyan idealism challenges the Schopenhauerian-Nietzschean presumption that at its base life is without significance, and his idealism does so without nostalgia, because it embraces rupture.

Lastly, I consider Dewey's idealism in relation to contemporary philosophies, showing that here, too, his position has something to offer. As I mentioned above, the systematic nature of Dewey's philosophy of rupture offers breadth to the otherwise merely suggestive implications of such thinkers as Adorno, Nancy, and Žižek, who do not show how rupture functions systematically in all areas of meaning-making experience. Dewey thus lines up with many cutting-edge thinkers today, but he also adds to their explorations insights relative to the nature of sensation, feeling, thought, will, and more. Moreover, I also pause to consider how Dewey's early idealism compares to his own later pragmatism. Could it be that, contrary to received wisdom, the earlier idealistic philosophy actually offers an advance over Dewey's later philosophy in some way? While not arriving at a conclusive answer to this question, I do offer the suggestion that the early Dewey's emphasis on rupture could possibly have greater explanatory value than the later Dewey's emphasis on *continuity*. The later Dewey insists upon a continuous development from the biological to the cultural, a concept central to his whole effort to rethink philosophy as a form of cultural interaction and criticism (LW 12:30ff). However, the early Dewey's emphasis on rupture rather than continuity may better account for the shift from the biological to the cultural. According to Žižek, for example, we must first negate our natural impulses, and repress their manifestation within us, in order to create culture; culture requires repression, discontinuity, the break with nature.<sup>15</sup> If that is correct, then rupture, and not continuity, would seem to better account for the emergence of culture. The issue cannot be decided in the present text, to be sure, but that Dewey's early philosophy can offer a compelling alternative to the later Dewey's account of culture, and even pose a challenge to the later Dewey on this score, suggests that there is more to Dewey's early philosophy than is typically recognized.

Having argued for these ideas, I draw the conclusion that Dewey's early work amounts to a significant new form of idealism, one that makes important contributions to philosophy in its own right. Taken solely on its own terms, Dewey's idealism goes beyond traditional

readings of Hegel; it lines up with, and even advances beyond, some important contemporary insights concerning the nature of human meaning; and it even challenges Dewey's own later naturalism. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly of all, Dewey's idealism gives us grounds for embracing life. For it argues compellingly—and contrary to the modernist presumption, still very much in force, that the world is indifferent to human concerns—that there is meaning in the world, after all.