Review

Reviewed Work(s): Reconstruction in Philosophy by John Dewey

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It is perhaps permissible, in conclusion, to deprecate a certain narrowness in the writer's outlook. An unsophisticated reader might readily be left with the impression that Leibniz, Ward, and Richardson himself are virtually the only adherents to the personalistic form of idealism. Reference to the allied doctrines of Fechner and of Royce, to name no others, would have enriched the book while throwing into stronger relief the considerable individual contributions of its writer.

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Reconstruction in Philosophy. By JOHN DEWEY. New York, Holt and Co. 1920. 213 pp. and index.

Not only professional students of philosophy but everyone who takes a thoughtful interest in the possibility of reconstructing any of the traditional structures of civilization which are visibly breaking down, is profoundly indebted to the invitation of the Imperial University of Tokyo to Professor Dewey to give the lectures which comprise this little book. The book is an attempt to interpret and to make articulate the deeper and only half conscious strivings and impulses which have made our present western civilization differ from the civilizations of antiquity and of the middle ages. The aim which is expressed in the prefatory note, "to exhibit the general contrasts between older and newer types of philosophic problems rather than to make a partisan plea in behalf of any one specific solution of these problems", is abundantly achieved, and with a lucidity and directness which philosophical writings, including Dewey's earlier writings, seldom exhibit. Of philosophic argument, in the familiar sense, there is very little. "See what has been going on," the author might say, "in our life and society since the collapse of feudal and authoritative ways of living and of thinking. I will show you the ideas which really move modern men and modern societies, the motives and aspirations which have come to the surface with ever increasing frequency in the actual life of men. Can you, as philosophers, continue to do your professional thinking as if all these forces and currents meant nothing, or as if they were simply aberrations, or as if they were irrelevant to the business of philosophy?" And when one attempts not only to see what manner of thing it is that has been transforming civilization in modern times, when one attempts to appraise the fruits of the modern revolution in science, industry, and govern-

ment, where shall one take his stand? Shall we estimate our modern world in the light of a standard which was formulated by Plato or St. Thomas, or shall we inquire whether modern civilization is fulfilling those desires and needs which arise out of the life of modern men? The point of these lectures will be quite missed unless one sees that Dewey proceeds throughout according to the second of these two alternatives. It is assumed that the modern mind really wants and requires a different order of things from that which satisfied the mind of ancient and medieval man, of the only men, at any rate, who figured at all in the older civilizations. The whole book is merely an analysis of the varying and discrepant ways in which the modern individual has gotten or has failed to get what he really wants in the several regions of his life. In science and in political democracy, in the control of nature and the mastery of technique, much, very much, has been accomplished. But in the wider and deeper regions of industry, in the daily economic tasks of the common man, in the life of imagination, in religion, art, and above all in philosophy, the logic of the modern ideal is checked and distorted.

What, then, is Professor Dewey's interpretation of the modern mind, and how do the real aspirations and temper of the modern world differ from those of the ancient and medieval worlds? His central thesis may be thus expressed: The modern democratic impulse means, at bottom, a single thing. It implies a sense of the continuity of human values and human interests, a continuity which renders obsolete all traditional distinctions between moral and economic, higher and lower, spiritual and material, between ends and means, between lofty ideals and prosaic matter of fact, theory and practice, aggressive control and esthetic appreciation. That the classical tradition in philosophy has arisen out of some one or more of these dualisms, Dewey shows in a manner both brilliant and profound. Traditional rationalism and empiricism have assumed that reason is outside experience and above it. Rationalism appeals to such a reason to supply assured principles for knowledge and for conduct; empiricism, distrusting such a reason, leaves the world pulverized into sensations and impressions. It is these feudal and heirarchical differences in the dignity and the status of social classes, of human interests, of the various aspects of experience, which inevitably result in stripping of all inherent significance the regions lower down in the scale, and in relinquishing them to the exploitation of any interested forces. This is why our industrial life is so empty of moral, *i.e.*, human interest, why

traditional philosophy is so remote from the human problems which are acute, why the life of imagination, of art and religion, is so sterile, and why education is so largely conceived as a matter of 'culture', contrasted with everything practical and vocational. Our 'higher' values become vapid and sentimental, and our 'lower' prosaic interests become brutalized and are handed over to the devil. Dewey analyses instance after instance of this with an acumen and understanding which are beyond praise. If anyone can read this book and not be quickened into a searching analysis of his own appreciations and judgments, he is incurably blind or stolid.

Especially noteworthy is the account of the historical origin of this cleavage between "an abiding communal framework of imagination", "traditional emotionalized belief", and "common sense knowledge of nature out of which science takes its origin." Here are two sorts of mental attitudes and mental products which tend to dwell apart because, in ancient Greece, they became the possession of separate social classes. It is this dualism which became fixed in the traditional dualism between the contemplation of final, absolute truths, and the pragmatic control over the forces and processes comprising our world. It is just this discrepancy with all of its implications which modern science and democracy have called in question, although the full philosophical articulation of this democratic motive is not dominant in the main currents of modern thought. Mr. Dewey would wish, I take it, to be true to the spirit and the logic of the deeper democratic impulses of the modern mind, and to suggest to us a philosophical method which deliberately rejects these ancient dualisms.

Where, then, does he lead us? There are two broad alternatives which confront anyone who desires to interpret the democratic attitude, the distrust of authoritative class distinctions. The easier thing to say is that since the traditional preoccupation with the interests of contemplation, the esthetic attitude, the life of philosophical imagination and classical culture has stood in the way of men's practical, technological and prosaic interests, therefore, in the modern revolt, there shall be no recognition of anything save the attitude of control and activity. The other alternative, equally true to the democratic temper, would be to reject indeed any objects of contemplation and enjoyment whose possession relegates to an inferior status and hence degrades the 'practical' common interests of men. But cannot new outlets for men's imagination, for the life of art, religion and social experience be discovered—or better, invented—which will be genu-

ine objects of appreciation and at the same time dignify and ennoble the whole circle of practical interests? Professor Dewey is not unmindful of this latter alternative and, indeed, the most significant thing about this book is the hint of a persistent desire to formulate the modern democratic impulse so that the esthetic attitude, the life of imagination, can become the possession of all men. I, at least, do not interpret this book as setting forth a philosophy of pure activism. Now that polemical necessities of the modern pragmatic movement are much less than they were twenty years ago, it is greatly to be desired that whatever possibilities there are of regarding the esthetic, religious, and spiritual values of life as the fruition of men's practical activities rather than as contrasted with them, should be exploited to the full. This book offers only hints in this direction, but they are of interest and importance. There is the distinct avowal that "there is no more significant question before the world than this question of the possibility and method of reconciliation of the attitudes of practical science and contemplative esthetic appreciation" (p. 127). When the author asks "Can it, *i.e.*, human experience, organize itself into stable courses or must it be sustained from without?" he is really asking whether our modern life can so organize itself that genuine human objects of appreciation can be provided which will satisfy the esthetic interest. Dewey's rejection of reason as a norm imposed upon experience from without does not lead him to ignore the necessities of stability and of genuine objects of appreciation. Or put it in this way: the human function which, in the classical tradition was assigned to Reason comes to be performed by experience itself. But the function remains. Indeed, Dewey distinctly implies that the very purpose of the pragmatic and 'aggressive' attitude is so to control and reconstruct our world as to make it something worthy of appreciation and enjoyment. Only such enjoyment must be a common and social experience, and it must grow out of and be continuous with the world of practical achievement. It is nothing given once for all, so perfect and so secure that it is always on the defensive against the inroads of a changing and growing world.

The fusion of logical and historical analysis, the use of historical generalizations as to the essence of older civilizations, and the correlation between social structures and theoretic concepts is always beset with certain dangers which, I suspect, are not wholly avoided even by so consummate an artist and master as Dewey. There are aspects, for instance, of feudalism and of medieval life which hardly fit into

the framework of the analogy between the classical, Platonic tradition and the feudal hierarchy of discrete classes and values. Social radicalism, certain implications of an organic political theory, group autonomy and social pluralism, as set forth by Troeltsch, Gierke, Carlyle, Duguit, and Beer, provide the basis, in the Middle Ages, for some at least of our modern democratic ideals and attitudes. And there is—to mention another matter—a direct historical continuity between the rationalism of Descartes and the ferment of the eighteenth century and the French Revolution which is passed over in silence in Dewey's account of modern rationalism. But these dangers of historical illustrations and analogies are incidental to the main theme. This book remains a monumental achievement which one would like to have read and reread by every college student, every thoughtful adult, every statesman and legislator at the present time.

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