Introduction: Education and the New Scholarship on John Dewey

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A new scholarship on John Dewey has emerged among academic philosophers in the last decade. Many of these essays are by those philosophers most responsible for creating this new scholarship. Contributors to this volume are distributed evenly between philosophy department faculty and philosophers in colleges of education. Many on both faculties have experienced the frustration of trying to convince their colleagues that they often seriously misunderstand and misapply Dewey, or that he has anything to say to the so-called postmodern age. This is the first collection to bring together the philosophers that have framed the new scholarship with Deweyan scholars in schools of education eager to evaluate, extend, and apply it. The result is what I call "Education and the New Scholarship on John Dewey."

So, what is the new scholarship, and what is its relation to issues in education? The best way to find out is to read these essays as well as other works by the authors collected here. One theme of the new scholarship especially well represented in this volume is the tendency to place Dewey’s aesthetics at the center of his thinking instead of his theory of inquiry, theory of democratic social relations, or even his philosophy of education. If the new scholarship’s emphasis on Dewey’s aesthetics is correct, then we will need to reconsider our understanding of the remainder of his holistic philosophy. Communication, creativity, democratic community, religion, and gender are just some of the aspects of Dewey’s educational philosophy that these essays reexamine from the perspective of the new scholarship.

Many contributors “(re)search,” to use Mary Leach’s refreshing locution, review, and reconstruct Dewey’s philosophy for their own contemporary purposes. Those who think that Dewey, the philosopher of reconstruction, would reject the idea that his own thought would require reconstruction to better respond to the vicissitudes of new times and contexts simply fail to grasp one of Dewey’s most important messages.

Several of the authors say something that positions Dewey in one posture or another regarding the “postmodern” and “poststructuralist” critiques of modernity advanced by such thinkers as Theodor Adorno, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and especially Michel Foucault, as well as the self-styled “postmodern bourgeois liberal” pragmatist Richard Rorty. Dewey usually, but not always, gets the better of the juxtapositioning. Deweyan pragmatism is contrasted with critical theory as well, especially the work of Habermas. What remains to do, for the reader

intrigued enough to have come this far, is to provide short expositions of the contents of each contribution.

John J. Holder starts us off well in his “An Epistemological Foundation for Thinking: A Deweyan Approach.” This paper addresses issues of immense importance to philosophers and educators. Holder provides a Deweyan critique of the epistemology of the forms of cognitivism currently dominant in the field of education. The core of the critique is that pure cognitivism must construct a false dualism between creative thinking and rational thinking. Holder uses Thomas M. Alexander’s notion of “naturalistic emergentism” to connect Dewey to some of the most exciting current research on thinking. The result is a naturalistic epistemology that establishes continuity between the noncognitive background of Dewey’s theory of thinking (e.g., “qualitative thought,” needs, emotion, habit, and imagination) with the more familiar cognitive foreground. Holder concludes with specific implications for educational research that emphasize the role of imagination in both rational thinking and creative thinking.

Philip W. Jackson’s essay, “If We Took Dewey’s Aesthetics Seriously, How Would the Arts Be Taught?” takes up Dewey’s notions about qualitative thought, imagination, feeling, and reflection, and relates them directly to questions about teaching and the curriculum. Jackson makes the case that aesthetics and arts education, with their emphasis on creativity and expressiveness, may be more basic than the so-called basics of E. D. Hirsch that emphasize rote memorization. The argument holds if you believe that thinking is basic to education. Others in this volume make similar claims against Mortimer Adler and Alan Bloom, as well as Hirsch. Like Holder, Jackson is influenced by Dewey’s insight that feelings, imagination, and art need not fall into a romanticist or subjectivist framework. At the same time Jackson asserts that aesthetic education can be rigorous, objective, and disciplined without conforming to the rigid structures of today’s Discipline-Based-Art-Education.

In his “Popular Art and Education,” Richard Shusterman reviews and reconstructs Dewey’s aesthetics to analyze and legitimate popular art as having powerful social and political as well as aesthetic significance. Shusterman is a social meliorist about popular art forms. Acknowledging their flaws and abuses he believes the popular arts have great merit and will improve with careful aesthetic criticism. The function of philosophy for Dewey was cultural criticism. Richard does Deweyan critique and reconstruction with and on Dewey to serve social melioristic functions. One thing he ameliorates is the self-alienation we feel when we take pleasure in some culturally devalued art form. His belief is that criticism of all kinds, and not just aesthetic criticism, can help provide the social preconditions necessary for proper appreciation and melioration. Like Dewey, Shusterman denies any sharp separation between theory and practice. Recognizing that philosophical argument and critical demonstration of value alone will not actualize concrete social and cultural reforms, he feels that the popular arts must find their way into our school’s curriculum and modes of teaching. That, as he clearly states, is why he wrote for a collection of essays on education.