

The Past and Its Problems

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Frank Margonis presents us with a challenging essay. His work “The Path of Social Amnesia and Dewey’s Democratic Commitments,” provides a challenge not just to Dewey scholars, but to any reflective scholar interested in working toward “rebuilding severed relationships” caused by the burden of forgetfulness regarding the problems of race.

As I understand it, Margonis’s central claim is that John Dewey was himself blind and forgetful when it came to dealing with the problematic issue of race. This blindness came about, partly, as a result of Dewey’s lack of engagement with African-American scholars of his day, such as W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke. This lack of engagement with racial issues and scholars of color results in a view of democracy focused on “progress” and the “frontier.” Such a view neglects the importance of a past fraught with slavery and oppression. Such a view also encourages a type of “social amnesia.” We look ahead to an unarticulated promise of a better future, directing our attention away from “past conquest and ongoing racial violence.”

I will respond to Margonis’s essay in three ways. First, I will agree that Dewey failed to address the problem of race in his corpus or in his professional interactions. Second, I will speak to that failure in terms of another noted limitation of Dewey’s work — the inability of Deweyan pragmatism to deal adequately with the tragic. Finally, I will address Margonis’s claim that Dewey is overly forward-looking and thus fails to give us an adequate theoretical apparatus for dealing with a tragic but important past.

CONCESSION

I believe Margonis does us a service in pointing out Dewey’s failure to address the problem of race adequately in his work. Dewey seemingly did not interact with the eminent African-American scholars of his day, including Booker T. Washington and DuBois. Dewey’s work gives little indication he intellectually interacted with the work of these individuals or with the problem of race as a whole. This is troubling for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the importance of education for both Dewey and those African-American scholars. Washington and DuBois developed sophisticated educational theories dealing with race and education in the United States. Both were active writers and reformers. Both were prominent intellectually and politically. Yet Dewey, for all his interest in education, seemed to pay them little heed. This lack of response, no doubt, contributed to the overall failure to address the African-American situation with regard to education and within the broader concerns of American democracy.

EXPANSION

Margonis’s central claim is that Deweyan democratic theory, with its emphasis on progress and the frontier, establishes an intellectual basis for a forgetting of the

tragic history of African-Americans and indigenous groups in the United States. If we see the history of African-Americans in the United States as a tragic one, then perhaps we can look at Dewey's overall ambivalence with regard to the tragic as further explanation of his avoidance of what DuBois called "the problem of the twentieth century."¹

John J. McDermott remarks "Dewey had an enormous trust in rationality, good will, and the doctrine of intelligence. Unfortunately, he had an undeveloped doctrine of evil, the demonic, and the capacity of human beings *en masse* to commit heinous crimes against other human beings."² This lack of explanatory power in the face of tragic injustices like slavery or disenfranchisement leads Raymond Boisvert to place Dewey as a thoroughly modern thinker. Dewey is modern in the sense he believes human intelligence capable of sorting out most thorny problems, even deep moral ones. Boisvert roots Dewey's insensitivity to the tragic in two intellectual furrows. First, there was Dewey's groundedness in nineteenth-century philosophical thought, which Boisvert characterizes as the high-water mark for the modernist belief in progress. Second, there is Dewey's position as a reformer — an individual who wanted to bring about change — so it made sense that he thought it was within human power to deeply affect and, to a high degree, control, the problems of the world. A deep sense of the intractable evil possible by human beings could, easily enough, quell the reformist impulse.³ Better for Dewey to err on the side of possibility and progress.

Tragedy may not be compatible with Deweyan pragmatism.⁴ If not, this may account for some of Dewey's failure to adequately address the problem of race in America. After all, is not the history of race in America largely a history of heinous crimes by human beings against other human beings?

AMELIORATION

I cannot, however, leave Dewey here, full of blindness and insensitivity to the great evils of America. It seems to be the case he did not treat with these evils in his work. But Dewey is deeply committed to amelioration — incremental tinkering to make things better. For Dewey, the amelioration of deep moral problems is not just a possibility but also a necessity if we are to live together in community. How much he embraces a utopian vision in regards to this amelioration is still a matter of some debate. But I do not believe Dewey's philosophy is as guilty of forgetting as Margonis suggests. The past occupies a vital place in Dewey's philosophy. It is central for the amelioration of social problems and for individual development.

I find the best treatment of the past in Dewey's work on education and aesthetics. In both, the past functions as a necessary component of present life. It is necessary for Dewey's version of social intelligence. It also serves to enliven and enrich present experience. In the chapter in *Democracy and Education* entitled "The Significance of Geography and History," Dewey speaks to the moral and practical significance of the past.

Intelligent insight into the present forms of associated life is necessary for a character whose morality is more than colorless innocence. Historical knowledge helps provide such insight...The use of history for cultivating a socialized intelligence constitutes its moral significance.⁵

The past emerges as a necessary course of study if we are to live rich, moral lives in the present.

There is little forgetting in *Art As Experience* when Dewey says “What the live creature retains from its past and what it expects from the future operate as directions in the present....The past absorbed into the present carries on; it presses forward.”⁶ Dewey’s aesthetics emphasizes flow, rhythm, harmony, experimentation, and integration. None of these things can take place without recognition, acknowledgment, and integration of what has come before. Dewey realizes that what has come before may be painful, but it still must be reckoned with if we are to create meaningful lives together. Later in *Art as Experience*, he says:

There is...an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense, in every experience. Otherwise there would be no taking in of what preceded. For “taking in” in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known, it involves reconstruction which may be painful.⁷

In other words, we must grapple with, struggle against, and stare down the evils of our past. That may hurt, but it is necessary if we are to live together in a meaningful way.

I am committed to amelioration in the Deweyan sense. I want to improve dialogue, to face our problematic past (including my own complicity in it), wrestle with the difficulties of the present, and hope for a better future. Dewey helps us do that, I believe. Margonis helps us to better face the problematic aspects of Dewey by showing us Dewey’s blindness to and omission of the problem of race in his work. If we wish to avoid, as Margonis wonderfully puts it “writing philosophy from within the cloud of social amnesia,” both Margonis and Dewey are needed.

1. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (New York: Penguin, 1995), 41.

2. John J. McDermott, “Introduction” in *John Dewey: The Later Works 1925-1953*, vol. 11, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), xxxii.

3. Raymond D. Boisvert, “The Nemesis of Necessity: Tragedy’s Challenge to Deweyan Pragmatism,” in *Dewey Reconfigured*, ed. Casey Haskins and David I. Seiple (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 162-63.

4. Sidney Hook, however, claims it is, but Boisvert disagrees. See Boisvert, “Nemesis,” 163-64. I am inclined to give it more of a place than Boisvert, however.

5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 217. Given the current topic, Dewey’s use of the word “colorless” is especially interesting, but my response here is necessarily limited.

6. John Dewey, “Art As Experience,” *John Dewey: The Later Works: 1925-1953*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 24.

7. *Ibid.*, 47-48.