

Recovery, Reconstruction, and Self-Renewal

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Midway life's journey I was made aware
That I strayed into a dark forest,
And the right path appeared not anywhere.¹

Like Dante, Dewey awoke at midlife having lost his way. Lynda Stone uses part of the philosopher's well-known story to accuse him of an American hubris. There is more to the story. In 1915, he initiated a long correspondence with the mentally unstable Scudder Klyce, whom he never met. Then, there is Dewey's romance with the Jewish immigrant Anzia Yeziarska, his yielding to dualism in living his everyday life, and the investigation of the Polish Jews in Baltimore where he showed a willingness to achieve democracy by undemocratic means. That, by the way, got him investigated by federal authorities for pro-German activities.²

While lost, Dewey also wrote poetry revealing a man who desperately desired unity, but thought it impossible in a Darwinian universe. Anzia employed parts of Dewey's love poems to her in later books. Philip Jackson has used Dewey's poetry to depict Dewey's metaphysics as that of a wonderer upon an infinite ocean fully aware there is no final destination.³ Dewey's repeated use of marine metaphors suggest that he, like Nietzsche's madman, was looking for the sponge that could soak up the ocean of nothingness. Eventually, both turned to artistic creation for absorbing answers. I have shown that by 1915 Dewey had already rejected what Jacques Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence. In Dewey's subsequent philosophy, there are no fixed essences, basic substances, ultimate origins, final foundations, or perfect teloi.

Lynda Stone reminds us, "Dewey's hubris is *ours*." I agree, though I believe the greater evil results from American exceptionalism. My question is: What should we do if we find ourselves guilty of hubris, exceptionalism, or supporting imperialism? Richard Rorty argues that Dewey "thinks you should remain an agent, rather than either committing suicide or becoming a horrified spectator of your own past."⁴ The pragmatic faith is that as long as we are alive, we may continue to recover the past into a present that permits creative response for the sake of securing better future consequences.

Let us begin with how Dewey responded when, presumably, he was clearly wrong. Stone cites a passage where Dewey boldly declares himself "a thorough and complete sympathizer" of the war. Reading the full essay, however, reveals Dewey was most interested in defending the right of schoolteachers to public dissent. After the firing of colleagues at Columbia for denouncing the war, he worked to establish the New School for Social Research. He also toiled to found the American Civil Liberties Union. Dewey also actively opposed the establishment of ROTC on college campuses. After the treaty of Versailles, Dewey recognized the failure of the idea of a war to end all wars and denounced the treaty in the *New Republic* because it sustained international disorder while enticing Germany into revenge. He was,

perhaps, wrong about the wisdom of entering the war, but right about ameliorating the evil consequences that as a man he failed to anticipate.

As a pragmatic philosopher, he should have seen it all coming. That is why Rudolph Bourne could use Dewey's own ideas to denounce him. In the period of neutrality, though, Dewey effectively used his radical empiricism and pragmatic instrumentalism to carefully examine the prospective consequences of using military force. Dewey, though, was clear about which side he was on. Dewey thought Kant's Absolute Idealism, with its abstract ideal of Duty devoid of concrete consequences, made it easy for Fichte and Hegel to substitute the existing national order as defined by the State as the content of the categorical imperative, thereby subverting Kant's intent. Bourne, in fact, found Dewey's book, *German Philosophy and Politics* an "original and illuminating interpretation."⁵ Dewey's critique resembles Nietzsche's charge that too many Germans had a "herd mentality."

Significantly, Dewey decried such leaders as Woodrow Wilson who appealed to an American absolutism of "immutable principles," something that continues to describe the herd mentality in the fifty states of the union today. Unfortunately, as Robert Westbrook remarks, with the U.S. entry into the war Dewey "proved susceptible to an idealization of the moral qualities of his country" and fell into an "ideological blindness against which he had warned in the period of neutrality."⁶ In spite of his more reflective philosophical judgment, "an American Hubris" captured him. Dewey himself conceded, "It may be my hope is the source of my belief;" it certainly was not his philosophy.⁷

Bourne had no trouble showing that Dewey violated his own philosophical stance displayed so well during the period of neutrality. Dewey, the advocate of war, not only failed to critique and clarify the concrete, immediate end-in-view, but choose means (that is, war) that could not possibly functionally coordinate with the end of peace. Although Dewey was well aware that limited political democracy in the U.S. was far from the ideal of social, moral, and political democracy he sought, he, nonetheless, managed to confuse his ideal of American democracy with the democracy actually in place. His hubris was born of blind hope and the confusion of being lost in a dark forest. Bourne's Deweyan inspired critiques provided accurate prophecy; mindless patriotism, suppression of free speech, spying on neighbors, and vigilante action soon took hold of the republic.

After the war, Dewey became an antiwar activist and one of the primary rhetoricians of the Outlawry of war movement. He also finally developed a well thought out political philosophy in the *Public and its Problems*. During his extended trip to the Far East he warned of the "conquest of China by economic penetration that will reduce her population to a proletariat working for foreign capitalists backed by superior military resources."⁸ This kind of capitalistic imperialism has brought us to our present impasse. Not until he visited Mexico in the mid-twenties, however, did Dewey discard American exceptionalism. He had thought imperialism was a conscious policy the nation could easily avoid, but, as Dewey himself states, "a visit to Mexico, a country in which American imperialism is in the making, knocked that notion out of my head."⁹

Dewey once wrote Klyce, "I have written myself out to you...too carelessly, more than I have put myself on record anywhere." He eventually broke off the correspondence when Klyce, showing signs of progressive volatility, threatened to publish it. Having conquered dualism intellectually, he fell victim to it in body, feeling, and action. I believe this dualism led to his outpouring of emotion in the correspondence to Klyce, the affair with Yeziarska, and his poetry, while, his philosophy remained serenely detached. He eventually found relief from the embodied pain of dualism as a devotee of the Alexander technique, which eventually led to his writing *Human Nature and Conduct*. Above all, he realized pragmatism required more than instrumental judgment of values and knowledge of how to bring values into existence. He recognized the immense importance of affective, aesthetic experience and value creation, which led to *Art as Experience*. Dewey's artistic response to the problem of nihilism resembles Nietzsche's in many ways, though he was a Whitman-inspired democrat, while Nietzsche reinvented Aristotle's aristocratic great souled man as a monster of creation.

What should you do if, midway through life's journey, you become aware you are lost, but, unlike Dante, your metaphysics does not allow you to think there is a predetermined destination? Dewey would recommend recovery, reconstruction, and self-renewal. Consistent with his philosophy, Dewey chose growth as the only aim of learning and living. The meaning of life for Dewey is to make more meaning and we may continue to make more meaning even when, upon reflection, we learn we have made mistakes.

Eventually, Dewey, like Stone, became a pacifist. On the eve of the Second World War he wrote:

There is no single force so completely destructive of personal freedom as is modern war. Not merely the life and property of individuals are subjected by war to external control, but also their very thought and their power to give them expression. War is a kind of wholesale moral enslavement of entire populations. Peace is a necessary and urgent condition of attainment of the goal of freedom.¹⁰

Dewey's words seem tragically timely today.

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1. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, opening stanza, lines 1-3.
 2. I draw all of my facts from two sources. One is chapters 6 and 7 of Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). The other is chapters 7 and 8 of Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). I will not clutter my response with references to specific page numbers, though I urge readers to examine these works carefully.
 3. Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Philosopher's Task* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).
 4. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 33.
 5. Cited in Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 205.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. *Ibid.*, 211.
 8. *Ibid.*, 257.
 9. *Ibid.*, 259.
 10. Cited in Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, 311.