

Dewey's Spiritual Response to the Crisis of Late Modernity and Early Postmodernity

Jim Garrison
Virginia Tech

Sapient, intelligent, reflective human beings such as *Homo sapiens* ponder their place in the universe while striving to live meaningful lives. For over one hundred fifty years, the unsustainability of Western metaphysics and theology has confounded our existential concerns. I concentrate on two events that undermine ontotheology and show how John Dewey responds to them with a religious sensibility that emphasizes artistic creativity, mutual responsiveness, and democratic participation in the shared pursuit of those ideals that make life most meaningful. There are other aspects to Dewey's answer, but these are the only ones I explore here. I wish to show that Dewey has a spiritual reply to the crisis of modernity and postmodernity if we understand spirituality as seeking deeply meaningful, good, and often intimate relations with the events of existence such that our creative acts matter in the flux of an unfinished and unfinishable universe.

The first and perhaps most percussive event is the publication of Charles Darwin's 1859, *The Origin of Species*.¹ The book's emphasis on existential contingency and randomness disturbs many as does the absence of God. Darwinism naturalizes all norms and values while questioning the very notions of justice and moral pursuit. He even challenges ideals of rationality that rest upon permanent and unalterable foundations. He also furthers the suspicion that dispassionate, objective science is the enemy of all kinds of idiosyncratic, personal meaning.

In his essay, "The Influence Of Darwinism On Philosophy," Dewey declares:

The conceptions that had reigned in the philosophy of nature and knowledge for two thousand years, the conceptions that had become the familiar furniture of the mind, rested on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final.... In laying hands upon the sacred ark of absolute permanency... the *Origin of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that... was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of moral, politics and religion.² (*MW*, 4:5)

The previously reigning concepts are the familiar stalwarts of Western ontotheology. Dewey does for all forms (*eidos*), essences, and identities what Darwin does for species. All forms, including personal and cultural identities, are relatively stable, but they are constantly evolving in a contingent, pluralistic, and perilous universe. He also rejects notions of a fixed and final *telos* to the universe, including a perfect *telos* or *entelecheia*, ultimate foundations (*arche*), and the idea of substance (*ousia*). Often the *entelecheia* is the perfect essence, the ultimate foundation, and most fully actualized substance; for example, God. Dewey rejects the metaphysics of substance with all that implies for human purposes, identity, foundations, and essence.

The second event is Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration: "God is dead."³ We must not forget that read in context, it is clear Nietzsche wishes to bury the entirety of Western ontotheology. Nietzsche insists we murdered God and must become like

God to justify the crime of killing him.⁴ Because our transcendent (for example, Plato) and transcendental (for example, Kant) Gods and ontology are anthropomorphic creations, Nietzsche also slays the very idea of a human essence (*eidos*). Darwin and Nietzsche combine to undermine the self-assurance of the modern subject supposedly born with a mind and self along with innate natural rights, free will, rationality, and such. The result is nihilism.

Nietzsche develops an aesthetic solution to the problem of nihilism. If we want meaning in the universe, we must create it for ourselves. This is an excellent start. Unfortunately, he quickly stumbles off course. Nietzsche thinks each of us should strive to become an "Übermensch" like Zarathustra; that is, "a monster of creation" endlessly exercising our "will to power."⁵ Instead of an autonomous, innately free, rational man, Nietzsche provides an autonomous, autopoietic, Dionysian man.

We know Nietzsche greatly influences Michel Foucault.⁶ Among other things, he fancies something resembling Nietzsche's autonomous monster of self-creation. Foucault embraces Charles Baudelaire's dandy that "makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art."⁷ Such a stance toward self-creation flirts with narcissism and tends to cut us off from meaningful and good, much less intimate, relations with others. He concludes:

This ironic heroization of the present, this transfiguring play of freedom with reality, this ascetic elaboration of the self — Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself, or in the body politic. They can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls the arts.⁸

Richard Rorty's ideal of the "liberal ironist" makes the same mistake of thinking the arts including the arts of self-creation are separate from the arts of statecraft.⁹

Dewey indicates that "individuality" itself is not "an original possession or gift. It is something to be achieved, to be wrought out" (*LW*, 2:61). Nonetheless, he would have thought all these monsters, dandies, and ironists just so much pretentious, self-absorbed, dualistic nonsense. Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty offer us the wrong kind of aestheticism because they not only construct a false self/society dualism, but also because they assume art exists apart from other social practices such as science, politics, and morality. Resembling romantic escapism, we could call it selfish self-creation.

Let us consider Dewey's response to both mistakes beginning with the idea that art exists apart from science and morality. For Dewey, *techne* (the arts of making,) is the only alternative to *tuche* (luck), or as he puts it: "Intelligence is the key to freedom in act.... Luck, bad if not good, will always be with us. But it has a way of favoring the intelligent and showing its back to the stupid" (*MW*, 14:210). More than 99 percent of all species that have ever existed are now extinct.¹⁰ Human beings require creative, intelligent action to survive and thrive. Science is simply the refined use of such inquiry.

Dewey says, "Scientific thought is... a specialized form of art" (*LW*, 5:252). He insists, "science itself is but a central art auxiliary to the generation and utilization

of other arts" (LW, 10:33). Dewey asserts that "art, the mode of activity that is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession, is the complete culmination of nature, and that science...conducts natural events to this happy issue" (LW, 1:269). Science as an art also extends to social relations: "When an art of thinking as appropriate to human and social affairs has grown up as that used in dealing with distant stars, it will not be necessary to argue that science is one among the arts and among the works of art" (LW, 1:287). Dewey thought intelligent social and political inquiry could create enduring norms and values. He also thought it could create relatively stable and enduring forms (*eidos*), foundations (*arche*), and ends (*telos*), although he eschewed perfect ends (*entelecheia*) and the very idea of substance (*ousia*). Dewey drains the swamp of metaphysics into the basin of logical inquiry where *eidos*, *telos*, and such cease to provide cosmic comfort, but can do practical work in a contingent, ever-evolving Darwinian universe.

Dewey understands moral thought and action as artistically creative as well:

One of the earliest discoveries of morals was the similarity of judgment of good and bad in conduct with the recognition of beauty and ugliness in conduct....The sense of justice, moreover, has a strong ally in the sense of symmetry and proportion. The double meaning of the term "fair" is no accident....The Greek emphasis upon *Kalokagathos*, the Aristotelian identification of virtue with the proportionate mean, are indications of an acute estimate of grace, rhythm, and harmony as dominant traits of good conduct....The modern mind has been much less sensitive to esthetic values in general and to these values in conduct in particular....The bleakness and harshness often associated with morals is a sign of this loss. (LW, 7:271)

Here Dewey invokes the classical Greek notion that the morally good, aesthetically beautiful, and logically harmonious are one.

In a chapter titled "The Natural History of Form," Dewey reminds us that for the ancient Greeks, "The reproduction of the order of natural changes and the perception of that order were at first close together, so close that no distinction existed between art and science. They were both called *techne*" (LW, 10:153). He further states that the "terms 'natural law' and 'natural rhythm' are synonymous" before noting that rhythm also "pervades all the arts" (LW, 10:154). For Dewey, the short definition of rhythm "is ordered variation of changes" (LW, 10:158). Rhythm is the temporal dimension of form (*eidos*). Rhythm requires "energies resisting each other" resolved such that they are "felt as orderly." The pause in a rhythmic development is "a balance or symmetry of antagonistic forces" (LW, 10:159). Rhythm requires recurrence, but "the recurrence is with a difference" (LW, 10:173). Dewey avoids the reduction of all differences to sameness. Startlingly, he proclaims: "Polarity, or opposition of energies, is everywhere necessary to the definition, the delimitation, that resolves an otherwise uniform mass and expanse into individual forms" (LW, 10:161). All created forms resolve the tensions presented within a given situation. In his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey writes: "What I have said in *Art as Experience*, in chapter VII on 'The Natural History of Form' can be carried over, *mutatis mutandis*, to logical forms" (LW, 12:372). For Dewey, we artfully create forms (*eidos*) in response to human needs, desires, interests, and purposes; they are not metaphysically given or discovered. We may say the same for self-creation.

Dewey takes a very different stance toward creative self-actualization than Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty when he asserts:

The *kind* of self which is formed through action which is faithful to relations with others will be a fuller and broader self than one which is cultivated in isolation from or in opposition to the purposes and needs of others. In contrast, the kind of self which results from generous breadth of interest may be said alone to constitute a development and fulfillment of self, while the other way of life stunts and starves selfhood by cutting it off from the connections necessary to its growth. But to make self-realization a conscious aim might and probably would prevent full attention to those very relationships which bring about the wider development of self....No amount of outer obstacles can destroy the happiness that comes from lively and ever renewed interests in others and in the conditions and objects which promote their development. (*LW*, 7:302)

Recognizing the social construction of the self, Dewey embraces what we might call social self-creation.

Nietzsche despised democracy, Foucault largely ignores it, and Rorty retains a commitment to an atomistic individualism that Dewey spent his career trying to overcome. Self-creation for the Deweyan pragmatist lies in becoming reflectively aware of the cultural practices that establish the contingencies (including forms of power and knowledge) that condition our conduct, including self-creative conduct, and striving in creative community to alter them. Dewey embraces otherness and difference in ways Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty cannot. He insists: "There are at a given time unactualized potentialities in an individual because and in as far as there are in existence other things with which it has not as yet interacted" (*LW*, 14:109). We have the potential to learn and grow only insofar as there are other things, places, and people different from us with whom we have yet to enter into functional transaction, and they may need us. We need others different from our selves if we are ever to engage in genuine self-creation. In "Creative Democracy — The Task Before Us," Dewey declares:

To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life. (*LW*, 14:229)

Social self-creation through participation in a pluralistic democracy proves far richer in meaning than egotistic, selfish self-creation. Let us explore the source for such democratic social self-creation a bit further.

For Dewey, to have a mind is to have linguistic meaning, and to have meaning involves coordinating our actions with other human beings. The fundamental function in acquiring meaning involves taking the attitude of another regarding an object used to coordinate the action. This involves the ability to make eye contact and follow the others eye (or pointing finger) to the object. A great deal of contemporary empirical work confirms Dewey's claim.¹¹ Similarly, the kind of self-consciousness required for self-creation involves taking the attitude of the other toward one's own actions. Minds and selves emerge through relations with other people. Good and happy minds and selves require good, happy, and often intimate relations. Melvin L. Rogers calls such coordination "mutual responsiveness."¹²

Moral responsiveness emerges without breach of continuity from our responsiveness to each other and the rest of the natural world and it allows us to co-create

moral norms and values to help coordinate our actions just as we co-create linguistic meanings. If we understand mutual responsiveness properly, we can see why, contrary to Nietzsche, democratic social relations are necessary for self-creation. Rorty claims: “The vocabulary of self-creation,” “is necessarily private... while the vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared.”¹³ The intimacy of mutual responsiveness required for self-creation proves Rorty profoundly mistaken while showing what is wrong with creative monsters, dandies, and liberal ironists.

It is in this context of mutual responsiveness that Rogers call attention to Dewey’s notion of “intelligent sympathy.”¹⁴ Here is how Dewey explains it:

The emotion of sympathy is morally invaluable. But it functions properly when used as a principle of reflection and insight, rather than of direct action. Intelligent sympathy widens and deepens concern for consequences. To put ourselves in the place of another, to see things from the standpoint of his aims and values, to humble our estimate of our own pretensions to the level they assume in the eyes of an impartial observer, is the surest way to appreciate what justice demands in concrete cases. (*LW*, 7:251)

Intelligent and sympathetic mutual response reflectively considers the consequences of our social, moral, and political actions upon others. It allows us to realize that to create a richer self requires sustaining good relations with others. This idea is foreign to isolated, atomistic monsters of creation, dandies, and liberal ironists that fear intimacy.

The mutual responsiveness sustaining our sympathetic, linguistic, moral, and political relations with others upon which social self-creation depends emerges from a preexisting intimacy with physical and biological nature. Let us begin with our physical intimacy. The forces of the universe brought us here and if they ever cease to preserve us, we will perish. All of the elements in the periodic table after the first, hydrogen, including the iron in our blood and the calcium in our bones, are the result of exploding stars, nova, or supernova. Life as we know it is a carbon based life form. The creation of carbon occurs in the plasma core of giant red stars. Novel properties emerge as the various elements begin to transact. For instance, oxygen sustains combustion and hydrogen is highly combustible, yet mixed in the right harmonious proportion, water (H_2O) puts out fire. Life itself is an emergent transaction. One highly plausible account of how life originated on earth involves the functional transaction of carbon and methane under high energy (probably lightening) that synthesized protein.

Like Nietzsche, Dewey is a naturalist who relies on the physical and biological sciences while insisting on continuity between biological and human functioning. For Dewey, a living function is any “process sufficiently complex to involve an arrangement or coordination of minor processes which fulfills a specific end in such a way as to conserve itself” (*MW*, 6:466). Thus, it is “a moving equilibrium of integration” (*MW*, 13:377). He observes that any “operative function gets us behind the ordinary distinction of organism and environment... It is primary; distinction is subsequent and derived” (*MW*, 13:377). Functions are not simply located: “[I]f asked, ‘where’ a transaction is located, the only possible answer... appears in many cases to be that it is located wherever it has consequences” (*LW*, 1:156). He claims:

As a moving equilibrium, a function is serial or temporal. This temporal phase introduces the ground of distinction between organism and environment; that is between those sets of factors that represent the maintenance of the function (organism) and those which intervene first as disturbing and then as restoring equilibrium (environment). (*MW*, 13:378)

As a moving equilibrium what is organism and what is environment, or what is the self and what the other, constantly evolves. An atemporal cross-section provides no ground for distinction. Dewey's functionalism replaces the metaphysics of substance (*ousia*).

Dewey's emergent functionalism yields a remarkable sense of religiosity that we may call religious humanism.¹⁵ Let us look at the two main aspects of this religious humanism. The first is "natural piety." Dewey affirms: "A humanistic religion, if it excludes our relation to nature, is pale and thin, as it is presumptuous, when it takes humanity as an object of worship" (*LW*, 9:36). Ironically, both those that would eschew religiosity altogether in favor of human self-assertion such as the secular humanist with their excessive pride in hypostatized rationality or those committed to selfish self-creation resemble those devoted to dogmatic religion in ignoring the intimate relations human nature maintains with the rest of nature. They all lack natural piety. What follows is a fine statement of Dewey's evasion of these extremes that emphasizes William Wordsworth's notion of "natural piety":

The fact that human destiny is so interwoven with forces beyond human control renders it unnecessary to suppose that dependence and the humility that accompanies it have to find the particular channel that is prescribed by traditional doctrines. What is especially significant is rather the form which the sense of dependence takes....For our dependence is manifested in those relations to the environment that support our undertakings and aspirations as much as it is in the defeats inflicted upon us. The essentially unreligious attitude is that which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows. Our successes are dependent upon the cooperation of nature. The sense of the dignity of human nature is as religious as is the sense of awe and reverence when it rests upon a sense of human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole. Natural piety is not of necessity either a fatalistic acquiescence in natural happenings or a romantic idealization of the world. It may rest upon a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable. Such piety is an inherent constituent of a just perspective in life. (*LW*, 9:19)

Moral amelioration, self-creation, and intelligent action all require a sense of reverence toward the universe that brought us here and continues to sustain us even as it will slay us. We live by natural grace.

If we are truly philosophers, that is, friends of wisdom, we should care for the environment. We would use our intelligence to better transform the world that, transactionally, transforms us. This imparts a deeper sense of self-creation. The English word "ecology," derives from the classical Greek *oikos* meaning "dwelling place." Our intimacy with the universe should give us a sense of being at home in the flux of events. However, it takes a great deal of intelligence to create and maintain a good abode. Expressed paradoxically, we might say that to care for ourselves we must care for our environment including especially other people, while to care for others we must also care for ourselves. Part of Dewey's response to the

existential crises of our age is to recognize the relationships that sustain our lives and care for them.¹⁶ Social self-creation also has a paradoxical expression: To create our selves, we must help others create their selves and by helping others create their selves, we create our own selves. Such paradoxes reveal their meaning when we think functionally and recognize that all actions are mutually responsive transactions.

Dewey's natural piety is no escapist fantasy that assumes we may somehow return to the Garden of Eden. Rogers correctly claims Dewey advocates "critical piety" that "blocks the past from having a permanent claim on how we move forward."¹⁷ He avows: "Piety is thus the kind of moral virtue that is attentive to relationships of dependence."¹⁸ He also indicates "Dewey infuses piety with the reflective and critical power of inquiry."¹⁹ For Dewey, as much as Nietzsche, intelligent inquiry is a Darwinian function. Our species endures not by fangs, claws, or physical strength, but by intellect. Unlike cold-blooded theories of reason with their abstract and decontextualized categories, intelligent deliberation for Dewey emphasizes the pertinence of human purposes, passions, and imagination.²⁰ There is vital relation between the self, the imagination, the creation of guiding ideals, and faith in Dewey's religious humanism.

Faith is the second aspect in Dewey's religious humanism. Let us begin with the relation between the self and imagination:

The connection between imagination and the harmonizing of the self is closer than is usually thought. The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal [or self-created] being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea....It cannot be apprehended in knowledge nor realized in reflection....The self is always directed toward something beyond itself. (*LW*, 9:14)

Dewey finds that "all endeavor for the better is moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual" (*LW*, 9:17). Accordingly, "Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality" (*LW*, 9:19). An active faith in imaginary ideals may nourish us when fidelity to the actual would fail.

Dewey's faith involves using our courage and intelligence to actualize imagined ideals while denigrating the blind faith of dogmatists or those filled with escapist fantasies that ignore actual conditions. To secure ideals, we must believe beyond the bounds of evidence, but we must critically examine the ideal from the start and continuously reexamine it as we move along the path of actualization.

Dewey asserts: "Art is thus prefigured in the very process of living" (*LW*, 10:30). The creative response to nihilism originates in the lust for life, which involves a biological and physical intimacy. Remembering our intimate relations with the universe including other people, we can appreciate spirituality as seeking good, meaningful relations with the events of existence such that our creative acts matter in the flux of an unfinishable universe. We will also recognize the role of mutual responsiveness, the importance of care, the rightness of religious sensibility, and the deeper meaning of democracy.

1. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species: By means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859) (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
2. Citations of the works of Dewey are to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press. Volume and page numbers follow the initials of the series: Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971). This work will be cited as *EW* in the text for all references. Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976). This work will be cited as *MW* in the text for all references. Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984). This work will be cited as *LW* in the text for all references.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), section 108.
4. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 125.
5. See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All* (1883), ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1978).
6. See Leslie Paul Thiele, "The Agony Of Politics: The Nietzschean Roots of Foucault's Thought," *American Political Science Review* 84 (1990): 907–25.
7. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 41–42.
8. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 42.
9. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
10. Teresa MacDonald, "Research Center, Dead as a Dodo?" University of Kansas Natural History Museum and Biodiversity, <http://www.nhm.ku.edu/woodpecker/dodo.shtml>.
11. Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).
12. Melvin L. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 146.
13. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiv.
14. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey*, 179.
15. Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
16. See Jim Garrison, "After Ontotheology: Reciprocal, Caring, Creative, and Right Relationships," *Human Affairs* 19, no.1 (2009): 36–43.
17. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey*, 18.
18. *Ibid.*, 131.
19. *Ibid.*
20. See *MW* 14: chapter 16.