

Beyond Familiar Territory: Developing the Deweyan Legacy

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INTRODUCTION

John Dewey's legacy casts a long shadow. Many scholars in philosophy of education are inspired by his work, and some of us, myself included, continue to investigate educational questions that were originally posed by Dewey. However, as with any great figure, Dewey's legacy is disputed. In Harvey Shapiro's analysis of Donald Schön's work on reflective practice, Shapiro claims that Schön "misappropriates" Dewey's idea of reflective inquiry. Although Shapiro correctly points out some limitations of Schön's perspective on Dewey, his claims of misappropriation are not entirely convincing. This, however, is not an especially significant difficulty. In my analysis, I argue that what is particularly interesting about Shapiro's essay is not so much his claims against Schön, but rather his preliminary explorations of the importance of Dewey's concept of the ideal.

SCHÖN'S LIMITED VIEW

Shapiro begins his account by rightly pointing out some difficulties in Schön's interpretation of Dewey. He casts some doubt on the latter's suggestion that Dewey "does not attempt the difficult task of explaining how the methods of the natural sciences are like and unlike the methods of commonsense inquiry." He also undermines Schön's dubious claim that Dewey "questioned the very existence of thought."¹ As Shapiro notes, this is based on a facile reading of Dewey.

After this phase of the analysis is complete, Shapiro comments, "Dewey's holistic phenomenology makes it difficult to do justice to his thought when isolating one aspect of experience, as I suggest Schön, and the rest, have done in focusing on what they characterize as the centrality of his problem-based, situational inquiry theory." Through the rest of the essay, Shapiro proceeds to illustrate this point by exploring Dewey's notions of experience, habit, and the ideal. He presents more than enough evidence to convince the reader that there is more to Dewey than is encompassed by Schön's theories on reflective inquiry.

Shapiro thus proves his case to some extent, yet this is not enough to show that Schön has *misappropriated* Dewey's work. There is an important difference between a limited perspective and a misappropriation. As David Cohen has pointed out, people often think of Dewey primarily as a pioneer of child-centered education.² Yet the scholars and students who believe this are not strictly incorrect, nor are they "misappropriating" Dewey; rather, they are in possession of correct but rather limited facts about Dewey's work. Naturally, some perspectives are more limited than others. I argue that the view of Dewey as merely a child-centered educator causes education students to miss some of the aspects of Dewey that are the most exciting from a theoretical standpoint. In contrast, Schön's framework for reflective practitioners is thoughtful and has proven both useful and popular with teachers.

Furthermore, Schön's fundamental point — namely, that inquiry was important for Dewey and that this idea has worthwhile implications for teachers — is correct.

Dewey's corpus is so vast that there are many valid ways to draw upon his legacy, and Schön's interpretation is a reasonable, albeit limited one. Theory is underdetermined by evidence, and this is certainly the case when it comes to the task of philosophical interpretation; there are multiple worthwhile theories that embrace and extend Dewey's multifaceted ideas. This real danger to Dewey's legacy comes from very limited interpretations like the one Cohen describes and from interpretations that are, arguably, incorrect. An example of the latter category would be Diane Ravitch's misleading portrayal of Dewey as an educational romantic.³

THE QUESTION OF DEWEY AND THE IDEAL

Now that this minor disagreement is out of the way, I turn to an aspect of Shapiro's efforts to explore the limitations of Schön's ideas. One claim that Shapiro makes that is particularly worthy of extension and exploration is his emphasis on the importance of the ideal in Dewey's work. Shapiro remarks that Dewey has preserved "an enduring place for the intangible, transcendent ideal in experience, including the experience of deliberation." Shapiro is right to say that this aspect of Dewey is absent in Schön's framework, but, to my mind, the more interesting question is as to how, exactly, this idea is manifest in Dewey's work.

Shapiro begins this analysis by citing Dewey's *Outlines of a Critical Theory on Ethics*. In explaining the "struggle for the ideal," Shapiro comments, "The struggle for the good is a staking of ourselves. It is venturing, committing to an unknown." I would add, however, at the risk of sounding Rumsfeldian, that the unknown is not entirely unknown in the *Outlines*. The *Outlines* is one of Dewey's earliest works, and I have argued at some length that it is essentially a Deweyan restatement of G.W.F. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.⁴ The central ideal of the book is a statement that Dewey calls the "ethical postulate." It reads as follows:

In the realization of individuality there is found also the needed realization of some community of persons of which the individual is a member; and, conversely, the agent who duly satisfies the community in which he shares, by that same conduct satisfies himself.⁵

This is a statement that has a number of important implications. First, examining the ethical postulate from a historical standpoint, it is possible to see that Dewey has borrowed a point from the *Philosophy of Right* in his emphasis on the harmony of the individual and the social. Hegel sees the progress of humanity as being, in part, a story of the continuous development of this kind of harmony, which he thinks of as being congruent with freedom in a certain special sense. Second, this commitment allows us to see, in the *Outlines*, the roots of Dewey's lifelong commitment to the reconstruction of society. When Dewey discusses the struggle for the good as involving the unknown, he means to suggest that figuring out the good, both in terms of the community and in terms of oneself, is going to require the constant investigation of new problems. The harmony discussed in the ethical postulate is not a static one. Dewey comments, "From this point of view, morality is a life of aspiration...there is required constant willingness to give up past goods as the good, and to press on

to new ends.”⁶ To return to Shapiro’s criticism of Schön, Dewey’s broad commitment to open-ended meliorism is an important aspect of Dewey’s thought that is not captured in Schönian reflective practice.

After he is finished with the *Outlines*, Shapiro turns to the question of the ideal in one of Dewey’s much later works, *Human Nature and Conduct*. Here, as Shapiro notes, Dewey remarks, “The ideal is not a goal to be attained. It is a significance to be felt, appreciated.”⁷ But what does this mean, exactly? Immediately prior to the quote that Shapiro offers, Dewey made the following comment:

The little part of the scheme of affairs which is modifiable by our efforts is continuous with the rest of the world. The boundaries of our garden plot join it to the world of our neighbors and our neighbors’ neighbors. That small effort which we can put forth is in turn connected with an infinity of events that sustain and support it. The consciousness of this encompassing infinity of connections is ideal. When a sense of the infinite reach of an act physically occurring in a small point of space and occupying a petty instant of time comes home to us, the meaning of a present act is seen to be vast, immeasurable, unthinkable.⁸

Once again, many years after the *Outlines*, we see idealism and social meliorism being combined in a significant way. Dewey famously remarked that there was a “permanent Hegelian deposit” in his thinking, and Shapiro correctly points out that we see some evidence of it here.

There is not enough space for further exploration of this idea within the context of this response. However, it suffices to note that some worthwhile new scholarship is being done on Dewey’s Hegelianism, perhaps most notably by James Good.⁹ If we want to go beyond Schön’s overly simplistic reconstruction of Dewey and understand Dewey as a transformative thinker, one powerful way to do this is by investigating the enduring effect that idealism had upon him.

1. Donald Schön, “The Theory of Inquiry: Dewey’s Legacy to Education,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1992): 121.

2. David K. Cohen, “Dewey’s Problem,” *Elementary School Journal* 98, no. 5 (1998): 428.

3. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 170, 171–74.

4. David Waddington, “Uncovering Hegelian Principles,” *Education and Culture* 26, no. 1 (2010).

5. John Dewey, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Register, 1891), 131.

6. *Ibid.*, 213–14.

7. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), 263.

8. *Ibid.*, 262–63.

9. James A. Good, *A Search for Unity in Diversity: The Permanent Hegelian Deposit in the Philosophy of John Dewey* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005).