Chapter 14

American Pragmatism and Technology: Larry Hickman

What follow are selections from a Southern Illinois University at Carbondale campus newspaper interview that Marilyn Davis conducted with Larry Hickman—the next SPT president in our series. (See Hickman's website.) The interview provides a nice portrait with which we can begin.

Davis begins with a quote from Hickman: "Our sophisticated culture needs philosophy more than ever to help solve its problems." With this as theme, she talks about Hickman's position as director of the Center for Dewey Studies at SIUC, where he heads the world's top resource on Dewey, which houses Dewey's papers and other key materials in American philosophy and virtually everything ever written about Dewey in English. Hickman himself, Davis tells us, first visited the center as a philosophy professor at Texas A&M University in the late 1980s, when he was writing his first book about Dewey. Soon after arriving at SIUC, Hickman also turned his attention to preparing an electronic edition of the Collected Works, a massive task that involved re-keying and re-scanning text, proofreading it, and helping to develop a powerful search engine. The project's chief funder, the National Endowment for the Humanities (Davis continues), also wanted an easily searchable CD-ROM edition of the letters to be the center's top priority, which Hickman oversaw.

Hickman is an internationally known expert on American philosopher John Dewey, whose ideas on technology he has interpreted, publicized, and amplified. In between visits to speak in Poland, Mexico, Japan, China, and Italy, Hickman was named SIUC's Outstanding Scholar for 2002.

Davis's interview goes on to say that in two "widely praised" books—*John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (1990) and *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Putting Pragmatism to Work* (2001)—Hickman has made a name for himself by showing that Dewey had a well-developed philosophy of technology.

While some philosophers have suggested that philosophy is essentially dead—that it no longer has much to say to our highly technological society—Davis quotes Hickman to the contrary: "Hickman disagrees. Strongly." She adds, again quoting Hickman: "Philosophy is alive and well precisely because it has

finally turned its attention to technical and technological themes. . . Technology (he says), is essentially human inquiry: our use of tools and techniques to create something new from raw materials and stock parts." Like Dewey, Hickman doesn't limit his definition of tools to tangible objects. Tools are any human invention used in problem solving and creation.

In terms of the content of Hickman's thought, Davis quotes him as saying, "If philosophy is worth anything, then it's applied, in some way. Pragmatism is a forward-looking philosophy that says that where an idea comes from is less important than what it can do for you." Dewey was interested in technology as a liberating force. He saw it as what human beings do naturally. In the same sense that spiders make webs, human beings make tools and techniques. And Davis adds another quote: "We live in a technological milieu. Those are our dominating metaphors. We move through the world technically and technologically. We have to find some way of understanding that if we're to ameliorate our problems." And Hickman says, "Philosophy is the way to do it."

Davis says that Hickman was attracted to Dewey because Dewey's interest in social progress and reform tied together technology, democracy, and education. And in keeping with his view that philosophy should be engaged in real-world struggles, Davis adds, Hickman agreed to be the faculty sponsor for the gay and lesbian organization at Texas A&M in its successful seven-year court battle to become a recognized student group.

Hickman's other interests include film (Truffaut, Fellini, and Robert Altman are among his favorites) and video art. At Texas A&M, he taught a course called Philosophy and the Visual Media and gained state funding for an annual film and video festival. (See Chapter 24 below.)

Personalizing her account, Davis says, "Hickman is a lean, tall, fast-talking Texan who grew up in San Antonio, went to college in Abilene (Hardin-Simmons University) and Austin (University of Texas), and taught philosophy at Texas A&M for 20 years before coming to SIUC."

I have reviewed both of Hickman's major books, and I repeat here some of what I said in those reviews.

I first take up Hickman's earlier book, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (1990). As I have said more than once elsewhere, I think the best account of

Dewey's philosophy that had been put forward before Hickman's is Ralph Sleeper's *The Necessity of Pragmatism: John Dewey's Conception of Philosophy* (1986). Sleeper's account, which follows Dewey's philosophical development from its earliest beginnings to what Sleeper views as Dewey's "mature philosophy" in *Experience and Nature,* and in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry,* begins with the claim that, for Dewey, philosophy is "a force for change," an instrument for transforming the culture in which we live. And Sleeper ends, in a chapter that, he says, shows "the integrity of Dewey's work and some of its ramifications," with the claim that Dewey's philosophy is fundamentally *meliorist.* In an insightful and sharp contrast, Sleeper notes how: "Although Wittgenstein and Heidegger share something of Dewey's concern for the release of philosophy from the constraints of tradition, they share little or nothing of Dewey's concern with the application of philosophy once released. They have none of Dewey's concern regarding the practice of philosophy in social and political criticism."

Hickman goes one step further. Hickman's thesis is that Dewey's philosophy is explicitly and consciously a meliorist *critique of our technological culture.* Perhaps exaggerating Dewey's occasional hyperbolic expressions, Hickman says that for Dewey philosophy is a technology—an instrumentality—for the transformation of culture, in our case, of technological culture. In saying that a critique of technology was Dewey's main tool, Hickman is being only slightly less provocative than in his claim that Dewey's larger project was to restore meaning to a culture that had rendered not only science but also workaday skills and even the fine arts "technological." In other words, Hickman is claiming that Dewey both intended to be and *was* a philosopher of technology—and a better one than most who today give themselves that title.

In Chapter 6 of his earlier book, Hickman contrasts Dewey's treatments of the way technology dominates today's culture with several versions of Karl Marx, interpreted as an economic determinist, and with the "autonomous technology" thesis of Jacques Ellul. This is an important chapter in which Hickman demonstrates that Dewey would have had a powerful voice to contribute to some of the major controversies in philosophy of technology in the 1970s. (See Verene's version of Ellul in Chapter 16; Marxism in Chapters 4 and 12.)

Chapter 7 brings the book to a conclusion, examining social and political ramifications of Dewey's critique of technology and technological culture (and echoing Sleeper): "It is a widely accepted view among professional philosophers

that the most innovative and influential philosophers of the twentieth century are Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey. Of those three, only Dewey wrote extensively about public philosophy; only Dewey advanced a philosophy of education; and only Dewey had a coherent program to produce practical social amelioration" (p. 198).

Hickman's book seems to me successful in demonstrating that Dewey was a philosopher of technology before the topic became popular, but also in showing that Dewey's philosophy of technology, if put into action, could be a remarkable force for good in today's world.

Turning to Hickman's more recent book, *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture* (2001), he tells us explicitly that his first chapter "sets the agenda" for the volume, so I will make that chapter key to my summary and interpretation of the book. (Here the material is taken from a review I did in *Metaphilosophy,* July 2004.)

The chapter opens with a discussion of various uses of the term "technology" in recent years, then provides Hickman's own definition: "Technology in its most robust sense . . . involves the invention, development, and cognitive deployment of tools and other artifacts, brought to bear on raw materials . . . with a view to the resolution of perceived problems . . . [which, together] allow [society] to continue to function and flourish" (p. 12).

In important ways, this is simply Dewey's classic definition of "inquiry" (sometimes "logic") as successful social problem solving, now clothed in language that makes the definition relevant to philosophy of technology controversies in the twentieth century. Dewey has sometimes been faulted for neglecting what his friend and colleague, G.H. Mead, called the "consummatory phase" that gives meaning to all the hard work involved in social problem solving; and Hickman might be accused of the same relative neglect.

But Hickman does emphasize the following: "[Dewey] sought to reconstruct [in *A Common Faith*, 1934] the noun "religion" as "religious," an adjectival term that would refer to the qualities of energy and enthusiasm that infuse and motivate all those experiences that produce enhanced adjustment within life's situations" (p. 77).

And in an edited collection, *Reading Dewey* (1998), Hickman places an essay by

Thomas Alexander, "The Art of Life: Dewey's Aesthetics," where he says Dewey would say it belongs, as the lead essay in the volume. Much misinterpretation of Dewey's "instrumentalism" and Hickman's broad use of "technology" might be avoided by making explicit how "social problem solving" is not all hard work, but includes—indeed is motivated by—a hoped-for "consummatory phase."

Hickman turns next to what he calls the "naturalizing" of technology. He distinguishes between habitualized "technical platforms" that support routine implementations of technology as he has defined it and the "reconstruction of technological platforms [which] requires reflection . . . [and] is therefore best termed 'technology' . . . in its etymologically correct sense" (p. 16). Hickman then says: "My theme in this section is . . . locating technology within the evolutionary history of human development" (p. 17). At least for philosophy generally (and here Hickman is applying it to philosophy of technology), this is again classical Dewey.

Carl Mitcham (Chapter 1 above) had criticized Hickman's earlier book, saying that, "If virtually all knowledge, and indeed all human activity, is or ought to be at its core technical, this raises the specter of reductionism . . . [and] the concept of technology becomes vacuous" (Mitcham, 1994, pp. 74–75). For Hickman, this is a misunderstanding. Using Dewey's Logic (1938), Hickman makes the case for distinguishing the "technical"—activities that tend to be "habitualized or routinized"—from the "technological" in the good sense: "When habitualized techniques . . . fail . . . , then more deliberate inquiry into techniques . . . is called for" (p. 23). By "naturalizing" technology, Hickman wants us to see that not everything technical is "technological" in the sense he is using the term (claiming to follow Dewey faithfully).

The next section of Chapter 1 is one of the few places in the book where Hickman attacks analytical philosophy. Hickman's (positive?) characterization of analytical philosophy is this: "Perhaps [analysts think] philosophy should restrict itself to analyzing and tuning up skills associated with natural and artificial languages." (We have seen, in Chapter 6, that Margolis criticizes Dewey's epistemological naivete in terms similar to this.) Hickman's reply is that he and Dewey are, and as philosophers of technology should be, not concerned with academic but with real-world problems. Margolis might be right in saying that, in today's philosophical world, one must be analytical to be taken seriously; but that can't and shouldn't be the end of the story. One part of analytical

philosophy that Hickman does consider legitimate is where analysts try "to deal with the specific problems engendered by the use and development of specific techniques . . . in [for example] medical ethics, agricultural ethics, and environmental ethics" (pp. 24–25). Here Hickman's reply, claiming to correct the narrowness of the analytical approach, also claims to carve out a niche for a Deweyan philosophy of technology: "Somewhere between these broad and narrow philosophical tasks—the theory of inquiry on one side and technical field-specific studies on the other—there lies yet another area of activity, uniquely philosophical but at the same time intimately associated with anthropology, sociology, history, and other disciplines, such as economics. This is the field known generally as the philosophy of technology, or the philosophy of technological culture" (p. 25).

The rest of Chapter 1 in Hickman's second book on philosophy of technology replies to objections and points out advantages of this Deweyan approach. It also includes an addendum on why Hickman will use the popular term "technoscience" in the rest of the volume. The point seems to be, primarily, to show where Hickman and Dewey would stand in recent science/antiscience controversies—that is, on the side of science, but only if it serves meliorist purposes.

In a special author/critics number of *Techné* devoted to the second Hickman book, which I edited (7:1, Fall 2003; see www.spt.org/journal), Hickman reacts to four critiques that I think are worth mentioning here.

Reacting to a charge by Albert Borgmann that his approach can offer no "firm norms" for the reform of technological culture, Hickman simply denies the force of the charge. Humans, working for reform from a great variety of intellectual disciplines, can *both* devise means to achieve a better social condition *and* adjust their goals—even providing "firm" goals if one feels that is necessary—as they go along. A both/and philosophy, Hickman says, is better than what seems to be Borgmann's point, *either* firm norms *or* unacceptable relativism. The question of relativism is a traditional issue in philosophy, and Dewey was often accused by his opponents of falling into it. (See Chapter 6 above, where Margolis defends what he considers to be an acceptable—even a necessary—level of relativism in any defensible pragmatism, but also criticizes Dewey's epistemological naivete.)

Next, in reacting to fellow pragmatist Paul Thompson, who claims that his book does not go beyond being a "propaedeutic" to actual involvement with the

experts who can help solve technosocial problems, Hickman admits there can be a tension between academic work and activism—though he thinks a professor's role allows for plenty of critical activism on the part of students, either now or in their future technical careers. Thompson thinks this is not enough; a genuine pragmatism should involve active cooperation in the real world of social problem solving. Again this is a perennial problem for philosophers, who often labor under the charge of being useless, of living in ivory towers. (Some, of course, are perfectly happy to do so.)

Andrew Feenberg's critique is that Hickman's and Dewey's liberal, pro-science politics is not what radicals were looking for in their calls for revolutionary reform in the 1960s and 1970s. Hickman, following Dewey faithfully, claims that the policies he favors are fairly close to socialist policies—others might call them Progressive—and, emphasizing the paradox, he says that Feenberg's recent proposals move him in the same direction. Whatever the merits of either side in this exchange, there is an issue here—a perennial one since the days of Marx—whether modern society needs revolutionary change or whether progressive reforms can do enough to make ours a better world. (Recall Sleeper's claim about Dewey's meliorist philosophy, and Hickman's endorsement of it.)

One last interchange from the *Techné* author/critics number that is worth mentioning here—to shed more light on Hickman's philosophy—pits Robert Innis against Hickman. Innis charges that Hickman has not been faithful to Dewey in terms of the much broader emphasis Dewey places on the role of "aesthetics" in his instrumentalism: our cultural settings provide the motivation to (as well as the culmination of) our efforts at social reform, and in general play a much larger role than Hickman allows for in his book. Earlier I noted that Hickman had edited another book on Dewey, in which aesthetics had pride of place, but that wouldn't undercut the charge that he unduly plays it down, or neglects it, in this book. In any case, the issue of a proper definition of instrumentalism, one that doesn't leave pragmatism open to the charge that it is excessively focused on problem solving, to the neglect of esthetic and other values concerns, is one that Hickman and any defender of pragmatism is going to have to deal with. One way this issue plays out returns us to Borgmann's charge, about “firm norms,” above.

Summarizing *controversies,* Hickman objects to Mitcham's claim (echoed here by Innis) that his and Dewey's instrumentalism is “reductive,” that it misses out on extra-instrumental or basic values. Hickman also rejects Margolis's claim

about Dewey's epistemological naivete; indeed he would say that Margolis's preoccupation with an analytical epistemology is inconsistent with the reform aims of Dewey's philosophy of technology. Hickman has also criticized Borgmann, along with many other philosophers of technology, who, he says have not used their broad theories to critically examine our social problems in the "instrumental" fashion favored by Dewey; and he has claimed, as we saw, that the *neo-Marxist* Feenberg has become a *pragmatist* without admitting it—though Feenberg retorts that he can't become just another liberal reformer, giving up the radicalism he learned from Marcuse.

There are other examples of specific controversies in the two books, with each opposing philosopher being dealt with at some length, but this is enough—it seems to me—to give the flavor of at least this part of Hickman's philosophy of technology.

It is important at this point to remind ourselves of one other controversy involving Dewey, Hickman's idol: we have seen Margolis, in Chapter 6, accuse Dewey of being epistemologically naive, of not meeting the standards of contemporary analytical epistemology. And, except for the recent resurgence of pragmatism in an analytical form, as summarized by Margolis, American Pragmatism was for several generations viewed with suspicion by analytical philosophers in what they viewed to be the mainstream. Hickman's work has figured prominently in a revival of the traditional meliorist version of American Pragmatism in American philosophical circles.

I now circle all the way back to Mitcham's concerns, in Chapter 1, that any philosophy that does not categorically reject engineers' claims that they are the ones who are actually doing something to make ours a better world, has no chance of "taking the measure" of our contemporary technological culture. That is, we next look at engineers' explicit claims to do philosophy, and at the handful of philosophers of technology who have taken engineering as a central focus of their writings.