
The late Sidney Hook intended in this volume (first published in 1939) to convey to beginning students of philosophy and the reading public an appreciation for John Dewey's philosophical vision and its relevance to America. While Dewey's philosophy is admittedly encountered secondhand by such readers, Hook hoped to encourage the study of Dewey's own works. To that end, he included a short topical bibliography of Dewey's major works.

Hook succeeds in providing a systematic exposition of Dewey's extensive corpus in less than 250 pages and in plain and lucid language. Hook, himself a pragmatist and former student of Dewey's at Columbia, does write as a partisan. Consequently, given the book's brevity, readers might well wonder why and how anyone could be anything other than a pragmatist. In short, the reader does not see exactly and in detail how Dewey got to be Dewey. That is to say, the sometimes formidable positions against which Dewey fought are in Hook's account sitting (and dead) ducks.

Hook opens his study with a chapter on Dewey's life and personality. In Dewey himself, one sees the embodiment of his philosophy -- a thinker concerned to unify intelligence and conduct for the sake of freedom. The image of Dewey's personality drawn by Hook suggests the screen persona of Gary Cooper but with a doctorate in philosophy. As Dewey's venue changes from Vermont to the Midwest and back to the East Coast, one witnesses an engaged intellectual responding to the salient problems presented by each environment. Yet, there is also continuity in that the democratic ideals imaginatively associated with Vermont, while reworked, are never abandoned. In this sense, Dewey is seen to be equally progressive and conservative.

Adhering to Dewey's own 1934 article "Philosophy" (The Later Works, 8: 19-39), Hook represents Dewey's vision of philosophy as an intellectual and reflective response to a problematic cultural context. Thought is occasioned when customary beliefs and values collide or else break down. From an empirical and historical perspective, philosophies have been concerned to defend or criticize traditional beliefs and values. Dewey's version of pragmatism (instrumentalism) is implicit in this cultural account of the genesis of philosophy. Primacy is assigned to the practical over the theoretical order. This primacy is both temporal and doctrinal. Responsible thought consciously responds to problems in associated living. Culture antecedes and envelops individuals. Custom and habit antedate reflection. So conceived, intelligence is empowered, being grounded in nature as a transformative principle and provided with a pragmatic criterion of success.
Dewey's reconstruction of classical Greek logic as the theory of inquiry follows from the conception of knowledge as a species of action rather than a kind of seeing or vision. An adequate theory of inquiry must be able to account for error (which traditional empiricism fails to do) as well as the increase or growth of scientific knowledge (which traditional rationalism fails to do). Hook devotes four of his twelve chapters to Dewey's theories of meaning, truth, logic, and mind claiming that Dewey's "... basic doctrines and most fundamental contributions have been in the field of logic." (88) These early chapters are programmatic in Hook's exposition and also indicate Dewey's critical involvement with the Western philosophical tradition, guarding against the view that Dewey is a mere moralist. The first misunderstanding or undervaluing of Dewey is possible because his writings are not replete with citations even when historical positions and figures are being examined. The second undervaluing is possible due to the extent of Dewey's writings in morals and politics. These applications to morals, art, religion, and education presuppose Dewey's methodological contributions, which Hook recounts in his early chapters.

Regrettably, Hook died before this republication. How he may have reintroduced this study in 1995 is uncertain. What is certain, I believe, would be his opposition to Richard Rorty's claim in the Introduction that there is no opposition to Richard Rorty's claim in the Introduction that there is no conceptual linkage between pragmatism and democracy. (xvii) This claim, which Rorty presents here without argument, is at odds with Hook's text (152-154, 159-160, 174) and with Hook's calling Dewey "The Philosopher of American Democracy."

In conceiving philosophy as a method for articulating the movement and spirit of the age, projecting its possibilities, and evaluating their actualization, Dewey has left, as he once jokingly remarked, some work for the younger people to do, and also, as Hook recounts, something with which to work.

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For scholars of both Arendt and Heidegger this will prove to be a frustrating book, promising much more than it delivers. The nature of their relationship has long puzzled interpreters of Arendt, especially in the light of her determined but ineffective attempts at exoneration of Heidegger's now well-established enthusiasm for and cooperation with the Nazi regime. It has