
Under the title Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation, Larry A. Hickman presents twelve original essays written by authorities on John Dewey and Classical American Philosophy. Hickman’s introduction affirms what the title suggested to me, that this volume is, among other things, an attempt to “locate Dewey’s work...as it participates in the major debates of continental philosophy from phenomenology to post-structuralism.”¹ A quick glance at the index, however, will reveal that Reading Dewey has little to do with philosophers generally classified as ‘postmodern’. There is only one passing reference each to Derrida, Habermas, and Lyotard and there are no references whatsoever to the likes of Deleuze, Kristeva, Adorno or Foucault. As far as the participation between Dewey and continental philosophy is concerned, I found only one essay taking on that task.

With an equally questionable title, “Dewey in Dialogue with Continental Philosophy,” Joseph Margolis takes as his point of departure Richard Rorty’s allegedly failed attempt to explain the relation between Dewey’s metaphysics and Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology. Margolis aligns Dewey with Merleau-Ponty, explaining that both The Phenomenology of Perception and Experience and Nature espouse a naturalistic, anti-dualistic metaphysics which is contrary to the Sein/Dasein distinction operating in Being and Time. The result is a rich essay, well worth reading.

In all fairness, Hickman makes it clear that this volume is also an attempt, “by and for a new generation,” to “locate Dewey’s major works within their historical context and present a timely reevaluation of each of the major areas of his broad philosophical reach.”² It certainly succeeds in this regard. Thelma Z. Lavine suggests a way to read ‘postmodern’ along these lines in her thoughtful essay, “The Contemporary Significance of the American Philosophic Tradition: Lockean and Redemptive.” Here she observes that American Philosophy, and Dewey’s political thought in particular, is uniquely sensitive to the contours of the enlightenment (read modern) / counter-enlightenment (read postmodern) antagonism and its significance for America’s future.

Most of the essays in Reading Dewey are equally broad in scope, examining a central thread running through Dewey’s philosophy. Writing on the aesthetic, Thomas M. Alexander puts his finger on the pulse of Dewey’s mature metaphysics, the notion that experience is shot through with the rhythms of doing and undergoing. Alexander reminds us that the ‘aesthetic’ is crucial to politics, business, education, ethics and science, not only the world of art, because any successful reconstruction of experience must be sensitive to these rhythms. Raymond D. Boisvert suggests that we think of Dewey’s metaphysics as a “ground-map of the province of criticism” which invites us to employ the unique interpretive terms, ‘event’ and ‘the social.’ Hickman’s own contribution shows that Dewey’s reinterpretation of logic holds that logical forms are not

¹ Reading Dewey, p. ix.
² Reading Dewey, p. ix.

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antecedent to inquiry, rather they emerge in the process of inquiry (read event) as a response to existential (read aesthetic, social) conditions.

Along similar lines, John J. Stuhr reminds us that Dewey’s first philosophy is not epistemology or metaphysics, or even theory for that matter, but a means for making intelligent the practice of social and political reconstruction. James Campbell explores in more concrete detail this complex task, taking special note of the conditions that oppose such a Deweyan reconstruction. Making the point that philosophy is a kind of education, inclusive of the social environment, James W. Garrison looks specifically at Dewey’s philosophy of education. Gregory F. Pappas situates Dewey’s conception of the moral life in his overall philosophy, characterizing it as “intelligent” (rather than relying on inherited custom or antecedent theory), “aesthetic” and “democratic” (in line with Dewey’s philosophical anthropology).

Charlene Haddock Seigfried, although affirming Dewey’s overall view of social reconstruction, raises some incisive criticisms of the version of feminism he endorses, especially in the second edition of his Ethics. Bringing together Dewey’s scattered remarks on social science, Peter T. Manicas highlights the need to reform positivist social science along Deweyan lines. Steven C. Rockefeller narrates the evolution of Dewey’s philosophy of religious experience, from his early idealism to his mature views on community life.

*Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation* succeeds wonderfully at sketching the landscape of Dewey’s philosophy and offering fair-minded criticism, all while preserving the overall spirit of his thought. This collection will help the newcomer to Dewey establish an interpretive basis for further reading as well as aid further research through its abundant textual references. The question is, then, why publish this group of fine essays under such a suggestive, perhaps even misleading, title?

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