Davidson’s own move beyond realism and anti-realism is articulated in the third and final chapter of the Dewey lectures: “The Content of the Concept of Truth.” Here he reviews and further refines his influential work on the conceptual resources available to a “radical interpreter,” and what these resources tell us about truth and meaning. The result builds on Tarski’s work. Davidson’s is an empirical theory “about the truth conditions of every sentence in some corpus of sentences” (p. 49). The theory is unlikely to be held explicitly as a whole by any individual speaker of course, but the key is that “the evidence for the theory be in principle publicly accessible, and that it not assume in advance the concepts to be illuminated” (pp. 55-56). As Davidson reminds us “public availability is a constitutive aspect of language” (p. 56).

The reader cannot help but regret that this first book of Davidson’s will also be his last. As Charles Parsons describes it, these first three chapters of Davidson’s book constitute “one of the most important philosophical writings about truth of its time.” For readers unfamiliar with Davidson’s work these chapters will provide a helpful introduction that show his views in dynamic interaction with the most influential philosophers of language and epistemology in the twentieth century. Pragmatist philosophers will find in Davidson a number of important ties to the American philosophical tradition of Dewey.

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This book offers the reader a rich, new, carefully nuanced, and strongly argued reconstructive approach to Dewey. Saito commences with an examination of Rorty’s revival of Dewey in his article “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin.” She rejects Rorty’s relativist position—and also its “totalizing” alternative, found at times in Dewey’s view of “growth” via the scientific method. (p. 12) By putting Dewey in dialogue with Emerson through Cavell, she offers instead a third alternative. Such a dialogue however, must take account of, though ultimately not acquiesce to, Cavell’s rejection of the inclusion of both Dewey and Emerson together within the pragmatist tradition. Instead, Cavell’s own dissenting voice can be used as a way via which to reconstruct Dewey’s own position. (p. 13)

Cavell’s notion of “Emersonian Moral Perfectionism,” (EMP) i.e., of “perfection attained yet not attained,” in the form of endless circles, is used as a stance from which to analyze Dewey’s outlook. Dewey’s concept of “habit” reconstruction and his “transactional holism” are examined within the framework of his naturalistic process of growth. Habit is to be viewed in a non-reductionist fashion, as a two-way street, and not as mere “habituation,” or accommodation to an environment. Within the ongoing process of “habit reconstruction” Dewey’s attention to “impulse,” or the seed of novelty that challenges tradition, can be profitably and positively compared to Emerson’s notion of “whim.” However, Dewey’s progressivist outlook is found wanting or to deviate from
EMP, when it comes to situations like dealing with the unconventional voice or the recalcitrant child. (p. 14), as these are described in Cavell’s account of Emerson. “Dewey’s notion of intelligence seems to function within a carefully delineated regime of clarity, organization and stability, avoiding or even suppressing the senses of the invisible, the infinite, and the imperfect. Such intelligence appears at times as not courageous enough to guide the young to grow without relying on fixed ends.” (p. 94) Saito goes on to reconstruct Dewey’s view of growth in an attempt to rescue it from this totalizing tendency—focusing on the link between Dewey’s idea of “impulse” and Emerson’s “gleam of light.” “As a symbol of our aesthetic and spiritual impulses, the gleam of light originates in the undivided condition of nature, embodying our aspiration for fulfilling life.” (p. 14) Growth takes place in terms of expanding circles rather than incremental progress.

Such a view of growth allows Saito to argue for the presence of a sense of the “tragic” in Dewey’s work. A sense of struggle pervades Individualism Old and New, for example, a sense of shame if you will, because Dewey is concerned about the loss of public self-awareness. Dewey’s description of the “tragedy of the lost individual” is augmented by a second sense of the tragic borrowed from Emerson—a sense of the tragic “understood in terms of proximity of evanescence and luminosity in the gleam of light, and of the double condition of democracy attained and unattained.” (p. 15) Saito argues that a reconstructed Dewey is especially valuable in exposing both the threat of nihilism and the obliviousness that would do away with our ethical lives.

In education, this loss of a sense of the tragic can be found in attempts to solve all matters as if they were “problems”—to measure excellence in terms of quantitative results, to emphasize knowledge as skills acquisition, to highlight citizen skills—as opposed to the “joy of learning.” The latter, as a result of the procedures mentioned above, has given way to a sense of nihilism. In opposition, Saito’s conclusion offers the reader a view of perfectionist education as a constant process of conversation, wherein deviant voices are allowed space in an infinite rather than totalizing environment. Perfectionist education is not isolationist in nature. The constant process of recreating the self requires “receptivity, detachment, and orientation toward the other.” (p. 16) This type of education can serve as a catalyst for creative democracy.

Saito’s position is one that emphasizes the aesthetic dimension highlighted by the later Dewey, wherein he “tells us that reawakening the intensity of living by cultivating the prophetic impulse—in effect the gleam of light—is a crucial step to creative democracy.” (p. 15) For Saito, Dewey’s account of things is more Emersonian than Cavell will allow for. But Cavell is right that Dewey’s language is too dull and prosaic—too unable to deal with the odd ball, the deviant, the “other” or the existential, first person narrative.

Saito’s account redefines “growth,” not as a gradualist constantly changing process with emphasis on continuity, but rather as one which allows for, even highlights rupture, loss, shame, etc. This is done by recognizing and even highlighting the realization that every attainment is also accompanied by a sense of loss, of shame that it
has also not been achieved (as an ideal). Growth is not toward any given end precisely
because the ends themselves are constantly changing. “Dewey’s idea of development in
temporal continuity…is not merely a linear progression, repetitions or redistributions.”
(p.114) It is, rather, a sort of “discontinuous continuity.”

Two things leap out at the reader after s/he completes reading Saito’s insightful
analysis. Her rich narrative is based significantly upon a new or redefinition of “growth”
and upon a redefinition of the “tragic.” Dewey’s notion of growth has oftentimes seemed
emphasize gradualist change. There are times in his work however, where the change
mentioned seems more like a paradigm shift, as in “The Influence of Darwin on
Philosophy.” Saito’s redefinition of growth along Emersonian lines as stressing
something attained yet lacking allows her to highlight success while also recognizing and
accepting a sense of loss or lack. “Deweyan growth can reemerge as holistic growth—
growth toward a whole, with the irruption of departure and loss. Growth is the infinite
process of self-overcoming in expanding circles.” (p.161). In her analysis it seems that
the tragic can be “overcome” through time in a sort of Jamesian will-to-believe fashion,
i.e., through resolve or hope. This is not a once-and-for-all time decision, but must be
continually reaffirmed. Dewey, for Saito, is given credit for recognizing the tragic—for
realizing that there are losses that cannot be overcome; but he also is given credit for
calling attention to the danger of the public becoming anesthetized or oblivious to the
situation at hand. Dewey’s pragmatism, for Saito, resists the absolutism of tragedy—it
maintains a philosophy of hope but not an oppressive optimism. Individuals do suffer loss
and grieve over it, as Emerson did over the death of his son Waldo. But over time the
grief can turn into “resolve,” as one becomes aware of or “makes sense of” the futility of
grieving. Dewey laments not only grief over loss, but also our obliviousness to loss over
time. In sum, Dewey, for Saito, shares with Emerson a sense of attained yet unattained
perfection with accompanying “loss, limitation or failure as part of the human condition.”
(p.135)

This is a rich account of Dewey’s philosophy—one which refuses to become
bogged down in dualistic alternatives. It moves beyond Hegel and Darwin to offer an
emersonian Dewey with a redefinition of growth that can accommodate the tragic—at
least as it is defined here. Saito’s account presents us with a more creative than problem-
solving Dewey. It is an account that is in itself both creative and refreshing. It causes each
of us to re-examine the definition of “growth” or of the “tragic” that we might take for
granted as “obvious.” In a truly emersonian sense it does what a book should do—it
serves as an “inspiration,” a prod, or a spur. It also, sadly and courageously, and in a self-
reflexive manner, makes us realize how much work is still to be done if we are to
achieve a truly self—conscious public and a creative democracy.

This is a very rewarding text and well worth the read.

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