

To Be of Use: The French Connection

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First, an aside: I received Jim Garrison's essay right before I had to leave my office to teach a class in another building. I did have time while walking over to skim the first two pages, and I must admit when I read what Jim had written about meeting me, I was taken aback. My first response was: "Well, that does not sound very nice!" Since Jim had generously and repeatedly told me he was open to any suggestions, my original thought, though fleeting, was maybe I could ask him to change that part. Upon reflection, however, I decided I should do no such thing. No. This was Jim's story, his memories, his own writing of his experience with me. I have no right to request a change of his remembrance, even if it does make me sound like a barfly. Besides, I thought, anyone who knows Richard Pratte and Gerry Reagen at Ohio State would realize that they never would have hired me there if I were not willing to hang out some at the hotel bar.

On the rest of that page, Jim liberally includes both his and my conclusions from an essay we co-authored on John Dewey and Jacques Derrida. I am pleased he repeated what I previously wrote, because in many ways it sums up my understanding of the French (mis)-connection in our essay, and gives the reason why I believe most attempts to assimilate one philosopher's project within another's does an injustice to both. In this case Dewey's and Derrida's fundamental projects are different; their writing of philosophy vastly different.

As I said, my effort was offered in the hope of finding a way to hold open the question of the relation between Dewey and Derrida so as to explore both the possibility of their coincidence and the necessity of their distinction. In this "conversation," Derrida introduces his own work to Dewey by acknowledging that his writing, indeed, *all* writing including Dewey's own, is double-bound. Any radical criticism necessarily produces words at war with themselves. They must struggle to exempt themselves from the very grammar in which they are caught up and by which they mean. Inevitably they are qualified, "written under erasure," hedged, as Derrida does, with inevitable quotation marks. If writings (of radical ideas) emerge always within a history they would subvert, and take their sense from that history even as they would undo that history's claim to mastery over their sense making, these writings must necessarily employ tools, devices that Derrida refers to as "ploys of designification." Not only does Derrida's writing work to exemplify the both/and, but also the neither/nor that he believes is demanded in any exterior form of critical rupture and redoubling. The moment we approach any philosophical notion no longer by thinking to refute it but by asking how it can be said, the ground shifts beneath the traditional arguments.

In his address, Garrison has not tried to trump Derrida, nor pose Dewey and Derrida's engagement with the metaphysics of presence as a contest with a winner and loser. Good. However, one could read this desire as creeping in further on with

these sentences: “Derrida frequently refers to the ‘metaphysics of presence’ and carries out a sustained assault that *surpasses* that of Heidegger.” Later: “Dewey did the same over a decade *before* Heidegger.” In this account it sounds as if Martin Heidegger’s work comes in second, or even third! In a poststructural reading of this one rhetorical move, I think that the deconstructive impulse bears repeating: to set up procedures to continuously demystify the “realities” that writing creates in order to fight the tendency of our categories to congeal. As he has with other theorists, Derrida might point out here that the “contest” that seems to resurface enacts both an attempt at de-scribing the varied moments of an idea — the metaphysics of presence — and an in-scribing, a marking with words that impress the author’s investments in privileging his own readings in a struggle here to generate a way of knowing that can take us *beyond* the current debate over the meaning and value of Dewey’s thought. For Derrida, all critical writing both confirms and complicates received codes. Thus, in his own writing he tries to *show* how language is inextricably bound to the social and the ideological. In using deconstructive strategies, his goal is the movement of social inquiry to an alternative ground, the ground of “discourse.” He tries to *enact* the ways in which talking and writing are situated within social practices; the historical conditions of meaning, the positions from which texts are both produced and received. A worthy project but not what Garrison does in his writing. Dewey also does not write like Derrida. Neither do I for that matter.

In this address, Garrison *uses* Derrida’s reputedly radical criticisms to point out the heretofore unremarked radical character of Dewey’s thought so as to persuade us of his usefulness to today’s educational philosophy. Now, to be of use would seem a fine activity for any philosophical thought. Here, Jim’s use of Derrida’s concerns of the metaphysics of presence is in the spirit of what some historians have called comparative intellectual history, an alternative to the reigning methodology of contextualism which regards the *meaning* of figures and ideas as inseparable from their specific circumstances in the past. Doing comparative intellectual history allows a (re)-contextualization, a (re)-situating of ideas in theoretical confrontations as well as confirmations. The conjunction permits new and unexpected contexts to result with the power to inform us about certain possibilities of the present — one’s we have not seen before — providing an alternative that reframes issues and resets codes in ways that engender a deeper appreciation of all that might be said. This seems to me to be a good way of sustaining the “French Connection.” Feminists and other theorists have taken Jim’s approach in reading Dewey’s pragmatics within (but also necessarily against) the politics and theories of such French philosophers as Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Luce Irigaray. In doing so some of us have realized a *sharing of a certain style* of cultural and political inquiry. This is one whose guiding value is in *nonidentity*; that is in the exploration and promotion of new forms of human action that acquire a power and value by deliberately eluding identification and direct affiliation. One that works to refuse totalizing, closed systems of thought; that mode of thought that *dissolves* particularity or difference into the abstractions of concepts and categories. Like Foucault in our time, Dewey exposed the Western philosophical tradition as a set of exclusionary mechanisms,

“that deify the fixed and stable” and relegate the “uncertain and unfinished” to the category of the unreal. He recognized the scientific bias toward fixity and closure that infects not only our own character structure, but also rationalism’s and idealism’s habitual failure to take into account, says Dewey, “the ultimate evidence of genuine hazard, contingency, irregularity and indeterminateness in nature.” This is an imminent stance launched from *inside* and takes for granted the inexorable: our confinement in what has created us — social and cultural convention, practices, representations, and institutions. Thus, those strategies of heroic hymns to Promethean powers, conceptions of cultural critique draped in flamboyant colors of alienation and/or elitism which presuppose the choice of a standpoint *outside* the sway of existing everyday life, he saw as fictitious as only the construction of abstract utopias can be.

Now both Jim and I know neither philosophers, nor anyone else, can dispense with concepts and with identity. The *desire* to do so and the *impossibility* of doing so collide within a contradiction that I believe Dewey’s *pragmatic* social theory deliberately dwells on rather than resolves. Often missed in our reading of the later Dewey is his distrust of system and identity thinking, and its extension of that to an understanding of the very *art* of classification and identification as the defining ideological moves in establishing what Foucault calls a culture’s “regime of truth.” Dewey, along with the thought of some French philosophers, encourages our suspicion of categories, including those of intellectual and political identity — oppositional, radical, liberal, conservative, poststructuralist *not* excepted.

One could argue that the Frankfort School motto of “not playing the game” also became the creed (or anti-creed) of Dewey’s work in the wake of World War I. According to my reading, Pragmatism’s vain humanism, evident in the pragmatic emphasis on scientific control before 1917, was altered thereafter. Dewey’s pragmatic stance migrated far from the impoverished criteria of adaptation and adjustment where there is no provision for thought or experience getting beyond itself. His corrective to the total rule of method is his recognition of thought’s instability and it provides the entry of experiment as pragmatism’s watchword. For example, Dewey equates philosophy and critique in his 1925 book, *Experience and Nature*. There he deconstructs “science” to be experimental inquiry, an active, revisionary pursuit rather than an attainment of a fixed body of knowledge. In my view, by the late 1930s Dewey has conceived of all his work as exploratory. His approach to politics, for example, demands a partial, tentative open attitude of critical and political inquiry. Indeed, he accepted as praise the critique leveled at The League for Independent Political Action in 1929, that its program was “partial and tentative, experimental and not rigid.” In emptying “democracy” of stable identity, Dewey rejected any cultural ideal which imposed on institutionalized knowledge the tyranny of the best as a universal norm.

In subsequent works, Dewey’s mode of inquiry mimes (rather than seeks to order) the density, volatility, and thick growth tangled in exploratory, involving, “intimate surrender” to the hazards of immersion. Rather than relying on “distance” which reduces all aspects of experience to the mental and insulates the body from

the chaos of confusion and change, Dewey's mode of inquiry becomes a mode of conduct that shields no primary, harbors no certainty; the crux is what happens *in* it, not a thesis or proposition. Gayatri Spivak believes that as much as we need them, even our presuppositions are best recognized as necessary fictions. Such an orientation makes philosophy "not expoundable — the fact that most of it can be expoundable speaks against it." The incessant (and doomed) effort to defer the inevitable universal norms of the writing of traditional philosophy is now the *burden* of Dewey's pragmatist project. For Dewey, as for the projects Jim and I make use of here, the rich fruits of inquiry have its source in one commitment: honoring what Dewey calls the universe's character of contingency.

In modifying the urge for conceptual definition, clarity, and control (attributes of instrumental reason) Dewey is far from oblivious to actuality, the *fragility* of the release of human power — in the Russian revolution, for example. Like Dewey we also recognize that any alternative cultural criticism informed by a pragmatic emphasis on our embeddedness in cultural forms of life, cannot escape *interest* as a final fact. Still a reading of selfhood as a continuously precarious active process allows us an experimental deviation, a restless analytic process, a nomadic inquiry in motion. This promotes a realization that *we* write and rewrite/repeat and change history. After all, we are all borrowers, pack rats of words, images and ideas in a landscape at once diverse, utilitarian and pluralistic.

If we are really willing to abide in the pragmatic spirit of experimentation, reconstruction, and revision (the responsibility entailed in Charles S. Peirce's fallibilism) we expect to be committed to an extremely difficult task. We realize that the intellect craves certitude. The trial of undecidability, as Derrida calls it, places a great demand on our human powers. It certainly unseats the idealist elevation of the intellectual from a position of privileged moral vision to a far less stable vantage. If our thought and experience are no longer "glued" to identity, if freedom, argues Foucault, is not an essence but an "egoism," a reciprocal *incitation* and struggle — a permanent provocation — oppositions like success and failure, positivity and resistance, impotence and power radically intermix. But here, says Dewey, is where our knowing resides — in a continuum of indeterminacy. To move freely with greater understanding of the situations in which we are immersed, taking seriously our fellow travelers' forces of energy, their bodies, imagination, curiosity and interests, seem to me to describe a purpose of Jim's address today.

My own reading of Dewey is in concert with Jim's understanding of Dewey's position on the metaphysics of presence. In fact, reading Dewey differently, as Jim says he does, has made possible the conversation he and I and Jim Giarelli are having today. If one must inevitably start, "where one is," we will all read Dewey differently. Actually, in my own memory of meeting Jim, it was not around talk of "weird feminist or French ideas" that I held, but around a Deweyan connection made between the two of us. I honestly do not remember whether we were in a bar or not.