

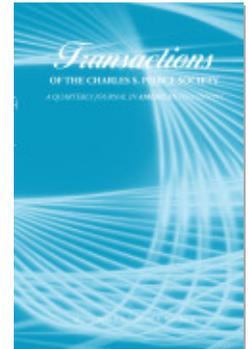


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Dewey (Series: *The Routledge Philosophers*) by Steven Fesmire
(review)

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STEVEN FESMIRE

Dewey (Series: The Routledge Philosophers)

London and New York: Routledge, 2015. xxii + 278 pp. (contains index).

In recent years, a genre of introduction to philosophical figures and movements for non-specialists has gained in popularity; these introductions aim to be neither too cursory nor too laden with academic detail. Oxford's "Very Short Introductions" and the "Wadsworth Notes" series are examples of the cursory type, while academic monographs are examples of the detailed type. Steven Fesmire's *Dewey* is a welcome and unique contribution to the new introductory genre, joining similar efforts such as Raymond Boisvert's *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time* (SUNY, 1998) and my own *Dewey: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2008).

Dewey possesses a number of helpful features. A glossary explains the usages Dewey imposed upon ordinary words, such as "accommodation," "experience," "situation," "habit," "interaction," and so on, and refers readers to related entries, passages within the book itself, and to relevant points in Dewey's corpus. A concise chronology includes events and publications significant to Dewey's philosophy; the index is detailed and thorough. Chapter are rounded out by a brief summary, notes, and a well-chosen list of further readings about that chapter's theme.

Before delving into the contents, a word about style. Fesmire's writing is not just accessible—requisite for any book of this sort—it is *lively*. He converses as a master scholar-teacher; someone who could teach you Kant before you realized what happened. The prose flows, explanations are clear but never pedantic, and imaginative examples regularly bring Dewey's meaning home to readers. Ideas are related to *our* world, to *our* experience, today. For example, the problem Dewey encountered between competing ethical paradigms is introduced using the metaphor of *wallpapering an old house*; after some philosophical explanation, the stakes of this choice are clarified by applying it to the issue of hunting and animal welfare. In some writers' hands, such strategies backfire, devolving into extraneous chatter; Fesmire, however, pulls it off. Fesmire's style also brings us closer (via Dewey's correspondence) to Dewey, the man. We learn, for example, that Dewey's Columbia colleagues "loved" him for his "Yankee diffidence and shrewdness combined with careful speech, good-humored seriousness, and a lack of vanity," and because Dewey "was fearless yet unpretentious in discourse [with a]. . . .mind . . . as persistent as the natural force he believed all of

our minds to be.” (21) We learn, too, that Dewey was cautious to distinguish between his admirers. To one admirer Dewey remarked, “I’m so delighted to find that you don’t claim to be a disciple. . . My enemies are bad enough, but my disciples are worse.” (29) Such stylistic touches keep the book moving sprightly along.

Dewey is comprised by eight chapters, each covering a major theme(s). After a brief introduction, the first chapter (1) provides a sketch of Dewey’s personal life and his wider impact as an intellectual; it also discusses a recent discovery of a long-lost book MS by Dewey. The next six chapters focus upon most major areas of Dewey’s philosophical work (with the exception of psychology and logic); they include (2) metaphysics, (3) epistemology, (4) ethics, (5) social-political and educational theory; (6) aesthetics and technology; and (7) the religious. A final chapter, (8) “Conclusion and Legacy” examines especially potent applications of Dewey’s thought (to environmental, ethical, and socio-political arenas), and important interdisciplinary “dialogues” in which Dewey’s thought has become integral (e.g. with Asian, Native American, and Inter-American interlocutors).

This is a fine book, and I have no significant difficulties with it at all. Fesmire, to my mind, provides a coherent and authentic interpretation which examines Dewey’s ideas charitably and with sufficient objectivity. While definite in its own take, the text remains mindful that other approaches may reasonably disagree with Dewey’s philosophical perspective. The remainder of this review will selectively highlight the major chapters in order provide a glimpse of *Dewey’s* key ideas and organizing principles.

The introduction is short but effective. Readers are oriented to how Dewey fit among the classical pragmatists, how he defined philosophy, and what motivated him, philosophically, intellectually, and as a citizen. Like a good travel guide, it lets readers in on its own scope, content, and typical strategies. Next, chapter 1 delves into Dewey’s life and works, providing “a selective chronological narrative of Dewey’s personal and intellectual biography” which prioritizes “themes, concepts, events, and writings that set the biographical and historical context for later analysis of his key writings.” (10) The chapter reads easily, weaving together major life events with personal, political, and philosophical influences. In some cases, these cannot be separated. We learn, for example, how important Dewey’s wife was upon his views regarding religion: “Alice was the most significant, if unsung, influence on Dewey’s shift away from religious orthodoxy.” (16) Dewey’s turn from Hegelianism toward the psychology of William James and the biological worldview of Darwin is examined; we learn details about his rise as an important innovator in both philosophy and education, and about his expanding efforts to theorize and practice in the arenas of domestic and international politics. Dewey’s later philosophical efforts, his style

as an element of his substance, and his defenses of academic freedom, are also covered. Again, the narrative is lively, peppered with interesting and even surprising facts. We learn, for example that Dewey's "reputation in China was still sufficiently strong by 1942 that. . .during the Second World War Dewey wrote a 'Message to the Chinese People' that was translated into Mandarin 'and scattered as a leaflet by the US Army Air Force over Chinese cities.'" (25)

Chapter 2 takes up Dewey's reconstruction of metaphysics in depth, and is one of the longer chapters. Metaphysical topics recur, as one might expect, in connection with Dewey's aesthetics, later on. For Dewey, Fesmire explains, "metaphysics" had a non-standard meaning. "Dewey developed a metaphysics," Fesmire explains, "in the classical sense only insofar as 'metaphysics is cognizance of the generic traits of existence.' On his pragmatic and naturalistic reinterpretation, metaphysics aims to project a provisional "map". . . to be used as a navigational tool for inquiring into the general characteristics of our natural existence." (38–39) Dewey "did not have a system of metaphysics that can be laid out in a straight path on the rationalist model" Fesmire explains, "but he did make constructive (in addition to many destructive) metaphysical assertions. . . .[developing] a metaphysics in the classical sense only insofar as 'metaphysics is cognizance of the generic traits of existence.'" (38)

In light of his view that "Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics was more an anthropology of nature" Fesmire's strategy is to "introduce several features of Dewey's constructive metaphysical map. . . [and] his more general approach to metaphysics by showing him in critical conversation with the Western tradition." (60, 39) The chapter contextualizes Dewey's approach within the long history of metaphysics and then lays out Dewey's critique of the tradition, especially of the underlying, fundamental dualisms. Again, Fesmire shows the current relevance of Dewey's critique: "We divert energy and effort from our quest to secure a better, truer, freer, and more beautiful world when we imagine human ideals as already-secured actualities existing in an ethereal realm. . . .We pretend that our religion is the final one, our savior or prophet the final embodiment of divinity, . . .our economic regime the completion of economic evolution." (44–45) The chapter then explains Dewey's positive metaphysical views, tracing their sources to education and psychology. He unpacks difficult metaphysical concepts ("experience," "situation," etc.) often by deploying Dewey's own mapping metaphor onto everyday life. For example, to explain the nature of "situations," Fesmire writes, "Acts or events develop over time, as with the act of writing an essay or the event of childbirth, so situations are temporally spread out. From composing a musical score to negotiating a peace treaty, the situational 'spread' includes the immediately felt echo of the prior flow of experience and the dawning sense of the

future flow.” (51) Dewey’s metaphysics, as one might expect, follows the same pragmatic limits informing all other areas of his philosophy. “What makes a map correct and successful is determined by whether it meets our aims for the map when we journey with it. . . . There can be no true map as some fixed and final charting of territory. . . . Maps are always provisional, open to revision and improvement.” (54) A metaphysical map is, in essence, an experimental proposal to “help us navigate real-world perplexities.” (59)

The chapter ends with a potent (and constructive) criticism of Dewey’s metaphysics. While Dewey embraced, as metaphysically fundamental, the principle of “continuity” among living things, he failed to fully extend that continuity to animals. In this way, he followed the modern’s inclination to set humans apart—and above. He writes, “Many among today’s more progressive, post-Earth Day readers will understandably share the opposite concern, namely that we risk betrayal of the more-than-human world when we *fail* to celebrate continuity. . . . Looking back from the vantage point of contemporary research on animal behavior, cognition, emotion, and culture, Dewey overstated the extent to which the behavior of other animals is determined by instinct that is pushed by unthinking appetite. Dewey echoed the prejudice of his contemporaries that all non-human animals act out of blind habit.” (72) Dewey’s error, however, seems pretty easily corrected, Fesmire contends. We can adjust his theory to recent decades of scientific inquiry into animals because while Dewey (unfortunately) “perpetuated a 1920s picture of animals as unintelligent and unemotional brutes” he also (more significantly) “attempted to throw into relief our human potential *as* adaptive imaginative *animals*.” (73, emphasis added)

Chapter 3 investigates “epistemology,” which for Dewey involves his critique of the tradition, his instrumentalist accounts of inquiry, situations, concepts, justification, and truth. (Logic, however, is treated only very briefly.) The map metaphor continues to inform the approach. It is refreshing to see Fesmire start by contrasting Dewey and Richard Rorty, not least because Rorty’s interpretation of Dewey’s epistemology produced agitation, dialectic, and not a little bit of obsession among American scholars! As Fesmire puts it, “Distinguishing Dewey from Rorty’s Dewey helped to clarify and develop key concepts, though at times it outpaced critical reexamination among those in the best position to renew the promise of Dewey’s philosophy.” (83) I appreciated the extended discussion of both “imagination” and “dramatic rehearsal” in the chapter because these are still under-appreciated aspects of Dewey’s theory of inquiry (and, notably, moral inquiry). I also appreciated connections made between Dewey’s epistemology, physics, and philosophy of science. The chapter benefits readers by distinguishing Dewey *qua* “naturalist” from other prominent naturalists, such as Quine. “Dewey,”

Fesmire writes, “treated the natural sciences as exemplars of an exacting experimental method, but he was certainly not ‘scientific’ in the sense of limiting experimental method to the sciences narrowly construed or reducing knowledge solely to what is garnered by means of the natural sciences.” (102) The chapter’s explanation of truth and warranted assertability are solid, and ably defend Dewey against charges of trivial expedience or narrow relativism by examining the means-ends continuum which must be understood as a key differentiator of Dewey’s approach. Satisfyingly, the chapter returns to Rorty and the present potentialities Dewey holds for analytic philosophy of language and science.

Chapter 4 takes us into ethics, a natural next step after the coverage of experience, situations, inquiry, and the overall pragmatic and provisional nature of concepts. Fesmire sets expectations for Dewey’s ethics early on, explaining that while the theory offers “no explicit guidance for many contemporary problems” it provides something more valuable, namely an approach to *doing* ethics “that is more sensitive to situational facts.” (125) This approach, as with metaphysics and epistemology, reconstructs traditional and “competing blanket principles of ethical theory so that they could be better used as deliberative tools to help us deal reflectively with distinctive factors of situations.” (125) Part of Dewey’s approach includes “a theory of character as inherently social and historical, . . . a theory of moral deliberation as fundamentally imaginative, and . . . a democratic moral ideal informed by aesthetic values.” (125) Again, with ease and enjoyable detail, the chapter applies Dewey’s theoretical turns to contemporary issues like animal-welfare and hunting. Such examples show readers *how* traditional theories’ monocausal approach to problem solving can sabotage their ability to address real problems. The chapter also does a good job of explaining Dewey’s rejection (affirmed and echoed by later neopragmatist Hilary Putnam) of the fact/value dichotomy before moving on to further discussion of the imagination (a subject of an earlier book by Fesmire). While crucially important in ethics, imagination must be understood as “an essential function of human interaction” for *everyone*: “the artist, the moral decision-maker, the scientist, the student.” (131) The chapter finishes with a review of Dewey’s view of theory’s general purpose in ethics and his conception of character as rooted in sociality.

Chapter 5 extends ethics into the wider social, political, and educational realms. It explains Dewey’s conception of democracy by connecting it to both experimentalism and an expanded individualism (initially explained in chapter 4). These amount to what Dewey called a “renascent liberalism,” one focused on the reconstruction of society’s main institutions to advance both economic and social justice. Dewey’s view constitutes, as Fesmire puts it, “a radicalism for grown-ups, those with the courage and patience to secure the ‘democratic means to achieve

our democratic ends.” (164) A welcome discussion of Dewey’s views as they specifically apply to economic theories provides an extended opportunity to examine Dewey’s criticism of laissez-faire liberalism—replete with a contemporary illustration, the social resource of health care. The chapter segues nicely from politics to education via the mediating notion of democracy as “conversation,” which allows tie-ins with the intellectual roots present at the founding of America’s democracy. Summaries of Dewey’s educational views are nicely done, benefitting by two organizing foci: (a) the choice faced by American schools between democratic vs. industrial education, and (b) the opposing views of conservatives and progressives regarding how to view the nature of children’s interest and motivation. Dewey’s synthesis of his political, psychological, and philosophical views can be seen in his pedagogy, which Fesmire explains using a contemporary (2014) example, the Edible Schoolyard project at the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California. (182)

Chapter 6’s combination of “aesthetics” and “technology” is genuinely bold and innovative. And like any great idea, it seems obvious after you think about it for a little while! This clever juxtaposition is unified by the basic idea that society has tremendous power to influence both the rhythm and quality of our daily experience, and that it does this, in no small part, through the arts and technology. Daily experience, Dewey worried, was quickly becoming fragmented, harried, and anesthetic: “Dewey held that the greatest problem of modern techno-industrial civilizations is the need to reconcile scientific–technological attitudes with aesthetic ones.” (189) For Fesmire, the aesthetic is *key* because the “unifying pulse” of Dewey’s philosophy is “consummatory experience.” It is the main focus of the chapter, and after explaining it, Fesmire goes on to show why it is important for Dewey’s view of moral intelligence and his philosophy of technology (which also includes, for Dewey, scientific inquiry as well). What many underestimate about aesthetics in Dewey is that it is actually crucial to understanding not only art (and other creative expressions of culture) but inquiry (or “epistemology”) as well. “It is because Dewey took art as the prototype for *an* experience that he preferred to speak of inquiry as an art. . . .an operative intellectual tool.” (193) This tool, like paradigmatic aesthetic experiences, “follows the generic pattern of development toward consummation” and “can be valued and enjoyed for itself.” (194) The chapter does a fine job of connecting aesthetics back to everyday (including moral) life, as well as seeing how scientific and technological activities are optimized when they embody the aesthetic without ambivalence. “The physicist produces the equation through the same general developmental process that characterizes the artist’s production of the painting. The scientific-intellectual and the aesthetic are distinct as lived experiences, but they are continuous with each other. Scientific-intellectual life and

emotional life do not stand aloof from each other as inherently isolated kinds of psychological experience.” (195) The underlying metaphysical reason explaining these continuities (between science and art, emotion and intellection), for Dewey, is the fact that *all* experience has a qualitative, tonal nature: “All meaning, whether linguistic or affective, is dependent upon this qualitative field, which suffuses and differentiates experience.” (207) Or, as Dewey put it, “The gist of the matter is that the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality, is the background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking.” (LW 5:262; in Fesmire, 207)

Chapter 7, on religious philosophy, is the last of the central, thematic chapters dealing with Dewey’s main philosophical foci. It is the shortest of the central chapters. It summarizes Dewey’s views succinctly and links them to earlier chapters, especially by connecting religious experience with (a) the human need for meaningful consummations and (b) Dewey’s larger purpose of defeating the obstacles to such experience—where defeating such obstacles requires *intelligence*: inquiry informed by imagination and compassion set into a democratic political and educational setting. Again, Dewey’s views are put in contemporary play by relating them to a contemporary tensions which Dewey also faced—between dogmatic (and sectarian) theism and militant atheism.

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Peirce: 5 Questions

Copenhagen, Denmark: Automatic Press / VIP, 2014, v + 296 pages

Over thirty volumes in the “5 Questions” series have appeared. Each publication gives a contemporary picture of the state of studies within a specific area. This volume on Peirce studies is no different. The volume contains answers to the questions by thirty-five Peirce scholars (many, many more could have been included). My only minor criticism of the volume is that I would have liked to have seen some additional