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*The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent.* Victor Kestenbaum, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. 261pp.

Barely four years after his controversial appointment at Union Theological Seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr published *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), which opened with a broadside against John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey had joined the Columbia faculty in 1904, and three decades later had become the chief academic spokesman for American liberalism. Over the course of one of the longest philosophical careers on record, Dewey would manage to address nearly every major philosophical issue of his time. By 1929 he had also become something of a spokesman for his own culture—though to a lesser extent than his contemporary, the liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). (This places Dewey in roughly the same general relation to Niebuhr as Harnack had to Karl Barth.)

Dewey’s relation to mainstream culture was complicated. He was the most influential theorist for the progressive education movement, which was on the rise at that time. Yet, he was also a socialist who worked against Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, whose star was of course rising even faster. Dewey’s relation to later philosophical developments is no less complex. He had anticipated major aspects of the postmodern turn in philosophy while both missing almost entirely its now famous “linguistic turn” and never recanting his allegiance to the liberal idea of progress.

Dewey produced academic work in philosophy in a style much more accessible than it has since become. This common touch in philosophy is reflected in his conviction that everyday experience could be mined for insights into vast untapped human potentiality, which gets symbolized for Dewey in both the aesthetic and the religious realm. This alone could make him a card-carrying liberal today. In *A Common Faith* (1934) he wrote that “religious” experience “may be taken toward any object and every proposed end or ideal.” Here “experience” carries many of the features of Schleiermacher’s notion of “consciousness.” This may seem surprising, since there are only four indexed references to Schleiermacher in the entire known corpus of Dewey’s writings. But the final reference, though brief, is significant. Toward the end of *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey remarks that when it comes to religious experience, “no one can deny that the sense of dependence, insisted upon, for example, by Schleiermacher, comes close to the heart of the matter.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Dewey himself was a (lapsed) Congregationalist, no less a product of Calvin than the “father of modern theology” had been.

Victor Kestenbaum, already well-known for his *Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey* (1977)—of which the discussions in this new book are an extension and revision—regards Dewey as virtually molded out of his early training in Kant and Hegel. Dewey’s roots are thus the same as Schleiermacher’s. Kestenbaum writes, “Dewey did not ‘break with’ or reject idealism. He recast it” (3). And one of the theses of this book is that this recasting has actually obscured the continuation of philosophical idealism in the mature Dewey.

However, *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal* seeks to be more than an historical and interpretive study of Dewey. The essays here are not even restricted to Dewey, “although almost all are deeply inspired by him” (8): they include some extended treatment of Gadamer, Michael Oakshott, John Findlay, and Wallace Stevens. Kestenbaum wants to extract one key unappreciated insight from Dewey, and then carry it beyond strictly Deweyan issues. Specifically, not only does Dewey’s philosophy have “an important place for the ideal, intangible, and transcendent” (1), Kestenbaum thinks that he himself has a clearer sense than Dewey did for “the intangibility of ideal meanings.” I think this *is* as important a point as Kestenbaum makes it. Here is indeed a concept that “focuses some of the most difficult, interesting, and enduring issues in . . . empirical and theoretical study” (4).

It’s worth noticing that this book is really guided by two aims that are not always easily combined. One aim seeks to determine what Dewey really meant, the other tries to formulate what Dewey really should have meant, and the aim here is to bridge the two. Kestenbaum is refreshingly up front about this, when he admits that “much of Dewey cannot survive such a translation project” (8). Fortunately, this does not mean that some of the essentials of Dewey’s project cannot be preserved and expanded, as Kestenbaum has done here. For example, Dewey’s view of the self sought to strike a balance between “blind impulse” and “blind routine.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He sees the healthy, integrated self as a functional, dynamically self-adjusting unit guided by “qualitative thought”[[3]](#footnote-3)—i.e., by phenomenological features that direct us toward a situation’s “consummation.” A Calvinist might recognize this as a secularized version of Christian freedom. Commentators, however, are more often struck only by Dewey’s secularism, and this is no doubt because the diminished Calvinism of Dewey’s day, which had been filtered through American Puritanism, was the most entrenched cultural obstacle to Dewey’s liberalism. Though Kestenbaum makes no explicit reference to Dewey’s implicit Calvinism, one of the virtues of his book is its attempt to set Dewey within a religious framework.

To capture this, Kestenbaum is seeking to re-introduce into mainstream pragmatism the non-vacuous category of “transcendence.” This is a bold move on several fronts, especially for a Deweyan. It is not, as Kestenbaum points out, drawn from the standard view of Dewey. Most commentators have taken Dewey, by his middle period (through 1924 or so), to have abandoned idealism in favor of a fallibilistic instrumentalism, which takes human conduct to be a function of rather tightly drawn, but always revisable, inductive relations between empirically specified means and ends. This emphasizes “tangibles” that (if we follow the point out logically) have to fit into a probability calculus for practical decision-making. On this standard reading, Dewey has more affinity with Logical Positivism than with German or British Idealism, as evidenced (for example) by the fact that his important essay *The Theory of Valuation* (1938) first appeared in *The Foundation of the Unity of Science,* undertaken by members of the Vienna Circle.

In his first chapter, which gives a good overall synopsis of his project, Kestenbaum surveys the majority and minority report on the question of Deweyan interpretation, and places himself squarely on the side of the minority who find more than just a light literary metaphor in Dewey’s frequent use of a term like “spirit.” *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal* aims to show how, for a Deweyan, human thought is more than just an instrument in the service of the tangible objectives—the concrete “ends-in-view”—of ordinary experience. Kestenbaum’s emphasis on the phenomenological and religious side of Dewey keeps the discussion right where it should be.

“Intelligence” for Dewey was a real feature of human nature, at least in its potentiality to exercise critical control over a wide range of likely situations.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is grounded in the phenomenology of lived experience, which Kestenbaum (much to his credit) never discounted, even in the face of the now standard neopragmatist interpretation of Richard Rorty. Kestenbaum’s earlier work had interpreted Dewey through the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal* continues on a similar hermeneutical track. As humans, we idealize our future in details not “tangible” to us—i.e., not drawn from the world as we actually know it to be. Faith in this human future is what virtually defines a liberal of Dewey’s era, and this is what has made theological anthropology appealing to religious liberals. But this is largely faith in things unseen. Christians live in hope and continue the task of reconciliation, either by community work or personal witness. Here and there they do see some evidence of this new-born future human world, like the first fruits of the post-millenarian vision that inspired the old doctrine of progress. It has not always been kept in mind that this is not an ideal we can control by instrumental reason. It is an ideal that, as Kestenbaum says, “is not an intention, but . . . does prescribe the intentions which steady it in consciousness and which, through action, fulfill it in experience” (37).

A reader of this book would do well to remember that Dewey begins his *Quest for Certainty* (1929) with the following sentence: “Man who lives in a world of hazards is compelled to seek for security”—which a Calvinist might recognize as a secularized version of the doctrine of God’s Sovereignty. Dewey accomplishes this secularization not by abandoning the concerns of spirit, but by focusing on the spiritual side of the human. What Dewey did and Kestenbaum implicitly does is what Schleiermacher had done—which is to work from the side of the Calvinist tradition that begins with self-knowledge. To this, Kestenbaum adds the idea that self-knowledge can never be gained at the purely instrumental level. The extent to which self-inquiry has an ulterior purpose is the extent to which we are opaque to ourselves, no better able to penetrate those operative motives than the human eye is able to gaze directly at the instrument of its own sight.

If all this is right, then Dewey seems to have more interesting things to say about religious life than one might suppose just from his rather thin *A Common Faith* (1934), which is his only extended treatment of the topic. The fact that Dewey wrote so little about the subject can perhaps be explained partly by the fact that its illumination requires some of the tools from formal logic and linguistic analysis that had passed by Dewey. The fact that Kestenbaum does not directly address these formal matters does not detract from the book’s interest nor from its importance, and actually makes the reading more pleasurable.

There are still some quibbles to be made about some of Kestenbaum’s own assumptions. Many religious liberals have tended to see spiritual matters in terms of the activation or creation of natural capacities, and for this reason have frequently been content to be “naturalists.” Kestenbaum is wary of this characterization—he fears being “hemmed in” by “the natural” (24). I think this may be a confusion on Kestenbaum’s part (though this might really be more a matter of semantics than substance). I still do not see why a sophisticated naturalism cannot treat guidance by the phenomenology of idealized possibilities to be a purely natural fact.[[5]](#footnote-5) But one can disagree with Kestenbaum’s rejection of naturalism without failing to see the value and originality of this book, which deserves to be read widely and carefully.

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1. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works: 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Dewey, *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. I: 1925, *Experience and Nature* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 1981), 270. For an extended discussion of this, see David Ilett Seiple, "John Dewey and the Aesthetics of Moral Intelligence" (Ph. D. diss., Dept of Philosophy, Columbia, 1993), 60ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," 1930, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 5: 1929-1930 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 243-62. See also D. Seiple, “Experience and the Organic Unity of Artworks” in Michael Kelly, *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (first edition), 28-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See David I. Seiple, "DEWEY, JOHN: Experience and the Organic Unity of Artworks," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, vol. 2 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, the defense of naturalism in Nathan Tierney, "The Evolutionary Self in Christian and Philosophical Perspectives," in *Ethics in the World Religions*, ed. Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, The Library of Global Ethics and Religion, vol. 3 (Oxford and New York: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 137-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)