

# Introduction

## *Passing Dewey By?*

WILLIAM J. GAVIN

While some philosophers write for eternity, others are more humble, or perhaps more anticipatory, offering outlooks which stem from particular contexts. For the latter group of thinkers, any sense of becoming timeless stems from enduring *through* time rather than transcending it. One of the latter thinkers is John Dewey, whose work consistently alluded to and affirmed the importance of context. Contextualism is the opposite of certainty, that is, of the assumption that an apodictic point of view exists, or is even desirable. In opposition, Dewey has told us that “the most pervasive fallacy of philosophic thinking goes back to neglect of context.”<sup>1</sup>

Taking this statement seriously requires several things on our part. By far the most important of these is realizing that contexts by their very nature are limited, and therefore in some sense and at some time they change and so must be “passed by.” Applying this observation to the works of Dewey himself forces us to ask when, and in what sense, he should be passed by. To be sure, if done at all, this task should be approached respectfully, for Dewey’s work remains at the pinnacle of the American tradition in philosophy. Still, Dewey himself would encourage us to take on this task; failure to do so would result in pragmatism degenerating into a form of antiquarianism, that is, a study of the past without realizing that the future will be different. In contrast, Dewey was constantly about the task of telling us how things have changed, for example, in a post-Darwinian universe. Going further, Dewey is best viewed as a social reformer, and his philosophy, as social criticism, is designed to be passed by, that is, to lead to some form of action. Philosophy for Dewey is mimetic; it reflects and perfects the concerns of a

community, albeit it in a critical manner. It is “formed,” and then it is “formative.” “The distinctive office, problems, and subject matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life in which a given form of philosophy arises, and . . . accordingly, its specific problems vary with the changes in human life that are always going on and that at times constitute a crisis and a turning point in human history” (MW 12:256). Once again, such a stance places upon the reader the responsibility of not letting Dewey’s work exist merely as “text,” but rather of undertaking the task of uncovering how the text relates to contemporary *contexts* in the new millennium.

A comparison here may perhaps be enlightening. At the end of book one of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra says: “Many die too late, and a few die too early. The doctrine still sounds strange: ‘Die at the right time!’”<sup>2</sup> This is a somewhat tricky matter; no bell goes off to let one know just when the right time has arrived. In theory we know what characterizes the right time, i.e., when your death can function as a “spur and a promise to the survivors.”<sup>3</sup> On the face of it, Zarathustra has given his gift (of uneasiness) to his disciples, and asked them to love the earth in its flawed entirety. Now it is time for him to go: “verily Zarathustra had a goal; he threw his ball: now you, my friends, are the heirs of my goal; to you I throw my golden ball.”<sup>4</sup> But having said as much Zarathustra does not leave, asking his disciples to “forgive me for that.”<sup>5</sup> His nondeparture forces the reader into reflection, thus insuring that s/he too is made uneasy. Zarathustra has urged his disciples to “pass him by.” But as the text “progresses” it becomes more and more difficult to accomplish this task. For Zarathustra himself does not stand still long enough to be passed by, as he continues to take upon himself the seemingly impossible task of becoming the *Übermensch*, and affirming eternal recurrence, a task initially thought to be reserved for his successors. Hence the significance of the book’s subtitle: “A Book for All and None.”<sup>6</sup>

Dewey’s texts, like Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, should be viewed as a spur or a prod. This is but another version of the pragmatic stance which stresses the interpenetration of thought and action. The thoughts and criticisms contained in Dewey’s works are not meant merely to be studied, though that of course is necessary. The text is also meant to be directive in nature. But in order to do so the texts must tell a story, a narrative. Dewey is constantly telling the reader the tale of how we got from “there” to “here”—in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and in “The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy,” for example. By the time of Dewey’s “Reconstruction As Seen Twenty-Five Years Later,” written as a new Introduction to *Reconstruction in Philosophy* in the 1940s, the story has become more urgent, and Dewey calls for the reconstruction *of* philosophy rather than merely reconstruction *in* philosophy, saying that “the need for

reconstruction is vastly more urgent than when the book was composed” (MW 12:256). In other words, the *context* has changed.

There is a sense in which we can feel urged to pass Dewey by, analogous to that urged by Zarathustra. With Nietzsche this sense becomes more formidable as it becomes apparent that Zarathustra’s disciples will not be able to pass him by, and that he himself is being asked to become the over[wo]man. Analogously, it can seem easy and somewhat straightforward to suggest that Dewey be passed by; but doing so may prove more difficult than initially appeared to be the case. For Dewey himself anticipated and took on, to a remarkable degree, many of the issues now being debated in contemporary philosophy. Dewey, like Zarathustra, did not stand still, waiting passively to be “passed by” by a group of successors. Though in a sense he urged his followers to surpass him for good pedagogical reasons, Dewey also was remarkably anticipatory of some of the new “problems”<sup>7</sup> on the horizon of the new millennium.

In the following essays several Dewey scholars take up the issue of just how, and to what extent, his work is to be “passed by.”

For one set of authors, Dewey’s contextualism remains intact, requiring more to be amended than radically changed. Thus, in “Advancing American Philosophy: Pragmatism and Philosophical Scholarship,” James Campbell considers the pragmatic meaning of philosophical scholarship at the present time, a time when many suggest that we are *preserving* rather than *advancing* American philosophy. Campbell begins with a formulation of this issue, and then compares efforts to advance American philosophy with what might be done to advance the American classical musical tradition. In a final section he “advances” matters significantly, by showing how a Deweyan approach might be effectively utilized in dealing with the contemporary issue of abortion. In “Dewey’s Limited Shelf Life: A Consumer Warning,” Michael Eldridge argues that Dewey’s most significant contribution is his advocacy of “social intelligence.” Using the latter, however, requires that we be sensitive to particular contexts. As a specific example of his point here, Eldridge argues that we not unqualifiedly accept an endorsement of unions in all situations—or assume that Dewey himself would do so in the context of the new millennium. In “New Directions and Uses in the Reconstruction of Dewey’s Ethics,” Gregory Pappas argues that, although we do not find an ethical theory *per se* in Dewey’s writings, nonetheless there are new functions for an ethical theory which are not at odds with Dewey’s criticism of traditional ethical theory. Rather, there is available from Dewey an alternative position which lies *between* divorcing ethical theory completely from moral practice, and on the other side, the pretensions of some normative ethical theories to dictate our moral conduct in a noncontextual manner. In “Contexts Vibrant and Contexts Souring in

Dewey's Philosophy," William Gavin notes that neglect of contexts and contextualism was deemed "the most pervasive fallacy in philosophic thinking" by Dewey. Contexts should be "fat" rather than "thin," offering a rich naturalism. Going further, contexts can go wrong or "sour" in several ways: by reducing the *context* to the text alone; by turning interaction into control or domination; by replacing the environment of interaction with one of interacting with narcissistic "pseudo-events"; and by not realizing that the *content* of a *context* has changed.

For a second group of authors, Dewey's work needs significant revision if he is to be relevant in the new millennium. Thus in "As Dewey Was Hegelian, So We Should Be Deweyan," Ray Boisvert faults Dewey's attempt to extend the method of the physical sciences to politics, education, and morals. While such a goal may have been comprehensible at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is not feasible in contexts confronted with "AIDS-type" issues. Dewey's attempt to universalize scientific method overgeneralizes from the specificity of different contexts and, going further, it immerses him in a "fresh start" view, that is, a new approach through science, which should be avoided. Dewey still has much to offer however, in the areas of "lived experience" and in his view of mediation which assumes "co-respondence" as primordial. In "(Re)construction Zone: Beware of Falling Statues," Shannon Sullivan argues that Dewey neglected the issues of race and racism in his philosophy. This, for Sullivan, is more than a mere gap or hole in his thought, for it perpetuates the conceptual and theoretical "whiteness" of his philosophy. Nonetheless, some resources do exist in Dewey's pragmatism which can be of assistance in going beyond it on the matter of race. The most powerful of these is "habit," understood as an organism's predisposition to transact with its physical, social, political and natural worlds in particular ways. In "Between Being and Emptiness: Toward an Eco-Ontology of Inhabitation," Tom Alexander argues that the thought of John Dewey is of exceptional value in relocating the quest for "knowledge" back where it belongs, that is, within the context of the general issue of "wisdom." Dewey dominates the twentieth century as the only thinker to articulate an eco-ontology compatible with democracy. Alexander offers a marriage of Dewey with the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, especially as refined by Nagarjuna.

Still a third group of authors included here argues that we should not be overhasty in passing Dewey by, for he has much to offer that has still, even as we enter the new millennium, gone unnoticed or unappreciated. Thus, in "On Passing Dewey By: The New Millennium and the Climate of Pluralism," Sandra Rosenthal argues that Dewey's philosophy and his understanding of self offer a more useful balance of community and pluralism than do the more exclusive alternatives put forward by Alasdair

MacIntyre, John Rawls, and Richard Rorty. In contrast to Dewey, each of the latter philosophers offers a view of the self which seems unable to exercise its anointed community task. In “Pressing Dewey’s Advantage,” Joseph Margolis shows how the work of Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam tend to cancel each other out. Each is a decisive critique of the other’s particular form of relativism without, however, ever showing how relativism might be formulated in a coherent and defensible manner. In contrast, Margolis suggests that a coherent account of constructive relativism can be offered, one which is quite compatible with Dewey’s realism stemming from *Experience and Nature*. In “Improving Life,” John Lachs shows how Dewey’s idea of “‘means-end’ integrated actions” promises permanent improvements to the human condition. Rather than dispensing with undesired labor for a few people only as in, for example, Aristotle and Hegel, Dewey offers a strategy that is, in general, universally available. Rather than offering attitudinal change as in the Stoics, Dewey presents a way of objectively reconstructing our relations with our activities. But Lachs charges that Dewey’s own account can offer only moderate progress, enabling us to achieve some, but by no means all, of the little improvements of which the human being is capable. In opposition, he suggests that we retain the “utopian” ideal that there are activities every element of which is rich in consequences and rewarding in experience. Finally, in “In the Wake of Darwin,” Vincent Colapietro argues that Dewey is best viewed as a “critical traditionalist” who constantly emphasized the need for a pluralistic approach to the past. He turns to those occasions when Dewey mourned the loss of colleagues, such as James, Mead and Hocking, by reenacting the ritual of recollection, in order to emphasize that unbearable loss is oftentimes something that must be “worked” through. Dewey is indeed a “spur” for Colapietro, that is, he is a thinker who invites and demands further critical reflection, but one whose work must be married to Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche as we move into the future.

Hopefully, the “pragmatic upshot” of this pluralistic tapestry of approaches is a rich narrative—one indicating both where the context has changed, and also what needs to be preserved and nurtured in Dewey as we advance into the future.

#### NOTES

1. John Dewey, “Context and Thought” (LW 6:5). All references to Dewey’s work in this volume are to the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953* edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969–91), and published as *The*

*Early Works: 1881–1898* (EW); *The Middle Works, 1899–1924* (MW); and *The Later Works, 1925–1953* (LW). These designations are followed by volume and page number. Quotations in this section are cited from *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953: The Electronic Edition*, edited by Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, Va.: IntelLex Corporation, 1996).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 183.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 186.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 103.

7. Though Dewey was perhaps too ready to conceive every “situation” as at least potentially “problematic” in character. On the important difference between “having a problem” and “having trouble,” see John McDermott, Introduction, *William and Henry James, Selected Letters*, ed. Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), xxii.