Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism

Hickman, Larry A.

Published by Fordham University Press

Hickman, Larry A.
Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism: Lessons from John Dewey.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63578
This essay builds on the material presented in the preceding chapter, in which I argued that the field naturalism of Aldo Leopold and the environmental naturalism of John Dewey have a great deal in common and that Dewey’s Pragmatism can broaden our understanding of Leopold’s life and legacy. In this chapter I shall discuss the relevance of Dewey’s ideas to more recent philosophical debates among environmental philosophers such as Bryan Norton, Holmes Rolston III, J. Baird Callicott, and Michael Zimmerman.

As I have already indicated, Dewey was one of the first philosophers to advance a rigorous and broad philosophical critique of technological culture. He was also an evolutionary naturalist who rejected what he regarded as the extremes of scientific realism and romantic idealizations of nature.

Dewey advanced his critique of technology on two fronts. On the first front he addressed readers of diverse types in his role as a public
intellectual. He closely followed developments within the technosciences and interpreted their social, political, educational, and religious consequences. He was one of the first major philosophers to do this in a systematic way, and his efforts met with considerable success. On the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, the New York Times hailed him as “America’s Philosopher.”

On the second front he addressed his professional colleagues in his role as a technical philosopher. He reworked the tools he had acquired from his study of the history of philosophy—especially its Greek and Enlightenment phases—to develop a highly sophisticated critique of technology. (For an extended account of this aspect of his work see chapter 7.)

Dewey thought that technology needed to be investigated on several levels. On the first level are the tools, machines, software, and other artifacts that are invented and used by ordinary people, especially by craftsmen and engineers. On a more general level is the technological milieu that furnishes the leading metaphors that help us as a culture define our place and time with respect to other milieux. On this level the character of our particular historical context is influenced not only by the crafts and engineering, but also by the theoretical sciences, historiography, jurisprudence, and the arts, among others. On a still more general level is what Dewey called “the general method of intelligence.” This is a general method of inquiry or problem-solving that draws on the methods of the various disciplines just mentioned and feeds back into them. At this most general level, technology may be characterized as the invention, development, and cognitive deployment of tools and other artifacts, brought to bear on raw materials and intermediate stock parts, with a view to the solution of perceived problems. At this level, more than any other, it becomes apparent that technology involves tools and artifacts that are intangible as well as those that are tangible.

Since this last point has been the source of some confusion, I offer two comments by way of clarification. First, Dewey thought that technology at its most general level is pervasive, but not ubiquitous. Since technology has to do only with deliberation, and since most of
human life involves behavior that is habitual or otherwise unreflective, the domain of the nontechnological is much larger than the domain of the technological. Second, the most general level of technology is intimately related to philosophy. There are two reasons for this. First, Dewey thought that philosophy, as a generalized criticism of criticisms, functions as a kind of “liaison officer” with respect to the various non-philosophical disciplines. It functions as a kind of go-between and translator. It supports their interaction with one another. Second, the theory of this most general level of technology—inquiry into inquiry—Dewey identified as logic (for more on this subject, see chapter 12).

Put somewhat differently, we might say that Dewey saw, and attempted to make clear to his readers in the philosophical community, the continuities between the kind of thinking that invents the telephone and builds bridges and the kind of thinking that solves problems in ethics and attempts to think about the generic traits of being. Even more important, he recognized that in order to solve the problems generated by our technologies in particular, and by our attitudes toward our technological milieu in general, then we must develop a specialized set of techniques—which he called technology in its most generalized sense. He thus championed a new way of thinking about traditional philosophical problems designed to take account of the pushes and pulls of life in industrial democracies. This would be a new set of tools and techniques designed especially to deal with the problems of technology-as-culture. And it would be self-consciously analytical and self-corrective.

Why did Dewey risk the confusion that would be the inevitable result of referring to each of these different levels of concern as “technology”? I believe he did so for two reasons. First, he was keen to demonstrate his plans for healing the splits and discontinuities within experience that he thought Greek philosophy bequeathed us and early modern philosophy exacerbated. He thought these problems resulted from a failure to treat knowing as an affair of construction and reconstruction. Second, he thought that technology—as the invention, development, and cognitive deployment of problem-solving tools and
other artifacts—goes all the way back in the history of human self-consciousness; all the way forward in terms of its prospects; all the way down within quotidian or everyday life; and all the way up in terms of the abstractions we construct and utilize in our attempts to understand culture in a comprehensive fashion. This, in fact, is a fair statement of his evolutionary naturalism as it pertains to the arena of human life.

As a public intellectual, Dewey saw his task as the invention and development of some of the tools we will need to tune up the workings of quotidian life in technological cultures. As a technical philosopher, he saw his task as the invention of new tools for thinking about technology in a more general sense, that is, for subjecting our critiques of everyday affairs to a metacritique. In the end, as I have already indicated, he regarded philosophy as the discipline that does just this kind of work, and he referred to it as “a criticism of criticisms” (LW 1.298).

I have argued elsewhere that Dewey was the first major philosopher to write extensively about technology on these various levels. In this matter he anticipated the work of Heidegger by several decades, even though Heidegger is still widely (and erroneously) thought to have been the first to introduce the subject into mainstream philosophical discourse.

Dewey sometimes referred to his most general criticism of technology—his criticism of criticism—as “Instrumentalism.” Since this has been the occasion for some misunderstanding, it would probably be better if we referred to it as “Pragmatic Instrumentalism” in order to differentiate it from the kind of vulgar opportunism that Langdon Winner has appropriately labeled “straight-line instrumentalism” and that the Frankfurt School has famously treated under the heading of Zweckrationalität. Although his Pragmatic Instrumentalism rests on several interconnected theses, I want to emphasize his rejection during the 1900s of both representative and sensationalist varieties of realism, at one extreme, and both subjective and objective varieties of idealism, at the other.
Robert Westbrook has described this aspect of Dewey’s work with his usual precision: “The source of difficulty for idealists, sensationalists, and those . . . who tried vainly to synthesize transcendentalism and empiricism lay in their requirement for ‘a total contrast of thought as such to something else as such’ (SLT, 330). This, Dewey argued, was to commit a mistake by now familiar to readers of his work: the erection of functional distinctions within experience into distinct entities.” Dewey thought that this mistake had been a major feature of the history of philosophy. That is why he called it “the philosophic fallacy.”

The commission of the philosophic fallacy was in Dewey’s view much more than simply a matter of concern for technical philosophers. He thought it an important move in a high-stakes game because it involved practical consequences: the error, as he put it, had led philosophers to state “the terms upon which thought and being transact business in a way so totally alien to concrete experience that it creates a problem which can be discussed only in terms of itself—not in terms of the conduct of life” (MW 2.308). What Dewey wanted to substitute for these traditional epistemologies—realistic as well as idealistic—was a new kind of inquiry or logic that would be a “natural history of thinking as a life-process having its own generating antecedents and stimuli, its own states and career, and its own specific objective or limit” (MW 2.309).

The consequences of Dewey’s insights for understanding technology were, and remain, considerable. He was keen to reject what he regarded as two extreme positions, both of which involve an element of truth, but both of which are incomplete in the form in which they are usually advanced. The first was scientific realism, with its emphasis on representationally given facts, its reliance on a correspondence theory of truth, and its assumption of a split between facts and values that favors facts. The second was idealism, which included the so-called “humanistic” or “spiritual” critique of scientific technology, with its emphasis on values grounded elsewhere than an experienced world, its reliance on a coherence theory of truth, and its assumption of a split between facts and values that favors values.
Dewey thought that there was a reasonable way out of this unhappy stand-off. He invited us to notice that the general method of intelligence (or the set of techniques that involves a critique of critiques) is reducible neither to attempts to “dominate” an objective world that exists independently of our experience, effected by means of a series of “adaptations” of it, nor to attempts to “accommodate” the subject to a set of values which also exist in some region beyond what we are able to locate and secure through processes of inquiry.

The failure of both of these programs—realist and idealist alike—was in his view a result of their lack of attention to the ways in which facts and values, ends and means, and intrinsic and instrumental goods are related in cases of actual deliberation. In his view, the extreme positions made one-sided attempts either to elevate means over ends, as scientific realist accounts of nonhuman nature often do, or to elevate ends over means, as idealist accounts often do.

Dewey simply bypassed the chasm this debate had opened. He proposed we recognize that the two sides—the one that emphasizes facts and the one that emphasizes values—are at bottom connected as phases or moments within inquiry. Whereas both facts (as facts-of-a-case) and values (as ideals, or ends-in-view) are essential components of problem-solving activities, realism errs when it attempts to make a fact into something independent that exists prior to its being experienced as a fact-of-a-case in the context of discriminative inquiry. And idealism commits a similar error when it attempts to make a value into something independent that exists outside of and apart from the ideals (ends-in-view) that arise from active discrimination of the features of our lived experience.

Dewey called our attention to the following readily observable situation: since we human beings are reflectively conscious organisms who live forward into the future, we continually engage in activities that involve various techniques—we plan, resolve, construct, and reconstruct. These activities are central features of human affairs, and each of them involves the formulation and testing of both reals (as either felt preferences or selected data to be organized into facts-of-a-case) and values or ideals (as ends-in-view to be tested with reference to the facts-of-a-particular-case).
In essence, Dewey was arguing that even the modernist epistemologies which attempt to provide ontological descriptions or taxonomies that divide portions of our experience into what is “external” and “internal” are themselves artifacts: the product of certain techniques. They are the consequences of inquiry, not its antecedents. Inquiry is thus a technological enterprise because it involves techniques: the invention, development, and cognitive deployment of tools and other artifacts (such as rules of inference), brought to bear on raw materials (such as data) and intermediate stock parts (such as the results of previous inquiries), to resolve and reconstruct situations which are perceived as problematic. Inquiry is a technique for producing new outcomes, including new habits of action.

This view of technology as critique of critiques—as a method of experimentation, resolution, and reconstruction—turns out to have some interesting consequences for environmental philosophy, and especially for our understanding of nature. Dewey argued that once unreflectively perceived events and relations begin to be ordered and reconstructed into facts-of-a-case, and once those facts-of-a-case are checked against ends-in-view and consequently transformed in ways that result in new knowledge, then new artifacts have ipso facto been produced. And since inquiry always involves broadened significance, it has dimensions that are social as well as individual. Its artifacts have meaning and authority within our cultural milieu.

When the delights of unreflectively experienced nonhuman nature, for example, or what in the previous chapter I called nature-as-nature, enter into deliberation as facts-of-a-case, then they take on the quality of cultural artifacts. Such artifacts are constructed by myriad culturally based deliberative enterprises including religion, science, industry, cinema, literature, and philosophy, to name but a few. Nature-as-nature relinquishes its status as immediately and evanescently enjoyed and becomes more secure and sharply defined. It becomes a construction, an artifact, we do well to recognize as nature-as-culture.

One important consequence of this view is that value is no longer understood as either what is immediately experienced as valued or
what is posited as an ideal end-in-view, but as what has been experimentally ascertained and secured as valuable. What is experimentally determined to be valuable is constructed from the inside of what Dewey called deliberative situations, or what some have described in more general terms as deliberation within a “lifeworld.” What is valuable thus does not intrude into a situation ready-made from some source external to the deliberative situation, whether that source be a neutral and determinate body of empirically given facts as posited by scientific realists, or freestanding and self-certifying values located in some uncognized or uncognizable domain as posited by idealists.

Another important consequence of this view is that “intrinsic value” and “instrumental value” come to be understood as relative terms, just as “means” and “ends” are relative terms. Something valued as “intrinsic” is just, Dewey reminds us, what “occupies a particular place in life; it serves its own end, which cannot be supplied by a substitute. There is no question of comparative value, and hence none of valuation” (MW 9.247–48).

But of course things that are valued as intrinsic in one situation may, in a new situation, be seen as incompatible with other intrinsic things. And things that are intrinsic for one person or group may be instrumental for another. Such conflicted situations call for choices, and choices call for deliberation. What was accepted as an intrinsic good in one situation may become the subject of analysis in another. We are then faced with the necessity of examining the object or event in question in order to determine its instrumental value for bringing about the good of that new situation.

In sum, Dewey was reminding us that some things are unreflectively valued, either because they are just immediately enjoyed in the absence of any inquiry at all (for example, an evening of food and wine with friends), or because they have been deemed to have intrinsic value—that they are irreplaceable or invaluable—on the basis of some prior sequence of inquiry (as is the case with human infants and certain nonhuman species) and their value is therefore no longer questioned. But when there is a clash of values, inquiry is called for. Arguments about action to be taken with respect to stands of trees,
nonhuman animal species, and sometimes even human infants involve real conflicts for which there is usually no facile solution. In each situation, deliberation must proceed with care. Facts-of-the-case must be determined, ends-in-view must be considered, and intelligent reconstruction must be undertaken.

Something that is regarded as intrinsically good in one situation or to one inquirer may be instrumentally good—“good for”—in another situation or to another inquirer. We then use the techniques of intelligent criticism of our concepts and other tools, or what Dewey also called technology, to make such determinations: we use various types of tools in the resolution and reconstruction of situations which present value conflicts. The aim of such situations is to produce new artifacts, that is, new situations that are balanced and harmonious. In all of this it is essential to recall that for Dewey the meanings of the terms “instrumental” and “intrinsic” are always context-sensitive.

Bryan G. Norton and J. Baird Callicott

Dewey’s treatment of these matters has some interesting applications to current debates within environmental philosophy. His views turn out to be quite similar to the views of several contemporary environmental philosophers and constitute a criticism of the views of several others. In this section I will discuss the work of two philosophers whose views are similar Dewey’s. In the next section I will discuss the work of two whose views differ from his.

In his essay, “On the Intrinsic Value of Nonhuman Species,” J. Baird Callicott distinguishes between the source of value and the locus of value. “I concede,” Callicott writes, “that, from the point of view of Scientific Naturalism the source of all value is human consciousness, but it by no means follows that the locus of all value is consciousness itself or a mode of consciousness like reason, pleasure, or knowledge.” From this he concludes that “something may be valuable only because someone values it, but it may also be valued for itself, not the sake of any subjective experience . . . it may afford the valuer.”
In order to make his view more perspicuous, Callicott strips the notion of “intrinsic value” of one common meaning, thus, we might say, distinguishing intrinsic value, or value in the sense of “for its own sake as meaningful to some reflectively conscious being,” from inherent value, or value in the sense of “in itself apart from its being meaningful to some reflectively conscious being.” “An intrinsically valuable thing,” he writes, “is valuable for its own sake, for itself, but it is not valuable in itself, i.e., completely independently of any consciousness.”

Callicott’s position in this essay is similar to Dewey’s. Both are eager to reject the subjective idealist’s claim that what we experience is only our own experience, or as Callicott puts it, the idea that “the locus of all value is consciousness itself or a mode of consciousness like reason, pleasure, or knowledge.” And both are also careful to reject the claim of the “objective” or absolute idealist, that there are things that are valuable in themselves, without qualification, apart from anyone’s reflective experience of them. Moreover, Callicott and Dewey emphasize valuing in its honorific sense as valuation, that is, as something that comes at the end of a sequence of productive activity, and that is therefore the result of deliberate choice. Callicott does this—although somewhat less robustly than Dewey—in the context of his remarks on intentionality. For his part, Dewey identifies valuation as the outcome of experimental deliberation with respect to choices among alternatives. “There is no value [in the sense of what is valuable],” Dewey writes, “save in situations where desires and the need of deliberation in order to choose are found, and yet this fact gives no excuse for regarding desire and deliberation and decision as subjective phenomena” (MW 8:35).

Callicott provides two examples of the locus of intrinsic value, as he uses the term: human infants and nonhuman species. Dewey also employs the language of location: in his view, we might say, both human infants and nonhuman species occupy “a particular place in life.” Both serve their own ends, and those ends cannot be supplied by a substitute. Moreover, “there is [normally] no question of comparative value, and hence none of valuation” (MW 9:247–48). Under
most circumstances, we neither need to ask what they are good for, nor would it be appropriate to do so: they are invaluable.

As Callicott reminds us, however, the notion of inherent value, as the value of something which is such as it is whether or not anyone ever experiences it as valuable (or meaningful), seems to be muddled from the very outset. The very idea of inherent value assumes that we can engage some putative something, located outside or beyond the range of experimental deliberation, and then say something meaningful about it.

Why should this distinction make a difference in our decisions about environmental issues? Our accounts of valuation—of what is valued versus valuable as well as what is intrinsic versus instrumental—cannot be articulated otherwise than from the perspective of our own experience as members of a human community. That is the only perspective from which we can experience things as immediately enjoyed or valued. It is also the only perspective from which we can begin to deliberate when we must test what is merely valued, or what is tentatively posited as an end-in-view, in order to ascertain whether it is also valuable. Like Dewey, but unlike some of the idealists whom I shall discuss in a moment, in this essay Callicott is chary of “detached and impersonal axiological reference point[s],” and he views his account as an antidote to the accounts of those who would “submerge the value of the present ecosystem in a temporally and spatially infinite cosmos.”

Callicott does not say in this essay, but his account implies it, that when we work outward from the human standpoint then we work from shared, constructed histories and institutions that provide platforms from which we can extend and enrich common experiences. But when we work inward from the outside, from what putatively transcends experience or is absolutely ideal with respect to common, practical interests, we often fail because of the subjectivism, the sectarianism, or the a priori considerations that taint such attempts to ground our experience.

One of the chief difficulties with working from the outside inward, of course, is that such claims as they are usually articulated are not
falsifiable. As William James reminded us, however, the “cash value” of such beliefs—the consequences they have for our behavior—are testable, provided they are based on options that are live, forced, and momentous. This in fact turns out to be what redeems certain strains of environmentalism that are grounded on religious doctrines. It is not their theology but the behavioral consequences of their theology that sustains their position.

Two problems limit the successes of such approaches. First, theological claims, because they are non-empirical, often distract attention from, even undercut, acceptable or even honorific behavioral consequences. And second, such non-empirical arguments are only effective when addressed to an audience already predisposed to accept the theological premise advanced. Arguments of this sort consequently suffer from a limited appeal that is to a great extent self-imposed.

In a more recent paper, Callicott has argued that “we base environmental ethics on our human capacity to value nonhuman natural entities for what they are—irrespective both of what they may do for us and of whether or not they can value themselves. And this we can do regardless of the nature of the object of our intentional act of intrinsic valuation as long as we think we have good reasons to value it intrinsically. We can value species (such as the Devil’s Hole pupfish), ecosystems (such as Cedar Bog Lake), the oceans, the atmosphere, the biosphere—all for what they are in themselves as well as for their utility.” It is of course intrinsic value (the value of something that is meaningful in itself to someone), as opposed to inherent value (the value of something for itself, apart from its meaningfulness to someone), that Callicott employs in the last sentence.

In a still more recent paper, however, published in 2002, Callicott seems to back off his earlier position. He appears to move nearer to the position of environmental philosophers such as Holmes Rolston III who argue from inherent value. He is particularly displeased by Pragmatic environmental philosophers such as Andrew Light and Bryan G. Norton, who, he complains, have wanted to bracket discussions of intrinsic value and get down to the nuts and bolts of environmental policy. “Pragmatist philosophers,” he writes, “now carp and
cavil against the concept of intrinsic value in nature as more nonsense on stilts." He wants to accommodate the view that it is humans who do valuing, whether instrumental or intrinsic, but adds that “lots of other forms of life can also ‘do’ a bit of valuing.” Given his defense of the various positions laid out by Rolston, however, as well as his self-description as a “pro-intrinsic-value-in-nature theorist,” and his claim that it is he and Rolston and not the Pragmatists who are doing a better job of raising the public’s consciousness of environmental conditions, it is difficult to know precisely how far he wants to push this argument. For the present purposes, however, it is enough to recall that Callicott’s earlier work honors a distinction—between the source of value and the locus of value—that is a slightly less robust form of a position that was also Dewey’s.

In his essay “Anthropocentrism and Nonanthropocentrism,” Bryan G. Norton also advances a distinction that Dewey had anticipated many years earlier. He distinguishes between “felt” preferences and “considered” preferences. “A felt preference,” Norton writes, “is any desire or need of a human individual that can at least temporarily be sated by some specifiable experience of that individual. A considered preference is any desire or need that a human individual would express after careful deliberation, including a judgment that the desire or need is consistent with a rationally adopted world view—a world view which includes fully supported scientific theories and a metaphysical framework interpreting those theories, as well as a set of rationally supported aesthetic and moral ideals.” He then adds that “when interests are assumed to be constructed merely from felt preferences, they are thereby insulated from any criticism or objection. . . . A considered preference, on the other hand, is an idealization in the sense that it can only be adopted after a person has rationally accepted an entire world view and, further, has succeeded in altering his felt preferences so that they are consonant with that world view.”

If we combine Callicott’s distinction between source and locus of value and Norton’s distinction between felt and considered preferences, it is easy enough to see that Dewey not only laid out a similar
theory of valuation almost a century ago, but he also elaborated on these very distinctions. He thought that what is experienced merely as valued (which is more or less what Norton calls “felt preferences”) usually involves a quality of an experience that is just unreflectively enjoyed, or else just posited as an end-in-view to be tested. Such felt preferences might involve an immediate aesthetic response to an animal in the wild, to a wilderness area, or to a waterfall or sunset. Such felt preferences might also involve the conclusions or consummations of previous inquiries that we continue to enjoy, that is, that do not present an occasion for renewed deliberation.

But what is determined to be valuable (which is more or less what Norton calls a “considered preference”) is a deliberately (technologically) mediated and enriched relation between an inquirer and the subject matter of his or her inquiry. The locus (to use Callicott’s term) of what is experienced as considered preference may be anywhere within the experienced field or situation. It is in fact one of the functions of inquiry to fix more precisely the locus of something that is just haphazardly experienced as valued, so that it can be more securely placed within the historical-cultural context of a person’s life-world and thereby be made more secure qua valuable. It is in this sense that inquiry involves technological mediation.

Questions about the locus of the unreflectively valued could well be unanswerable. Felt preferences, since they are unreflective and therefore lack inquiry, do not inquire into locus. The objects and events of felt preferences are enjoyed just as they are, no questions asked. But the locus of the valuable lies within a deliberately reconstructed field of experience where it has been related to other parts of that field. This is because, as Dewey reminds us, the determination of something as valuable always involves some sort of choice, that is, some sort of reconstruction of what had been unreflectively enjoyed but has ceased to be so because of some conflict or other. Competing feelings are adjudicated with respect to one another, conflicts are resolved, and the situation is remodeled or reconstructed. In the process, what is valuable is located and secured with respect to a newly organized whole.
To put this somewhat differently, it makes little sense to ask about the locus of what is unreflectively valued, since to pinpoint locus involves reflection. But the locus of something that is experimentally determined to be valuable is ascertained by means of inquiry. This applies equally to other humans, to institutions, and to things such as stands of trees, spotted owls, and the Devil’s Hole pupfish.

There is no recourse to a distinction between subject and object in Dewey’s account of the locus of the valuable. He simply rejected the modernist epistemology that proposes a distinction. He argued that the distinction between subject and object is itself a result of isolating and then locating with respect to one another various elements within an experienced field: subject and object are artifacts of inquiry. To establish the locus of what is valuable is to produce new artifacts. Dewey thought that one of the primary uses of deliberation is to extend and enrich the meanings of human experience. This would of course involve the extension and enrichment of the meanings of the environments by means of which we live, including the enrichment of our appreciation of wild nature and nonhuman species.

Developing this line of thought somewhat further, we can see that Dewey held something similar to what Norton has called a “weak” form of anthropocentrism. In Norton’s terms, “A value theory is strongly anthropocentric if all value countenanced by it is explained by reference to satisfactions of felt preferences of human individuals. A value theory is weakly anthropocentric if all value countenanced by it is explained by reference to satisfaction of some felt preference of a human individual or by reference to its bearing upon the ideals which exist as elements in a world view essential to determinations of considered preferences.”

Dewey frequently contrasted his version of naturalism, which is similar to Norton’s weak anthropocentrism, with a myopic strong anthropocentrism founded on an unremitting subject/object dualism that pits human life against an “external” environment and sanctions the domination of nature. The assumption of strong anthropocentrists, whom he identified as realists, was that since nature and its
transcript science are value-neutral, just any means at all may be used to satisfy human desires, or felt preferences.

But if Dewey was no strong anthropocentrist, he was an anthropocentrist nonetheless. He thought that both human life and its wider context, nonhuman nature, are unintelligible absent the recognition that it is only with the advent of reflective consciousness that nature comes to have deliberate preferences. It is only with the advent of reflective consciousness that nature comes to have “a mind of its own.”

**Dewey’s Environmental Conversation**

Dewey had already turned his attention to what we today call environmental philosophy in an essay he wrote in 1909 to help celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. The essay, originally published as “Is Nature Good? A Conversation,” takes the form of an interchange among several discussants, among whom are Eaton, a Pragmatist, Moore, an ironically named absolute idealist, and Stair, a mystic.

Moore, the idealist, argues that nature exhibits evil as stubbornly as it does good, and that consciousness is merely a “temporary bird of passage . . . doomed to ultimate extinction” (MW 4.25). Therefore, only the real value behind the apparent value—the permanent value beyond the temporary value, and the inherent value beyond the instrumental value, so to speak—is ultimately real (MW 4.26).

We can see in this argument an adumbration of an idealist answer to the thought experiment known among environmental philosophers as the “last person” problem. In one of its versions, we are invited to determine whether there would be moral considerations involved in the decision by the last person on earth who had the power to push a button that would destroy the planet, whether or not to do so at the moment of their death.

Were Moore the last person on earth and about to die, he would certainly view his life as an individual, conscious human as a “temporary bird of passage” against the backdrop of the absolute or inherent rational value of Nature (with a capital N). He would therefore, on
those grounds, take no action that would harm his environment. The idealist does not reject *überhaupt* the claim that “considered preference,” or, in Dewey’s terms, what has been determined to be valuable, is of high importance; he simply considers human rationality merely a small part of the larger rationality of the Absolute. In terms of contemporary debates, Moore might well be a proponent of the strong version of Gaia, which holds that the entire planetary system is capable of some sort of rational deliberation, or at least capable of some sort of super self-consciousness.

To this Stair, the mystic, says that Moore has mistaken reason or intellect as the final umpire. Reason or intellect is only a source of discord; the ultimate organ of unity and truth resides elsewhere. Words like “feeling, sensation, immediate appreciation, self-communication of Being,” he says, can’t quite do the job he wishes them to do, but they can be offered as an invitation “to woo you to put yourselves into the one attitude that reveals truth—an attitude of direct vision” (MW 4.26). In our own time Stair would perhaps be a proponent of some more mystic version of Gaia, or some version of panentheism, or a blend of the two.

One supposes that Stair’s response to the “last person” problem would be similar to Moore’s, but justified on different grounds. For Stair, the value that grounds what is cognitively experienced as valuable is romantically or aesthetically felt, rather than rationally discerned, but it is real nonetheless. He thus inverts Dewey’s Pragmatist position, which treats what is romantically or aesthetically felt-as-valued as something to be reconstructed (in the event that it becomes problematic). Stair’s position calls to mind the post–World War II work of Heidegger, and the work of Charles Hartshorne as well.

*Zimmerman and Rolston*

The idealistic positions assumed by Moore and Stair, positions that are criticized in Dewey’s essay, have their counterparts in contemporary environmental philosophy. Michael Zimmerman, for example, writing in 1988, thought he had found the basis for environmental
ethics in a form of mystic idealism known as "panentheism." He thought that the primary virtue of panentheism for environmental philosophy is that it avoids the dualism of Western metaphysics. In his nutshell characterization, "Panentheism . . . claims that the Creator is both transcendent of and immanent in creation. This state of affairs is paradoxical for cognitive rationality, but not for nondualistic awareness." Not surprisingly, Zimmerman found support for his view in the work of the later Heidegger, although he did not—at least in this essay—mention his debt to the most famous twentieth-century proponent of panentheism, Charles Hartshorne.

Zimmerman’s position in this essay seems to combine elements of positions taken by Dewey’s characters Moore and Stair. His view is idealistic because it posits a ground or source of value beyond what is, or even what could be, a part of cognitive experience. And his view is mystical because of its suggestion that a spiritual-perceptual gestalt shift is necessary in order for that source of value (which is located beyond what is cognitively determined to be valuable) even to be glimpsed. Zimmerman urges his readers to take up a "nondualistic awareness" that seems to be supported more by direct perception than by cognition. The ideal object of "nondualistic" awareness thus becomes, in his view, a tool by means of which we are to evaluate what is cognitively constructed.

Like other forms of idealism, however, panentheism attempts to import what is of value into experience from what is external to it, in this case from a Creator who is both transcendent and immanent in creation. Such a creator is a thinker who thinks himself, or as a "process" theologian might put it, a God who experiences growth and knowledge of Himself through the growth and increased self-understanding of His creations.

This is of course a weaker form of idealism than some of its cousins, such as the several varieties of absolute idealism that were popular at the time that Dewey wrote "Is Nature Good?" But it is idealism nonetheless. It rehearses the usual claim of idealisms, namely that it is an antidote to dualism. And like other forms of idealism, it turns out to replace an overt form of dualism with one that is covert. In
Zimmerman’s terms, what is absolutely noncognitive but available through an apparently mystical or intuitive “nondualistic awareness” is split off from the cognitive in a way that the former appears paradoxical to the latter.

In an essay published in 2004, Zimmerman develops these ideas even further, arguing that there are themes within Continental philosophy that are appropriate to environmental philosophy but that have not yet been tapped. He calls for a re-enchantment of the world, and more particularly for environmental philosophers to take “religion seriously not merely as an interesting cultural practice, but also as giving institutional expression to profound and to some extent verifiable insights.” Although Zimmerman pitches a very broad tent, it is clear that at least some of its occupants answer to the description that Dewey gives of Moore and Stair, his idealist and his mystic.

The work of Holmes Rolston III, I believe, exhibits yet another idealistic strategy for bringing what is valuable, in the sense in which I have used the term, into our lifeworlds from the outside, unmediated, or so it appears, by human deliberation. In his examples (which are articulated in terms that call to mind the work of the later Heidegger), the value of wild nature as well as certain other things, such as communion wine, is said to be not so much resource as source. “Before . . . the sacred [communion wine],” he writes, “one is not so much looking to resources as to sources, seeking relationships in an elemental stream of being with transcending integrities.”

Rolston thinks that we need “to get ourselves defined in relation to nature, not just to define nature in relation to us.” He writes of the type of experience that “moves value outside ourselves” and he tells us that “value is not just a human product.” He tells us that value is what “makes a favorable difference,” whether in the life of an organism or an ecosystem. Wilderness is said to be “the most valuable realm of all, the struggling womb able to generate all these adventures in value.”

In fact Rolston seems to have just inverted the Pragmatist’s analysis of valuation. For the Pragmatist, what is valued is unstable, fragile,
and fleeting, but what is valuable has been secured by means of experimental deliberation. For Rolston, however, what is valuable is primary and originary: it generates and grounds what is valued. As he puts it, “We have too much fallen into the opinion that the only values that there are, moral or artistic or whatever, are human values, values which we have selected or constructed, over which we have labored. Modern philosophical ethics has left us insensitive to the reception of nonhuman values.” Moreover, “it is the autonomous otherness of the natural expressions of value that we learn to love, and that integrity becomes vain when this value secretly requires our composing.”

The radical empiricism of Dewey and James presents a very different picture of these matters. Since they do not recognize a subject/object split in nonreflective experience, they hold that immediate value is “located” neither in subject nor in object. It is in fact not located at all: it just is. On reflection, of course, what was immediately valued prior to deliberation can be located within an experienced field, a field from which subject and object can then also be isolated as parts or moments. Dewey and James observe, and they invite us to do so as well, that unreflective enjoyment, because it is unreflective, is prior to subject/object distinctions, which are the byproducts of processes of inquiry. The subject/object distinction comes only in the context of an analysis of an experience (and even then only in the event that conditions call for such an analysis). For Rolston, however, immediate value seems to come forth already well formed: even prior to our experience of it, he tells us, it already has a “transcending integrity.”

For Dewey and James, wild nature is a cultural/historical artifact. For Rolston, wild nature is just given. Rolston’s attempts to ground value in a nature which has never been subject to the reconstructive and transformative activity of human deliberation would, I think, have appeared to Dewey as commission of the philosophers’ fallacy—a reification and an anthropomorphizing of a great “Source.” This move was arguably also made in the work of the later Heidegger.
Because of the Pragmatist’s rejection of the realistic hypothesis, of course, she would also reject the notion that wilderness areas must be developed in an economic sense to be deemed valuable. “Transformation” or “development” or “management” of a wilderness area in this context would mean, for example, that it is located with respect to other features of our cultural landscape and that it is treated in ways that involve as much intelligence as possible, given our current tools and techniques. Such management might well mean setting it aside for scientific research or for non-intrusive human visitors, or even reserving it exclusively for its nonhuman natural inhabitants, thus placing it out of bounds for use by the current generation of humans. This is very similar to the way in which Aldo Leopold spoke of the “management” of natural settings.

I must admit that I find Rolston’s split between “source” and “resource” somewhat troubling. If we read “resource” as “commodity” and “source” as “ground of value,” as I think his texts invite us to do, then we seem to have slipped imperceptibly into one of the varieties of dualism that tend to lurk behind most varieties of idealism. Put in terms of some of the older idealisms, the source becomes the real, the resource what is only apparent.

I have already drawn attention to the Pragmatists’ attempts to bypass dualisms of this type by treating resource and source, commodity and ideal, and even instrumental and intrinsic, as relative to one another as aspects or moments within inquiry, and not as ontologically distinct from one another. Especially in the work of Dewey, it is instruments—tools and methods—that relate commodity and ideal to one another, to check them against one another as means are checked against ends and ends are checked against means.

To be fair, Rolston does not argue that intrinsic value is the only type of value: he argues that “there is nothing secondary about instrumental value.”27 “Excellence,” he writes, “does not consist in what a thing is merely for itself, but in what it is for others.”28 And he even sounds a bit like Dewey when he writes that “excellence is not a matter of encapsulated being, but of fittedness into a pervasive whole.”29 But what Rolston means by “pervasive whole” seems to involve an
ideal cosmic system already complete with an (ideal) history of “storied achievements,” whereas what Dewey means by “pervasive whole” involves a deliberative situation in which harmony and balance have been restored. In the final analysis, then, Rolston’s view of instrumental value is nested in an ideal system, “the historic system that carries value to and through individuals.”\(^{30}\) Dewey, on the other hand, because he was an evolutionary naturalist, rejected such ideal “historic systems” as something that could lie outside of, but yet at the same time somehow be determinative of, experience.

In short, I am suggesting that the positions of both of these environmental philosophers, Zimmerman and Rolston, tend to be idealistic in a sense that was adumbrated and criticized in Dewey’s essay almost a century ago.

“Eaton” Gets the Last Word

Since “Is Nature Good?” is Dewey’s own essay, Eaton the Pragmatist is given the last word. He points out that Moore, the idealist, has to assume some ultimate value beyond experienced values in order even to articulate his claim that some values are genuine and others illusory. But, he continues, it is not the search for some ultimate value beyond experienced values that motivates practical men and women. In their attempts to regulate their lives and avoid undesirable consequences, they have to deal with all sorts of conflicting values and possible courses of action they have to find intelligent ways of discriminating between means and ends. This was probably what motivated Aldo Leopold’s famous remark about how an environmentalist can appeal even to “Rotarians.”\(^{31}\)

In short, we human beings experience inherent value only in the highly attenuated sense that certain things are unreflectively \textit{valued}. But since nature retracts what is valued as quickly and as unpredictably as it proffers it, it is the job of intelligence, or technology, to ascertain whether what is valued is also \textit{valuable}; and if it be found to be such, to work to secure it.
To Moore’s spiritual cousin Stair, the mystic, Eaton replies in a similar vein, that communication with Being through “the moments of insight and joy that life provides” (MW 4.28) is little more than self-indulgence, since even mystics need to eat and be housed and it is usually left to unmystic persons (such as Eaton) to do this.

What would be the Pragmatist Eaton’s response to the “last person” problem, the question as to whether the last person on Earth, facing death, would choose to destroy the planet when she dies? Are there grounds for her not to do so?

For the last person to destroy the planet would be wrong, from the viewpoint of Eaton the Pragmatist, but not on the grounds usually furnished by his idealist interlocutors. It is not that there is an absolute value beyond human experience that serves as the criteria for human valuation, but rather that morality is a matter of the best choices that can be made given the context of our experience.

Though the last person would lack human companionship, she will realize, if she is a Pragmatist, that what she is, including her thought and her language, is nevertheless the product of a social world. Her refusal to destroy the planet would therefore probably be based more on her own integrity than something outside her culturally and historically constructed experience of nonhuman nature. Her evolutionary naturalism would lead her to honor the observable historical and genetic continuities between human and nonhuman animals. She might, for example, be concerned about the fate of Washoe, Nim Chimsky, and the other chimpanzees whose lives have intertwined both emotionally and cognitively with those of human beings (and with whom, as she knows, she shares more than 98 percent of her genetic material). Her environmental naturalism would also lead her to take into account the well-documented social lives of other nonhuman animals, including pets, which have entered into the cultural lives of human beings and each other. They are part of a cultural matrix which she honors. To diminish them would mean that she would die as a diminished person.

In order to understand her Pragmatic response to the “last person” problem, we must therefore take a step back from the question as it
is usually stated in order to reconstruct it. The question for a Pragmatist is not “Why not destroy the earth?” but rather “What kind of a person would choose to do so?” The Pragmatist would answer that such a person would be one whose malice or insensitivity to other forms of life would itself reveal a lack of integrity, a life out of balance, in short, a failure to do what is moral. At least in this regard, the Pragmatist shares certain positions with the “virtue” ethicist: the moral individual is a construct, a well-articulated artifact, a finely honed product of factors that are uniquely individual entering into dynamic relationships with those that are cultural and historical. The moral and the technological are thus in her view inextricably linked, because the production of artifacts, including the artifact she knows as “nature-as-culture,” is through and through a moral enterprise. But of course the Pragmatist also shares certain positions with the “consequentialist” as well, including concern for nonhuman sociality. The Pragmatist locates her own moral position within an historical context, looking both backward and forward in time.

Incidentally, by making this type of response to the “last person” problem the Pragmatist would avoid the criticism of those such as Bertrand Russell who have claimed that Pragmatic ethics involves a bare utilitarian consequentialism, a vulgar form of instrumentalism, or a gross commitment to “efficiency.”

John Dewey is to my knowledge the only philosopher to have advanced a critique of technology as part of a broad philosophical program, including social and political philosophy, educational philosophy, ethics, and logic, or the theory of inquiry. No other philosopher of technology, so far as I know, has done this. Heidegger’s work notoriously lacked a coherent social philosophy, and it exhibited nothing in the way of a philosophy of education. Dewey thought of all of these elements as playing pivotal roles within a comprehensive critique of technology. This is not to say that Dewey advanced what was known in the nineteenth century as “a philosophical system.” He disliked systematizing, and made that dislike quite clear. Nevertheless, because he regarded philosophy as an attempt to understand and ameliorate experience as we find it—to foster growth and
the enrichment of the meanings of human experience—he thought that insofar as it is possible a philosopher ought to have an integrated philosophy.

Dewey’s critique of technology thus offers positive contributions to current debates within environmental philosophy. This applies not only to the work of philosophers such as Callicott and Norton, who have intentionally or unintentionally followed in his footsteps, but also to the work of the contemporary idealists and even mystics, whose arguments recapitulate many of those of the idealists and mystics toward which Dewey directed his criticism.