INTRODUCTION

1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

There is a growing interest in the philosophy of John Dewey. This is due to a variety of factors: the existence of a vigorous Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, the publication of Dewey’s collected works by Southern Illinois University Press, a renewed concern with social and political issues, and the proselytizing of Richard Rorty, who enlists Dewey in the crusade against foundationalism. This book seeks to contribute to this growing interest.

Locating Dewey as one in a long line of thinkers who recognized the importance of ontological considerations, it examines in particular the way Dewey dealt with the perennial issue of permanence and change. Since the time of Plato, this topic has been discussed within the context of "forms." As we shall see, Dewey’s own reflections bring him to a revised understanding of this venerable philosophical term. While rejecting much that was in the tradition, Dewey nonetheless continued to ask questions and to suggest answers that place him at the level of classical metaphysicians. The aim of this book is to examine, explain, and interpret his questions and answers pertaining to the issue of change and permanence.

To avoid confusion in terminology, I shall specify the way in which two prominent terms, "ontology" and "form," are used in the text. "Ontology" is the etymologically more suitable word for the discipline known, prior to the eighteenth century, as "metaphysics." The most accurate description for this study was provided by Aristotle when he characterized it as the study of being qua being. Ontology deals with beings—that is, with things that exist—and it deals with them only insofar as they exist. Further specifications of beings (as animate, chemical, inanimate, etc.) circumscribe the subject matters of the special sciences, and do not concern the ontologist as such. Ontology seeks what is common to all entities. Dewey uses "ontology" and "metaphysics" interchangeably, and I follow him in this. I also employ various synonyms for "being," "Entity," "thing," and "existent" are so used, and in each case indicate that which is.
“Form” is both a venerable philosophical concept and a term commonly used in ordinary discourse. Because of this, it has acquired a variety of meanings. My usage of “form” follows that of a contemporary leader in the study of the topic, Lancelot Law Whyte. What is central to the many meanings of “form,” according to Whyte, is the “notion of an ordered complexity.” When some elaboration of this compact formulation is provided, certain characterizations of form become evident. (a) Form always involves a blend of unity and multiplicity; sheer multiplicity and sheer unity describe situations in which form is not a factor. (b) Since form implies that a complexity is organized in a certain way, a structure or determinateness of some sort is achieved. (c) Because the multiplicity or complexity may be ordered in a variety of ways, form implies a limitation imposed upon the manifold.

Although not widely regarded as a metaphysician, Dewey explicitly recognized the significance of this discipline. He described philosophy as “a criticism of criticisms,” meaning by the term “criticism” “discriminating judgment” or “careful appraisal” (EN 298). Such criticism is especially important and appropriate, Dewey insisted, where there is concern about “goods or values” (EN 298). But this kind of criticism would not provide the benefits of harmony and secured goods unless it had been developed in conjunction with an accurate metaphysics as “a statement of the generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds” (EN 308).

To grasp the connection between concern with metaphysics and concern with values, we must understand that for Dewey metaphysics involves more than the mere enumeration of generic traits. This discipline does not find its work exhausted when a list of characteristics such as individuality, multiplicity, process, contingency, and stability has been recited. Such an enumeration, as Dewey insisted, would have “nothing to do with wisdom” (EN 309). The importance of metaphysics is that it attempts to go further and to ascertain with respect to the general traits of nature “their degrees and the ratios they sustain to one another” (EN 309); it seeks, in other words, to articulate “the nature of the existential world in which we live” (EN 45).

Any attempt to consolidate and enhance values will be based, according to Dewey, on just such a vision of what the world is like. “The more sure one is that the world which encompasses human
life is of such and such a character (no matter what his definition), the more one is committed to try to direct the conduct of life, that of others as well as of himself, upon the basis of the character assigned to the world” (EN 309). For Dewey, philosophy's primary role was always the concern with values, but such concern, as he well recognized, does not exist in a vacuum. The human situation “falls wholly within nature” and “reflects the traits of nature” (EN 314). Because of this, the study of metaphysics as an examination of these traits assumes a fundamental significance. I am hopeful that the text which follows will both substantiate these views and provide an accurate presentation of Dewey's metaphysics.

2. The Need for Such a Study

This book was written in response to two major problems in Deweyan scholarship and to a third issue of a more purely theoretical character. (a) To begin with, there are scholars who dismiss the Deweyan attempt at formulating a metaphysics as superficial, irrelevant, and contradictory. (b) There are others who provide a caricature of Deweyan metaphysics as describing a natural world given over solely to flux, process, and change. (c) Finally, there is a general need, occasioned by developments in the sciences, for contemporary philosophers to deal with the issues encapsulated in the term “form.”

(a) Freud complained that one bane of any thinker is to have too many friends or followers. It would not be long, Freud knew, before his name would be uttered in support of positions worlds apart from those he actually held. This was certainly true for a philosopher like Hegel, whose thought was led in conflicting and diametrically opposed directions by his followers. It is also true for Dewey in reference to interpretations of his metaphysics. Two commentators in particular, Richard Rorty and Sidney Hook, both avowed admirers of Dewey, fail to recognize the importance of the naturalistic metaphysics he developed.

Rorty claims that it is easier to think of Experience and Nature, Dewey's fundamental statement of metaphysics, “as an explanation of why nobody needs a metaphysics, rather than as itself a metaphysical system.” It is hard to see, Rorty claims, how Dewey's displaying of generic traits “could either avoid banality or dissolve
Hook’s criticisms of the metaphysical dimension in Dewey’s work comes at a surprising place, his introduction to the definitive edition of *Experience and Nature* published in 1981. Hook introduces Dewey’s most articulate effort at formulating a metaphysics by denying any importance to that discipline as Dewey understood it. He claims that Dewey would have done well to revise the text by abandoning the enterprise of gaining knowledge about generic traits. He doubts that such traits exist and asserts that Dewey’s philosophical outlook does not require “that he interpret traits in this way” (EN xiv).

The major difficulty with the interpretations of these two men is that they begin by imputing to Dewey a position that only approximates the one he actually held: metaphysics is merely the ticking off of traits. It is quite probable that this sort of endeavor could not avoid banality (Rorty) or should be abandoned (Hook), but this is not what Dewey meant by metaphysics. As I pointed out earlier, Dewey does not conceive of metaphysics as the simple recitation of traits. It is true that at times he does provide this sort of list, but he is quick to append qualifications. Near the end of *Experience and Nature* he claims that only if the “general traits of nature existed in water-tight compartments” would it be enough “to sort out the objects and interests of experience among them” (EN 309). The mere listing of generic traits is not sufficient. The real work of metaphysics involves the examination of how these traits are implicated in actual existents and events. Typical metaphysical assertions in Dewey do not take the form suggested by Hook: “individuality and continuity, unity and multiplicity, the novel and the familiar, the clear and the obscure, the distant and at hand, and a host of other polarities” (EN xv). Such a collection of polarities would indeed be sterile and readily discarded, and would hardly distinguish Dewey’s philosophy from that of other thinkers.

But Hook’s list is misleading. A more accurate selection of metaphysical statements in Dewey would include the following: “Every existence is an event” (EN 63); “interaction is the one unescapable trait of every human concern” (EN 324); “all natural existences are histories” (EN 129; emphasis deleted); “esthetic quality, immediate, final or self-enclosed, indubitably characterizes natural situations as they empirically occur” (EN 82). These are important fun-
damental descriptive statements, quite different from alternative metaphysical theories. Dewey is saying that existents and events must not be viewed as static, isolated, or separate from values. Once ontological assertions are established, the work of developing philosophical analyses in fields such as education, politics, aesthetics, or ethics will move in a certain direction. The real issue is, not that of metaphysics vs. no metaphysics, but that of alternative metaphysical positions. Dewey was keenly aware of his need to articulate a metaphysics consistent with the discoveries of modern science, and he attempted to elaborate it in *Experience and Nature*. Scholars like Rorty and Hook who reject this attempt as trivial or misguided are actually overlooking the central import of that text. Their appreciation of Dewey can then be only partial and truncated.

(b) Yet the need for a careful examination of Dewey's metaphysics arises not only because of prominent scholars who judge his metaphysical enterprise not to be especially significant, but also because of those, equally prominent, who have misrepresented the positions Dewey held in his naturalistic metaphysics. Richard Bernstein has called attention to what he calls "the Dewey legend" (*ENF* ix–xi), the outcome of scholarship that has significantly misunderstood and consequently misrepresented Dewey's philosophical positions. Bernstein gives examples of what he considers to be "caricatures" of Dewey's views in the fields of epistemology, philosophy of education, and ethics. He might also have added the caricature of Dewey as the consummate metaphysician of flux, a new Cratylus preaching that nature is all change and process. This charge is refuted in the chapters that follow.

A typical articulation of this interpretation can be found in Jacques Maritain's description of Dewey's philosophy as one in which "there is no nature, there is only process." Other commentators have expressed similar views. David Bowers, for instance, has linked Dewey's metaphysics of flux to an ethics of relativism, thus adding to the Dewey legend in two fields. "In short, by construing the conception of process in as extreme a form as possible, instrumentalism affirms the doctrine that nothing is permanent save change itself, and boldly accepts the relativistic implications of this view for human conduct." Another scholar, Leo Ward, not satisfied with the role of pronouncing an interpretive judgment on
Dewey's philosophy, inaccurately paraphrases him so that Dewey himself appears to have publicly embraced the metaphysics of absolute flux: "He [Dewey] finally said that in his old Hegelian philosophy everything was form and structure, and that in his later development structure came to nearly nothing."7 This book defends the thesis that, contrary to Ward's assertions, in his later thought Dewey recognized form and structure as significant, and incorporated them into a consistent ontological position. Some commentators, such as H. S. Thayer and Joseph Ratner, have argued for a more balanced view of Dewey, one in which elements of both change and permanence find their proper place.8 Nonetheless, no one, so far as I can tell, has attempted to trace systematically, in Dewey's works, the development of the concept which he identified with the stable aspects of reality, that is to say, "form." This lacuna the present work hopes to fill.

(c) The final reason for undertaking the work presented here is the impetus given to metaphysical issues as a result of discoveries in the sciences. This is especially true with respect to the issue of "forms." The prominence of this topic stems principally from the growing impact of the biological sciences, but developments in physics have also brought out the need for philosophers to deal once again with the question of form or structure. The maturation of the biological sciences was given a great impetus with Darwin's publication of The Origin of Species in 1859. This maturation was certified nearly a hundred years later when Watson and Crick revealed the molecular structure of DNA in 1953. The great advances of biology have placed it in a special relationship to philosophy. Some commentators, like Henryk Skolimowski, have argued that biology has replaced physics as that science which primarily occasions and inspires philosophical speculation.9 Even if this analysis is exaggerated, an important fact has to be admitted in the relationship of biology to philosophy: the data of the biological sciences can no longer be ignored or treated as special instances of chemistry and physics.

One very prominent datum biologists have focused on is form. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson devoted two large volumes to a famous study entitled On Growth and Form.10 The Nobel Prize-winning biologist Albert Szent-Györgyi emphasized the connection
between biology and form by arguing that life itself is impossible without form. "Life is made possible by order, structure, a pattern, which is the opposite of entropy." Assertions like these, not uncommon among biologists, have helped to restore the issue of form to some of the prominence it held in pre-Cartesian philosophy.

Nor is biology alone in this respect. Between the publication of Darwin's *Origin* and the beginning of the twentieth century, an important discovery in physics had a direct bearing on the issue of form. Karl Popper has argued that the full impact of this discovery was not immediately felt, but that it was no less revolutionary than the work of Darwin and Copernicus. The discovery in question was the work of J. J. Thomson.

J. J. Thomson's discovery (and theory) of the electron was also a major revolution. To overthrow the age-old theory of the indivisibility of the atom constituted a scientific revolution easily comparable to Copernicus' achievements: when Thomson announced it, physicists thought he was pulling their legs. . . . To assess the revolutionary significance of this breakthrough it will be sufficient to remind you that it introduced structure as well as electricity into the atom, and thus into the constitution of matter.

Form, as I argued in Section 1, always involves unity and multiplicity. Classical atomistic theory, claiming a unity without parts for the atom, excluded the possibility of form on this level of analysis. The significance of Thomson's discovery is that the basis for this exclusion is no longer valid.

Of course, physicists have turned their attention to the search for an elementary particle more fundamental than the atom. As this search has progressed, a pattern analogous to the case of Thomson and the atom has materialized. As an article in a 1977 issue of *Science* reported, at each stage of this search what were once thought to be elementary particles "have successively been shown to be composites of more elementary particles." Physics has, then, moved in a direction similar to that of biology. For the biologist, the study of life means the study of organized beings; for the physicist, the study of particles means the study of structured, composite entities. Because of these developments, the topic this book investigates is of interest not simply to Dewey scholars, but to the philosophical and scientific communities in general.
3. General Outline

The approach I have taken in examining Dewey's metaphysics in this book is both theoretical and historical. The study is theoretical because it aims at understanding Dewey's metaphysics. It is not concerned with questions involving action or production. The possibility of associating theory with practice is not denied, but the topic dealt with is restricted to the search for accurate knowledge concerning Dewey's position.

To be thorough and accurate, I have traced Dewey's ontological analyses through each period of his lengthy philosophical career. Dewey was an active philosopher for seven decades, and one trait of this activity was an openness to novel and more effective approaches to philosophical issues. As a result, his writings are a living body of thought in which growth, modification, and development are evident. He has not left his interpreters a single position etched in stone. Dewey's opinions and formulations altered through time, and this book attempts to follow these alterations with respect to the issue of change and permanence.

The text is divided into three parts, Idealism, Experimentalism, and Naturalism, in accordance with the three major periods in Dewey's philosophical career. Part I, the shortest of the three, deals with questions of form and being in Dewey's writings during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Part II takes up this topic in the context of the new "experimental logic" Dewey promulgated at the turn of the century. Part III, the lengthiest section of the book, is composed of four chapters that investigate ontological issues in the period beginning with the appearance of *Experience and Nature* in 1925. The concluding chapter reveals the ways in which Dewey's metaphysics can shed some light on a topic of contemporary significance, the foundationalist/anti-foundationalist controversy.

As we move into the post-modern world, leaving behind the epistemology-centered orientation that dominated during the period between Descartes and Nietzsche, we can benefit from Dewey's guidance. He had both a sensitive historical sense and an original vision to promulgate. He did not treat the past as a package that could be sealed and disposed of. The tradition, it is true, was in many ways one-sided or worn out with usage. This did not mean for
Dewey what it does for some contemporary commentators: that we are entering a post-philosophical culture. It was, rather, a challenge to provide a network of generative ideas which would function as a successful framework within which we could better come to understand the world in which we live. Dewey is important as we move into the post-modern environment because he provided such a network of generative ideas. Metaphysics is the home of this novel vision in its starkest elaboration. If this study serves to offer one way in which we can come to a constructive interpretation of post-modernism in philosophy, then it will have been successful.

NOTES

1. Rorty praises Dewey both in his popular and provocative book Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and in numerous essays that have been collected as The Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1982). Further references to these texts will be abbreviated as MN and CP respectively.


3. CP 72.

4. CP 74.


7. “John Dewey in Search of Himself,” The Review of Politics, 19 (1957), 206. Ward gives no specific reference to the text he is paraphrasing. The context seems to indicate a passage from Dewey’s autobiography in which Dewey explains how he “drifted” from Hegel. Dewey does discuss “form” in this regard, but what he has in mind is a formalism or schematism that forces data into a preconceived dialectical framework. This is the “form” that he rejects. In other respects, Dewey is quite explicit in admitting that Hegel “left a permanent deposit in my think-
ing." The passage is actually quite laudatory of Hegel, and ends with praise for a philosopher not unassociated with forms, Plato. "The form, the schematism, of his [Hegel's] system now seems to me artificial to the last degree. But in the content of his ideas there is often an extraordinary depth; in many of his analyses, taken out of their mechanical dialectical setting, an extraordinary acuteness. Were it possible for me to be a devotee of any system, I still should believe that there is greater richness and greater variety of insight in Hegel than in any other single systematic philosopher—though when I say this I exclude Plato, who still provides my favorite philosophic reading" ("From Absolutism to Experimentalism," LW V 154). This article was originally published in 1930, when Dewey was seventy-one years old.


9. "Biology is nowadays a special science, for it has become a philosophical battlefield on which a new paradigm for all human knowledge is being established. The reign of physics as the universal paradigm is now over. Biology is aspiring to produce a new paradigm" ("Problems of Rationality in Biology," in Studies in the Philosophy of Biology: Reduction and Related Problems, edd. Francisco Jose Ayala and Theodosius Dobzhansky (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), p. 205.

10. 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942; repr. 1952). In Volume I, Thompson describes forms as involving an "intrinsic harmony," and in a note provides an explanation that is fully consistent with the characterization of form given in Section 1 of this Introduction. "What I understand by 'holism' is what the Greeks called ἀρμονία. This is something exhibited not only by a lyre in a tune, but by all the handiwork of craftsmen, and by all that is 'put together' by art or nature. It is the 'compositeness of any composite whole'; and, like the cognate terms κράσις and σύνθεσις, implies a balance or attunement" (p. 10, note explaining "harmony").

11. The Living State: with Observations on Cancer (New York & London: Academic Press, 1972), p. 2. Some expressions of the fundamental significance of form or organization are more poetic, as in the following passage from Loren Eiseley. "Men talk much of matter and energy, of the struggle for existence that molds the shape of life. These things do exist, it is true, but more delicate, elusive, quicker than the fins in water, is that mysterious principle known as 'organization,' which leaves all
other mysteries concerned with life stale and insignificant by comparison. For that without organization life does not persist is obvious. Yet this organization itself is not strictly the product of life, nor of selection. Like some dark and passing shadow within matter, it cups out the eyes' small windows or spaces the notes of a meadow lark's song in the interior of a mottled egg. That principle—I am beginning to suspect—was there before the living in the deeps of water” (The Immense Journey, repr. ed. [New York: Time, Inc., 1962], p. 18).


13. Arthur L. Robinson, “High Energy Physics: A Proliferation of Quarks and Leptons,” Science, Nov. 4, 1977, p. 481. More recently, two Canadian physicists who prepared a series of radio programs with prominent biologists and physicists expressed a similar sentiment in explaining how the topics for the interviews were selected. “In selecting topics for discussion, we have betrayed our own prejudices. . . . We have concentrated on areas which, we feel, hint at the next scientific revolution. Perhaps in this context we owe an apology to an important group of scientists—those engaged in elementary particle research. Some physicists feel that the search for the ‘ultimate building-blocks of matter’ is one of the most promising modern areas of research. It was our belief, however, that there are deeper questions to be explored, and that the goal of ‘the most fundamental particle’ is somewhat of a throwback to the presuppositions of classical physics” (A Question of Physics: Conversations in Physics and Biology, edd. Paul Buckley and David F. Peat [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979], pp. ix–x).