The Gleam of Light

Natsu Saito

Published by Fordham University Press

Saito, Natsu.
The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/13276

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=401475
One criticism directed against Dewey’s concept of growth, “Growth towards what?” is caused by an ambiguity entailed in his position between Hegel and Darwin, two main philosophers who influenced the formation of his view on growth. Dewey asserts that the moral ends and ideals of growth can be explained solely on the basis of Darwinian naturalism and the scientific method. Indeed, the major part of the interpretation of Dewey’s pragmatism, whether being defense or attack, has been made within this framework of Dewey between Hegel and Darwin—an evolutionary naturalist who has not completely abrogated ethical ideals.

Richard Rorty has shown us one possible direction to which this controversial philosophy of growth can turn. As Richard J. Bernstein points out, Rorty in his Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature sheds light on pragmatism’s move away from traditional epistemology, “the accurate representation of reality” or the foundational view of the world. From this antifoundationalist position, Rorty, in what he calls
his “hypothetical” rereading of Dewey, presents us with one possible picture of Dewey from the standpoint of “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” but reorienting this notoriously toward the relativist direction. His controversial reinterpretation of Dewey can act as a window through which we can further penetrate into the quarry of Dewey's naturalistic philosophy of growth. Indeed, the debate over Dewey’s naturalistic ethics and its concomitant concept of the scientific method of thinking discloses the limitations of the very framework of Dewey between Hegel and Darwin—its totalizing tendency geared toward power and progress that masks the subtle implications of the life of growth without fixed ends.

**Dewey from Hegel to Darwin**

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey presents his Darwinian manifesto: “Life is a self-renewing process through action upon the environment.”2 This is the essence of Deweyan growth, the theory of the interaction between an organism and its environment through functional and purposeful activities in specific situations. An emphasis is put on growth as growing in the present participial form, a “culminative movement of action toward a later result” (*DE*, 46), not “a movement toward a fixed goal” (55). Its distinctive feature is “immaturity,” which he calls “the possibility of growth” (46), “a positive force or ability, the power to grow” (47). According to Israel Scheffler, Darwinian evolutionary theory, with its claim of continuity between mankind and the lower animals, and its emphasis on process in nature, had a significant impact on American pragmatism. In contrast to British empiricism, which divides mind from world in a static and analytical way, American functional psychology stresses the notion of “dynamism, utility, and organism” with “biological, social, and purpose considerations.”3 This is a major turn from his old Hegelian, teleological view of self-realization: a movement directed to and measured by the ultimate end, the ultimate harmony of self and social realization, and “the perfection of personality.”4 In *Psychology* (1887), Dewey writes: “The self, in its true nature, is universal and
objective. . . . The self always confronts itself . . . with the conception of a universal or completed will towards which it must strive.” It is this teleological dimension of Hegelian self-realization, or in his words, “the absolute goal” or “whole” that Dewey came to reject later (DE, 62).

His naturalistic idea of growth is not restricted to his earlier educational writings; it continues to prevail in his succeeding works. In Reconstruction in Philosophy (1920), for example, the growth metaphor backs up his claims for the moral reconstruction of the world: “Growth itself is the only moral ‘end.’” In Human Nature and Conduct (1922), growth is a key not only for the education of children in schools, but also for the renewal of democratic society as a whole. In A Common Faith (1934), growth is given a religious tone as “a higher value and ideal than is sheer attainment.” It is a spiritual process that involves “intense realization of values” (CF, 53). In Experience and Education (1938), in defending progressive education as something different from a laissez-faire, child-centered education, Dewey restates his belief: “educative process can be identified with growth when that is understood in terms of the active participle, growing.”

As Sidney Hook says, Dewey is a “philosopher of growth” throughout his career.

Dewey’s naturalistic view of growth represents his claim of continuity between the human world and the natural world:

> A morals based on study of human nature instead of upon disregard for it would find the facts of man continuous with those of the rest of nature and would thereby ally ethics with physics and biology. (HNC, 11)

This epitomizes his naturalistic ethics of the “desirable.” Dewey claims that a morality originates in the empirical facts of the “desired,” and that this acquires the moral status of what “should be desired.” Growth can be considered to be a process in which the desirable traits of a moral life are cultivated. Here, the scientific method plays a crucial role—the procedure of practical judgment in a particular situation based upon the consequences of one’s conduct.
It is a method for “judgments about the conditions and the results of experienced objects; judgments about that which should regulate the formation of our desires, affections and enjoyments.” Namely, the scientific method is a means to mediate the moral and the natural, man and nature, and to bridge the desired to the desirable. Dewey’s scientific method is not the positivist’s notion of science, but a more Peircian, experimental method of inquiry based upon the procedures of hypothesis, observation, and control, and a critical habit of mind. Through the scientific method, Dewey claims, humans can reach the facts and laws of nature; it is an avenue for “effective moral renewal” (RP, xxxvii).

With the concept of scientific method, Dewey tries to offer an alternative picture of naturalism as a way to overcome the bifurcation of the “is” and the “ought”: an antireductionist naturalism. On the one hand, he is opposed to the materialist view of nature as it reduces “all distinctive human values, moral, aesthetic, logical to blind mechanical conjunctions of material entities.” On the other hand, he is opposed to the antinaturalism claimed by supernaturalists, theologians, and philosophers who deny nature as the basis of morality. What Dewey means by nature covers physical and animal nature, but this also includes humanity, and the human use of intelligence. The ethical is continuous with, not the same as, nature. The ethical grows out of the physical universe as an extension of nature. Values are part of nature. Thus,

Naturalism is often alleged to signify disregard of all values that cannot be reduced to the physical and animal. But so to conceive nature is to isolate environing conditions as the whole of nature and to exclude man from the scheme of things.

Dewey’s antireductionist naturalism constitutes not only the basis of his pragmatism, but also his ideal of democratic humanism:

[N]aturalism finds the values in question, the worth and dignity of men and women, founded in human nature itself, in the connections, actual and potential, of human beings with one another in their natural social relationships. (“Anti-Naturalism,” 54)
For Dewey, moral authority resides exclusively in mankind’s natural and social life. The social ideal of democracy is founded on human nature, not on some preconceived, fixed nature, but on human nature in growth. Dewey’s naturalistic ethics also represents the antimoralism and antiauthoritarianism of his thought—his struggle against “the escapism and humanistic defeatism inherent in antinaturalism” (“Anti-Naturalism,” 61). He opposes any hierarchical distinction that relegates man’s nature to a lower realm, while placing morality in a higher one.

In his naturalistic philosophy of growth, however, Dewey has left us with a certain ambiguity. In drifting from Hegelian absolutism to Darwinian experimentalism, Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth retains a strong sense of idealism. In his autobiographical essay, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” Dewey describes the path of his intellectual development as “drifting” in an imperceptible movement, which took as long as fifteen years. He acknowledges that “acquaintance with Hegel has left a permanent deposit in my thinking.” Much research on Dewey’s philosophy emphasizes this point. As Israel Scheffler says, Dewey continues to retain Hegelian emphases on continuity, wholeness, on development, and on the power of ideas. Richard Bernstein expresses this as “Hegel’s organicism.”

Steven C. Rockefeller offers an interpretation to the effect that even after Dewey had left Hegelianism, he did not lose his faith that life is full of ideal meaning. Alan Ryan also argues that Greene’s influence on Dewey’s ethics was continuous with his later pragmatist ethics. Similarly, Russell B. Goodman argues that “Dewey never ceased to be an idealist” and that “there are many traces of Hegel even in Dewey’s later writings.”

As these scholars demonstrate, even if the absolute end point disappears from the path of growth, Dewey’s faith in the power and progress of humanity—his Hegelian quest for the whole, the active development of human potential, and ethical idealism—continues to be an integral part of his naturalistic philosophy of growth. In his Hegelian period, Dewey describes his ethical ideal as follows:
IN THE REALIZATION OF INDIVIDUALITY THERE IS FOUND ALSO THE NEEDED REALIZATION OF SOME COMMUNITY OF PERSONS OF WHICH THE INDIVIDUAL IS A MEMBER; AND CONVERSELY, THE AGENT WHO DULY SATISFIES THE COMMUNITY IN WHICH HE SHARES, BY THAT SAME CONDUCT SATISFIES HIMSELF.  

This stance is retained in his later naturalistic period. In *Ethics* (1908), Dewey claims: “The good for any man is that in which the welfare of others counts as much as his own.”24 In *Democracy and Education* (1916), he argues that the democratic way of living involves the “full development of private personality [and] is identified with the aims of humanity as a whole” (DE, 102). This Dewey calls “a common good” (E1908, 338), or “a good shared by all.”25

In western ethics, the type of continuity claim that Dewey makes has been a target of criticism. As G. E. Moore says, in his famous claim against the naturalistic fallacy, the good in itself has its own intrinsic status and can never be identified with the natural.26 According to W. K. Frankena, the criticism of the naturalistic fallacy has its historical root in Hume, who bifurcates the “ought” of value and the “is” of fact, and who claims that any attempt to reduce the former to the latter is doomed to failure.27 The bifurcation of facts and values is still dominant in contemporary western ethics. For example, Charles Taylor, in opposition to reductionist versions of naturalism, including utilitarianism and the behavioral sciences, considers goods as having their own intrinsic claim apart from natural facts. He considers the “sources” of these moral ends to be “independent of our own desires, inclinations, or choices.” And thus, he claims that the “real growth” of the self is a journey toward these higher sources of the ultimate goodness.28 Likewise, Bernard Williams holds the view that the realm of the moral life is independent of the world of empirical, natural science.29

An attack on Dewey’s naturalistic ethics of the desirable is in the same vein as these arguments against the naturalistic fallacy. Morton White claims that a relationship between the de facto condition of

---

22 THE GLEAM OF LIGHT

---

23 Capitalized in the original text

24 In *Ethics* (1908), Dewey claims: “The good for any man is that in which the welfare of others counts as much as his own.”

25 In *Democracy and Education* (1916), he argues that the democratic way of living involves the “full development of private personality [and] is identified with the aims of humanity as a whole” (DE, 102). This Dewey calls “a common good” (E1908, 338), or “a good shared by all.”

26 In western ethics, the type of continuity claim that Dewey makes has been a target of criticism. As G. E. Moore says, in his famous claim against the naturalistic fallacy, the good in itself has its own intrinsic status and can never be identified with the natural.

27 According to W. K. Frankena, the criticism of the naturalistic fallacy has its historical root in Hume, who bifurcates the “ought” of value and the “is” of fact, and who claims that any attempt to reduce the former to the latter is doomed to failure.

28 The bifurcation of facts and values is still dominant in contemporary western ethics. For example, Charles Taylor, in opposition to reductionist versions of naturalism, including utilitarianism and the behavioral sciences, considers goods as having their own intrinsic claim apart from natural facts. He considers the “sources” of these moral ends to be “independent of our own desires, inclinations, or choices.” And thus, he claims that the “real growth” of the self is a journey toward these higher sources of the ultimate goodness.

29 Likewise, Bernard Williams holds the view that the realm of the moral life is independent of the world of empirical, natural science.

An attack on Dewey’s naturalistic ethics of the desirable is in the same vein as these arguments against the naturalistic fallacy. Morton White claims that a relationship between the de facto condition of
something “appearing red” and the de jure condition of something being “objectively red” is equivalent to a relationship between the desired and the desirable in Dewey’s argument. Based upon this analogy, White asserts that just as something objectively being red does not impose any moral obligation, Dewey’s concept of the desirable based upon the scientific method does not have an obligatory force; and therefore, the “ladder” from the desire to the desirable in Dewey’s empirical approach “cannot lead us from the descriptive to the normative.” At the bottom of White’s criticism lies his own desire for “a rock that is more substantial than mere desire” as a source of moral obligation. Based upon this observation, White argues that Dewey fails in his attempt to “take a middle course between transcendentalism and extreme naturalism,” suggesting a possible vacillation on Dewey’s part between Hegelian idealism and Darwinian naturalism. 30 Walter Feinberg also impugns Dewey’s continuity claim, asserting that Dewey “muddied the distinction between [the natural and ethical].” 31 Similarly, Ryan is skeptical, claiming that the evolution of complex ideas, moral ideals, and aesthetic taste are different from the evolution of animal species, and that the latter cannot explain the former. Dewey says nothing about “the grounds for preferring Einstein to Newton, Beethoven to Bach, or the life of an ascetic to the life of a Wall Street banker.” 32

Nel Noddings, though Dewey’s sympathetic supporter, thinks that Dewey does not provide specific criteria for moral judgment. She is particularly doubtful of Dewey’s scientific and instrumental method, pointing out that his moral theory based upon the scientific method cannot deal with all moral judgment. She claims that in our moral decisions involving should-claims, we need moral criteria as distinguished from non-moral ones—criteria based upon “certain universals in the human condition,” ideas that are “very nearly absolute.” 33 On this point, Noddings seems to join White’s search for the “rock” that is the foundation of morality. Her criticism implies that Dewey’s naturalistic view of growth, based as it is upon the scientific method, can be applied only to that limited realm of our lives where absolute criteria of moral judgment are not involved.
All these critics imply that the comprehensive and distinctively moral dimension of the human life of growth—its ends, ideals, and criteria for good or bad growth—cannot be fully supported by Dewey’s claim of a continuity between the natural and the moral. They are especially doubtful about the transferability of the scientific method employed in the natural realm of “is” to the moral realm of “should.”

*Rorty’s “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin”*

It is this bifurcationist worldview presented by those critics of Dewey’s naturalistic ethics, and their quest for a foundation that Rorty wishes to rebut. Rorty attempts to reconcile a tension between Hegel and Darwin evident in Dewey’s naturalistic view of growth. On the one hand, because of his Hegelian background, Dewey does not give final authority to natural science despite his commitment to the scientific method. On the other hand, he is “sufficiently naturalistic” to think of human beings in Darwinian terms. Dewey is “a pragmatist without being a radical empiricist, and a naturalist without being a panpsychist.”

Based upon this interpretation, Rorty supports the implications of Dewey’s naturalism for his American democratic vision in terms of his antimoralism and antiauthoritarianism—pragmatism’s revolt against a bifurcationist’s worldview. Dewey carried with him a “life-long distaste for the idea of authority—the idea that anything could have authority over the members of a democratic community save the free, collective, decisions of the community.” This is founded on Dewey’s naturalism, “a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature.” Rorty compares Dewey’s vision of democracy to Whitman’s “democratic vistas”—the significance of natural human experience, “something that can be loved with all one’s heart and soul and mind.” Unlike Plato, with his idea of “eros,” or Kierkegaard with his concept of the “Wholly Other,” but not unlike Nietzsche and his “polytheism,” Dewey brings the authority of the moral life back to humans on earth, “an indefinitely expansible pantheon of transitory temporal accomplishments, both natural and cultural.”
Thus, Rorty concludes that Dewey’s God, the “symbol of ultimate concern,” is the sublime diversity seen through human eyes, and created by human experimentation. This supports Dewey’s vision of a democratic community that treasures the potential of each individual. Rorty inherits an asset of Dewey’s naturalistic ethic that opposes a hierarchical distinction between morality and nature—a democratic faith made possible by Dewey’s continuity claim.

Rorty, however, turns Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth in the direction of relativism and antifoundationalism—a direction that disturbs those who express concern about the allegedly ateleological view of Deweyan growth. He does so with his “hypothetical” re-reading of “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” by means of a very Hegelian synthesis of the Hegelian and Darwinian aspects he finds in Dewey. As for Dewey’s Hegelian roots, Rorty’s interpretation is as follows:

Teleological thinking is inevitable, but Dewey offers us a relativist and materialist version of teleology rather than an absolute and idealist one. Whereas Hegel held that the study of history brings over from philosophy the thought that the real is rational, the Hegel-Darwin synthesis Dewey proposes must de-ontologize this claim and make it simply a regulative, heuristic principle.

As for the implication of Dewey’s Darwinian naturalism, Rorty claims:

If one asks why flexibility, articulation, variety, and interestingness are worthy ends to pursue—why they are morally relevant ends for individuals or societies—Dewey has nothing more to tell you than “so act as to increase the meaning of present experience” . . . . Squirrels do what is best by their lights, and so do we. Both of us have been moving in the direction of what seems, by our respective lights, more flexibility.

Thus, by synthesizing his deontologized Hegelian historicism and relativized Darwinian naturalism, Rorty represents Dewey’s pragmatism as socio-cultural relativism. The claim he makes on behalf of Deweyan growth is this: “Growth itself is the only moral end.” For Rorty, naturalistic growth is merely
an expedient activity of an organism’s adjustment to environments—nothing more or less. Beneath his relativist approach, however, the way Rorty explains how Hegel and Darwin join hands in Dewey represents a faith in power and progress typically common to these thinkers—the “teleology” of freedom in the image of infinite expansion that groundlessness enables humans to obtain.

One dominant criticism is directed at Rorty’s Darwinian linguistic behaviorism and his rejection of Dewey’s “metaphysical” account of experience and nature. Against the representation theory of language—the idea that language mirrors the ultimate reality, reality “out there”—Rorty asserts that human beings are simply engaged in contingent language games in which linguistic activities are social and cultural functions. There is no ultimate foundation on which we can rely. From this perspective, Rorty criticizes Dewey’s underdeveloped theory of language: “[Dewey] should then have gone on to note that the development of linguistic behavior—of social practices that used increasingly flexible vocal cords and thumbs to produce longer and more complex strings of noises and marks—is readily explicable in naturalistic, Darwinian terms.”

Rorty is particularly critical of Dewey’s Experience and Nature. In this book, Dewey, in Cornel West’s words, scratches a “metaphysical itch,” an itch that Rorty thinks Dewey should not have scratched. This position of Rorty is elaborated in his explicit criticism of “Dewey’s Metaphysics.” While Rorty acknowledges the contribution of Dewey’s pragmatism as it serves as a philosophy for social and cultural criticism, he is impatient with what he considers the residue of the old metaphysics of experience, the “generic traits” of experience, in Dewey’s Experience and Nature. Rorty attacks the traces of old metaphysical concepts in such phrases as “prime matter” and “thing-in-itself,” found in Dewey’s account of “qualities of interaction.” In Rorty’s view, naturalistic growth as presented by Dewey must be merely an expedient activity of an organism’s adjustment to environments, without any link between experience and nature. Nature is anything but that which gives a deep or spiritual meaning to the activity, as in transcendental idealism or panpsychism. Nor does nature
give a moral end, a telos in the Greek sense. Rorty brings Dewey’s naturalism much closer to a mechanical view of nature, a unification of man and nature by means of “behaviorism and materialism.”47 The following remark by Rorty encapsulates this:

Every speech, thought, theory, poem, composition, and philosophy will turn out to be completely predictable in purely naturalistic terms. Some atoms-and-the-void account of micro-processes within individual human beings will permit the prediction of every sound or inscription which will ever be uttered. There are no ghosts.48

Here Rorty is making a reductionist (eliminative materialist) criticism of Dewey.49 The subtleties of the moral life are subsumed again in the totalizing force of reductionism. This is a “consequence of pragmatism” that Rorty produces out of Dewey’s claim of a continuity between the moral and the natural.

Rorty’s linguistic behaviorism and the breakage of a link between experience and nature are criticized by other Deweyan scholars. They express concern that something crucial in Dewey’s original account of human experience is missing from Rorty’s reinterpretation, and therefore that Rorty’s claims, in James Gouinlock’s words, “undo Dewey’s work, rather than carry it forward.”50 Ralph W. Sleeper claims that Dewey’s theory of communication is supported by generic traits of nature, or its “transformative ontology” — “the transformational character of discourse that is recognized only when the signs of language are seen as works of a social art invented to turn the powers of nature to account.”51 Gouinlock also claims that Dewey’s metaphysics is the attempt to provide “a generic characterization of the human involvement with the nature of things.” That is to say, such features of our surroundings as trees, rivers, fish, animals, friends, enemies, the earth, and implements of all kinds enter into the shared activities of human beings. It is Dewey’s rich account of nature that gives an orchestrated and intelligible account of life experience, man’s intimate continuity with the plural, ever-changing processes of nature. It is this dimension, Gouinlock points out, that is missing from Rorty’s Dewey.52
Likewise, West gives a positive interpretation to what Rorty criticizes as Dewey’s “metaphysical itch.” In West’s view, it serves as “the principal cultural motivation for various scientific and artistic forms of redescriptions and revisions of the world.”

Robert B. Westbrook expresses a similar concern that in Rorty’s Dewey the rich account of the nature of selfhood, the motive of moral behavior, and the meaning of human life disappear—all of which Westbrook claims are the central concerns of Dewey as a philosopher of reconstruction. Westbrook identifies a major difference between Dewey and Rorty in terms of the latter’s lack of the “ground-maps” that philosophers can provide in the course of their cultural criticism, the basis of moral and cultural commitments. Due to this lack, according to Westbrook, Rorty refuses to accept the heart of Dewey’s ethical postulate of democracy, the communitarian view of the unity of self-realization and the social good, and consequently presents his alternative idea of a “liberal utopia” in which private and public spheres are split.

These critics suggest that Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth can support his democratic ideal and that it can offer a far richer, ethically thicker account of human experience than Rorty’s Dewey. They imply that Rorty’s reinterpretation of Dewey is an inadequate response to the bifurcationist criticism of Dewey’s naturalistic ethics. Rorty’s full-fledged negation of the foundation and directionality in Deweyan growth and his mechanization of nature aggravate the concerns of those who need clear, definite moral ends outside the realm of nature.

As much as being loyal to Dewey’s original philosophy, however, his defenders reveal a tendency, to borrow Rorty’s words, to “stick so closely to the letter that they can make no concessions to current audiences . . . They maintain purity of doctrine at the price of having to explain disagreement with Dewey, or refusal to take Dewey seriously.” As a result, they have not yet responded adequately to the questions that have been continuously addressed to Dewey’s idea of growth: What specifically does it mean to keep growing without fixed ends? What is ethical about such a naturalistic stance? How can we obtain a moral source for continuing growth? What is going on in
the moment of growing? And perhaps the most challenging question is: How first of all can we commit ourselves to such an apparently progressive, optimistic view of growth in this age of cynicism? These questions can be understood as those that are directed against the affirmation of the nature of power and progress that runs through Deweyan growth and his pragmatism as a whole—a philosophy that is supported by its Hegelian and Darwinian background. The answers to these questions demand more than a literal interpretation of Dewey’s idea. The sympathetic and critical mapping of Dewey’s position stands in need of a new vocabulary.

Such need is found especially in Dewey’s defenders’ account of his idea of intelligence, or the scientific method of thinking. For example, Gouinlock, in his defense of Dewey against Rorty, shows his own position to be based upon Deweyan “scientific intelligence”—experimental inquiry, a willingness to question, investigate, and learn, a determination to search for clarity in discourse and evidence in argument. Gouinlock writes: “These virtues embrace novelty, innovation, growth, regard for the concerns of others, and scientific discipline. They reject the blind following of custom, authority, and impulse. They preclude not only dogmatism and absolutism, but deliberately hurtful conduct as well.” Though he acknowledges that such a positive stance is supported by Dewey’s awareness of nature’s limitations as much as its possibilities, Gouinlock’s language is characterized by his faith in the “scientific-democratic virtues”—a faith in the democratic freedom of power and progress. It is about such vocabulary or way of speaking that critics of Dewey express their concern, particularly in this age of uncertainty and precariousness.

More recently, Larry Hickman has offered a richer account of Dewey’s concept of intelligence and scientific method through his positive evaluation of Dewey’s views on science and technology. Hickman defends Dewey from the charge of positivistic scientism made by the Frankfurt critical theorists. While scientific realism presupposes objective truth and static structures, Hickman says, Dewey’s conception of scientific method is his instrumentalism: a view that science works to improve tools to resolve problems in life. Facts are
not objective truth, but “facts-of-the-case.” Facts cannot be value-free as in positivistic scientism. Dewey’s is the experimental method of inquiry typically utilized in scientific-technical disciplines but also applicable in other fields. This does not mean, however, Hickman emphasizes, that the scientific-technical method should serve all forms of inquiry, including art, for example; rather, along with other forms of inquiry, scientific method enriches the general pattern of human intelligence by improving the tools and artifacts that we have at our disposal when we seek to overcome difficulties. Intelligence is not static but is in the process of constant refinement and change. Further, Hickman claims that the community of inquirers endorses the desirability of the case as distinct from the subjective state of the desired. In all of these respects, Hickman argues, Dewey’s pragmatism cannot be identified with enlightenment scientism.58

Still, this strand of the defense of Dewey’s concept of intelligence and the scientific method of thinking cannot expel the radical doubts of the critics. In their eyes, the defenders of Dewey faithfully inherit his Hegelian and Darwinian assumptions of power and progress. Particularly in the context of the far more advanced state of science and technology in our times, the defense of Dewey’s idea of intelligence as the human capacity to employ the scientific method to the solution of problems sounds weak. Hickman’s trust in the power of “the community of inquirers” to endorse the desirability of a case invites the kind of question that Andrew Feenberg addresses. In response to Hickman’s defense of Dewey’s pragmatism in the age of technology, Feenberg responds:

[Dewey] lacked the dystopian sensibility that would have brought him face-to-face with the threat of science and technology . . . The constant talk about experimental method, for example, extended into every aspect of life, suggests a narrowly manipulative and intellectualist attitude toward the world. Perhaps Dewey’s thinking is belied by his language as his defenders claim, but it is difficult to overlook nevertheless.59

In the twenty-first-century world, the threat of this dystopian aspect of technology is so much a part of our daily lives, and in this age of
nihilism we can become so easily blind to this danger. The call to overcome this danger merely through the power and desirability of human intelligence and will, from Dewey and Deweyan scholars, sounds naively utopian.

*Putnam’s Defense: A Step Forward*

Hilary Putnam shows us a way beyond Rorty’s Dewey, but in such a way as to be sensitive to those voices of anxiety over Dewey’s pragmatism and naturalistic philosophy of growth. On the one hand, in defense of Dewey’s antibifurcationist claim of the moral and the natural, and against Rorty’s relativist interpretation, Putnam shows us Dewey’s third position beyond foundationalism and antifoundationalism—another sense of “objectivity” that Dewey’s pragmatism points towards. On the other, he elucidates a certain limitation entailed by Dewey’s philosophy of growth based upon the scientific method of thinking.

As a pragmatist, Putnam agrees with Rorty that it is futile to talk about objective reality in terms of “things in themselves.” In his negation of traditional ontology and epistemology in western philosophy, however, Putnam points out that Rorty flatly rejects the addressing of this objectivity in an either-or way—whether there is or is not such a reality “out there.” This dualistic scheme of Rorty’s thinking ignores the undeniable sense of objectivity that is so much a part of our everyday, common experience: our belief that there is a reality of objects in the world that are not the products of thought or language, and that, in the light of this, it behooves us to “get the facts right”; our solid sense that “outside of our skins,” even after we die, events will continue; and the fact that we can still sympathize with the experience of others as something real. In Putnam’s view, these factors in our common sense demonstrate the kind of objectivity that needs to be accounted for, in what might be called “the ordinary notion of representation.” In a way different from traditional representational theory, we are still able to “represent” a certain kind of “objectivity” in the world of human beings, within a third realm that lies between the
world with the absolute ground and one with no ground. Putnam claims that: “Rorty has failed to explore the sort of ‘impossibility’” that we still have to deal with beyond absolute guarantees; that he fails to “inquire into the character of the unintelligibility” of certainty that is entailed in the metaphysical realism that he wishes to attack. In other words, Putnam suggests that Rorty has avoided venturing into an intricate third realm of human experience that lies beyond the either-or choice of metaphysical realism or relativism—a third way that is implied in Dewey’s pragmatism.61

In place of Rorty’s relativist approach, Putnam presents his “realist” defense of Dewey’s pragmatism and antireductionist, nonbifurcated naturalism.62 In Putnam’s view, Dewey is engaged in “the search for a middle way between reactionary metaphysics and irresponsible relativism,” while avoiding both Aristotle’s metaphysical essentialism and early modern realism.63 Putnam acknowledges Dewey’s invaluable contribution toward the idea of the “entanglement of fact and value.”64 Putnam opposes the bifurcated view of the relationship between fact and value that has dominated analytical philosophy: a division between “the true world” composed of objective facts that are “really there,” on the one hand, and a separate realm of value belonging to the world of appearance, on the other.65 Against this dichotomous view, Putnam agrees that there is a continuity between the moral and the natural in Dewey’s naturalism. He claims that Dewey, along with other classic pragmatists, incorporates “the first-person normative point of view” as an essential component in the constitution of facts.66

He also points out that Dewey’s scientific method of inquiry is a way of discovering what is warrantedly assertible about both facts and values.67 It is a method of hypothesis, testing, and experimentation through cooperative inquiry and free communication: what Putnam calls “the democratization of inquiry.”68 In this social procedure, “ethical objectivity” is made possible, even without relying on “a universal set of ‘criteria’” applicable to all situations. He calls this pragmatist concept of objectivity “justification without foundations.”69 This idea of objectivity is an application of Dewey’s concept
of “warranted assertibility,” his pragmatic view of objectivity as being that which is being discovered and revised in the continuous process of inquiry in each specific situation. By tapping this potential in Dewey’s antireductionist naturalism, Putnam shows that Dewey’s pragmatist concept of objectivity presents a third way beyond essentialist realism or positivist objectivism, on the one hand, and beyond subjectivism, idealism or “irresponsible relativism,” on the other. His realist interpretation of pragmatism’s third sense of ethical objectivity helps us better to understand how Dewey’s naturalistic idea of growth, despite its Darwinian basis, can present growth as still capable of having a moral end. As James Conant claims, Putnam’s philosophy has “an overall guiding vision,” and this distinguishes Putnam’s Dewey from Rorty’s.

The implications of Putnam’s realist position are illustrated by his account of Dewey’s philosophy of education. He claims that education for Dewey is the continuous reorganization of the child’s experience for increased connections of meaning. It is conducted with the aim of cultivating children who will be members of a pluralistic, but not relativistic, democratic society—a society that involves cooperative interactions among individuals possessing diverse values. Dewey’s democratic philosophy, Putnam argues, aims to maintain the ideal of cultural interdependence against the fragmentation of society, and suggests a mediated position for multicultural education in America: an alternative way beyond the choice between a relativistic, separationist stance and an assimilationist call for a common “American culture” (or “the submerging of all our differences”). The educative process conducted in smaller, intermediate-level communities is a way of cultivating a larger democratic community based upon the “sufficiently strong bonds of shared interests.” Thus if we follow Putnam’s Dewey, growth without fixed ends does not end up with chaos, but rather, being supported by the method and attitude of democratic inquiry and dialogue, with the search for common ground. To sustain this overall guiding vision, which Putnam argues for on Dewey’s behalf, instead of teaching children merely “facts and skills,” with virtues added alongside, schools should teach children to
test continuously both facts and values through inquiry and experimentation by "applying intelligence to value questions." There is, however, a catch. Despite his help in the defense of Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth, and despite his realist espousal of this third objectivity made possible in Dewey’s theory of inquiry, Putnam has to acknowledge limitations inherent in Dewey’s pragmatism: what he calls “the limits of intelligence as a guide to life.” In other words Putnam restricts the realm of moral life over which Dewey’s scientific method of thinking, or his concept of intelligence, is able to have effect. While he defends Dewey’s concept of social intelligence as exercised in the realm of “social goods,” he asserts that there are other situations in the moral life where Dewey’s naturalistic ethics, insofar as it is based upon scientific method, is powerless. In Putnam’s words, “While Dewey’s social philosophy is overwhelmingly right, as far as it goes, his moral philosophy is less satisfactory when we try to apply it to individual existential choices.” To illustrate this point, Putnam cites Sartre’s character Pierre who makes an existential choice between joining the Resistance and taking care of his mother. Here no generalized method or social perspective, with their totalizing tendencies, applies, but “[i]ndividuation is at stake.” This is the moment when “the limits of intersubjectivity” in Deweyan pragmatism are disclosed.

Putnam suggests that there is a limitation inherent in Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth, one that tries to explain the moral dimension of human life solely based upon the concept of growth associated with the scientific method of thinking. Acknowledgment of this limitation rather than full endorsement of Dewey’s position may mollify the attack from the critics of Dewey. If Putnam is right, however, it means that there is something in Dewey’s pragmatism that makes it inevitable for the private ethical life and the public life to be divided. The method of scientific inquiry and Dewey’s concept of intelligence turn out to be inadequate to serve the moral vision of democracy and education to which he aspires. This not only contradicts Dewey’s own claim of reconciling these two realms, but also undermines the basic line of his pragmatism.
Putnam’s critical defense of Dewey shows us the nature of this limitation—or perhaps the internal tension—in Dewey’s pragmatism, both by being true to his claim of a continuity of the moral and the natural and by disclosing the danger that follows if we simply pursue it: that is, the limit in the scientific method of thinking exposed in a certain dimension of the moral life.

Neither Rorty’s relativist reinterpretation nor Putnam’s realist one can present an adequate defense of Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth in such a way as to save the basic line of his pragmatism. In different ways, Rorty, the Deweyan scholars, and Putnam all disclose the limitations of a totalizing tendency inherent in Dewey’s philosophy of growth where this is interpreted within the framework of “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin.” It is a philosophy of power and progress that stifles the delicate sense of an ethical reality exceeding the dichotomy of foundationalism and antifoundationalism, and the sense of the impossible and the infinite entailed by the path of growth without fixed ends. Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth, when strictly interpreted within the framework of Dewey between Hegel and Darwin, and in the language of scientific method, cannot respond to the concerns of critics steeped in the context of our times. Is this a limitation embedded in the structure of Dewey’s own thought, or is it possible to overcome this impasse from within the structure of his own philosophy?

It is the latter potential that the rest of this book aims to explore. Following on from the contributions made by Rorty, Putnam, and other Deweyan scholars, I shall try to explore another possibility of reconstruction in philosophy in Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth—seeking a way toward Dewey beyond Hegel and Darwin, beyond the philosophies of totality. I shall attempt to show the ethical reality of the possible and impossible that humans undergo in the passage of continuous growing by navigating a middle way beyond foundationalism and antifoundationalism. This I believe is a call from our times, a call to which the task of reconstruction in Dewey’s pragmatism must be dedicated. The task will inevitably require the critical reconstruction of Dewey’s concept of intelligence, for this has been too much associated with the scientific method of thinking.