Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism

Larry Hickman

Published by Fordham University Press

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

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/13300

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=402076
I take as my point of departure the now famous remark by Richard Rorty, that when certain of the postmodernists reach the end of the road they are traveling they will find Dewey there waiting for them. The precise text I have in mind is from the introduction to The Consequences of Pragmatism. It goes like this: “On my view, James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling.”

I freely admit that when Rorty wrote this sentence he probably had something different in mind than what I will suggest here. That much is clear from his remarks on Foucault and Dewey several hundred pages later. He tells us there that the burden of his argument “is that we should see Dewey as having already gone the route Foucault is traveling, and as having arrived at the point Foucault is still trying to reach—the point at which we can make philosophical and historical
Rorty fleshes this point out in an admirable manner when he writes that although Foucault’s philosophy of language and his analysis of power relations seem new, Dewey anticipated both. Even further, he suggests that Foucault’s “structures of power” are not much different from what Dewey described as “structures of culture.”

Just taken as they stand, however, these remarks only allow us to conclude that Dewey is on the same road and has reached the same point that the others have traveled. In what sense is he, as Rorty put it, “waiting at the end of the road”? Rorty thinks that this is a matter of Dewey’s superior vocabulary, which “allows room for unjustifiable hope, and an ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity.”

In what follows I want to indicate some of the ways in which Dewey’s version of Pragmatism can be viewed as having advanced beyond the positions held by some of the authors commonly identified as postmodernists. In other words, I will suggest that Dewey’s Pragmatism can and should be viewed as a form of post-postmodernism. Of course I do not intend to argue that there is any sort of linear progress in philosophy, or that Dewey has somehow leapfrogged postmodernism. There are in fact several important senses in which Dewey is a postmodern thinker. Kwame Anthony Appiah and James Livingston, among others, have called attention to elements of postmodernism in Dewey’s thought, and Livingston has even identified some of those elements as already well formed during the first decades of the twentieth century. What I intend to do instead is identify some of the problems postmodernism leaves unresolved, and then indicate how I think Dewey had already dealt with them early in the twentieth century. It is in this sense that I am terming his variety of Pragmatism post-postmodernism. To put matters another way, it is postmodernism without some of its problems. To put this in some sort of perspective, however, it would probably be good to say something about how I understand the term postmodernism.

What precisely is postmodern about postmodernism? Precision is difficult here, since the term is notoriously slippery. Elizabeth Deeds
Ermarth, who has written an admirable book on the subject,\(^7\) has even gone as far as to suggest that the word may not function so much as a term of reference as a way to “hold open a space for that which exceeds expression.”\(^8\) Postmodernism does refer to specific ideas, although they must be stated negatively. It is fair to say that postmodernism rejects some of the key assumptions, methods, and conclusions of the period from Descartes to Hegel and beyond. In doing so, of course, it also rejects many of the assumptions, methods, and conclusions of the philosophical tradition going all the way back to Plato and Aristotle. In Appiah’s book, this involves the rejection of foundationalism and other forms of epistemological exclusivism, the rejection of metaphysical realism and other forms of ontological exclusivism, and the celebration of such figures as Nietzsche and Dewey.\(^9\)

Ermarth has provided us with what is probably one of the best summary statements of the movement, if indeed that is what we wish to call it. She suggests that postmodernism can be recognized by two key assumptions. “First, the assumption that there is no common denominator—in ‘nature’ or ‘God’ or ‘the future’—that guarantees either the One-ness of the world or the possibility of neutral or objective thought. Second, the assumption that all human systems operate like language, being self-reflexive rather than referential systems—systems of differential function which are powerful but finite, and which construct and maintain meaning and value.”\(^10\)

I find it extremely helpful that she is keen to differentiate postmodernism from its near relative, deconstruction. The latter, she argues, often gets caught up in its own circularity because of its preoccupation with what a text is not, rather than what it is. On the other hand, postmodernism is characterized by its positive efforts to construct meaning in the absence of transcendent value and to find ways of acting in the absence of absolute truth. Despite the fact that some may find this view controversial, I hope that I will be allowed to stipulate it and move on.\(^11\)

While Ermarth provides a tight characterization of what the varieties of postmodernism have in common, Appiah offers a similarly
precise characterization of how they differ by discipline. In technical philosophy, as I have already indicated, Appiah thinks that postmodernism involves the rejection of epistemological and ontological exclusivism and the celebration of such figures as Nietzsche and Dewey. In architecture, postmodernism rejects the exclusivism of function (the styles of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe) in favor of playfulness and pastiche. Postmodernist architects would include the great Antonio Gaudí of Catalonia, as well as the less accomplished but equally playful designers of taco restaurants in the American Southwest that resemble giant sombreros. And then of course there is the incomparable postmodernist architecture of Las Vegas. A third type of postmodernism is encountered in literature, where, Appiah tells us, it is a reaction against the high seriousness of authors such as Marcel Proust, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf. This, I suppose, implies a turn toward the self-reflexive playfulness of authors such as James Joyce and Donald Barthelme. In addition, given the preoccupation of some French and American philosophers with the permutations of the trope, perhaps their work should be considered literary, rather than philosophical, postmodernism. Rorty, a neopragmatist trained in philosophy, was most recently a professor of comparative literature. Appiah finds a fourth type of postmodernism exhibited in political theory. In this case it rejects “scientific” Marxism and other monolithic enterprises and turns instead to a celebration of pluralism and perspectivism. The evolution of the Frankfurt School, to take one important example, supports Appiah’s characterization of political postmodernism. First-generation Critical Theorists, such as Adorno, regarded technoscience as reified ideology, operating apart from and opposed to the activities of the lifeworld. Second-generation Critical Theorists, such as Habermas, focused on social problems of constitutionality and consensus-making. And their third-generation heirs, such as Feenberg and Axel Honneth, by regarding technoscience as embedded in society, thus concentrate on problems of globalization, pluralism, and multiculturalism. (See chapters 4 and 5.)

What all of this boils down to for Appiah is space: postmodernism is, in his view, “a new way of understanding the multiplication of
distinctions that flows from the need to clear oneself a space; the need that drives the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity." "Modernism," he writes, "saw the economization of the world as the triumph of reason; postmodernism rejects that claim, allowing in the realm of theory the same multiplication of distinctions we see in the cultures it seeks to understand." For Appiah, a close observer of modernism in the form of colonialism, postmodernism is culturally liberating. In fact, in various manifestations, postmodernism puts the individual front and center. As a system of communication, postmodernism is more or less the celebration of individual and group differences under an overarching communications superstructure that eventually replaces many of the functions of the nation-state, as Marshall McLuhan described in great detail during the 1960s. In its commercial, and even in its educational, manifestations, it may well turn out to be what some entrepreneurs are now calling "mass customization"—the mass production of objects tailored to individual wants and needs.

At this point it seems appropriate to recall one of the best known statements of postmodernism: the well known remark by Lyotard. In his words, a crucial feature of "the postmodern condition" is the end of "the grand narrative." What does this mean? Even more to the point of the title of this chapter, what does it mean in terms of how we should understand Dewey’s work? Does he avoid some of the problems that continue to plague postmodernism?

If the end of the grand narrative means recognition of the futility of attempts to build metaphysical systems such as those constructed by Hegel and Marx, systems that attempt to encompass everything, then Dewey was already a card-carrying postmodernist more than a century ago. In a letter to James Rowland Angell, dated May 10, 1893, for example, he wrote, “Metaphysics has had its day, and if the truths which Hegel saw cannot be stated as direct, practical truths, they are not true.” An indication of Dewey’s disdain for systematic metaphysics, metaphysics-as-usual, can be found even in familiar remarks addressed to his wife, Alice. In 1891, two years before his "metaphysics has had its day" remark to Angell, Dewey wrote to Alice that he had been approached by a speculator at the Chicago Board of Trade, a
certain Mr. Van Ostrand, who had been working on a philosophical “scheme.” Van Ostrand had offered Dewey $100 to serve as a kind of philosophical consultant. (This was, by the way, no mean sum. We know that just eighteen months earlier Dewey’s annual salary was $2,200.) “For the first time on record,” he told Alice, “in our experience at least, metaphysics made the connexion with the objective world—. . . if there are many men like him in Chicago, I’ll resign & go out there & hang up a sign ‘Dr. Dewey, Metaphysical healer.’”

In short, if Lyotard’s remark about master narratives means that metaphysics-as-system-that-accounts-for-everything is defunct, then Dewey was a postmodernist almost a century before Lyotard’s famous dictum was published in 1979.

There is a second possible interpretation of Lyotard’s remark. The end of the master narrative might be taken to mean that metaphysics in any form is impossible because it claims too much as a privileged position, that the varieties of human experience are at their most fundamental levels ungrounded and incommensurable. On this reading, the best that we can do is cope with that fact by constructing whatever solidarity we can in our roles as “ironists,” in Rorty’s term, that is, people who know that their brave front and best efforts may be futile. As Rorty puts it, “Liberals have come to expect philosophy to do a certain job—namely, answering questions like ‘Why not be cruel?’ and ‘Why be kind?’—and they feel that any philosophy which refuses this assignment must be heartless. But that expectation is a result of a metaphysical upbringing. If we could get rid of the expectation, liberals would not ask ironist philosophy to do a job which it cannot do, and which it defines itself as unable to do.”

So this second possibility seems to reflect Rorty’s version of the postmodernist distaste for metaphysics. If we accept this alternative, then Dewey was not a postmodernist, but held in fact a position that is much richer and goes well beyond that feckless view of matters. In other words, Dewey was a post-postmodernist.

Of course there is an irony that Rorty may not have fully appreciated. The positivism he dislikes and the postmodernism he apparently likes, share an interesting trait: they both hold the position that
philosophy is incapable of addressing ethical issues such as the ones that Rorty raised in the passage just quoted. In the case of positivism it is because such issues are consigned to the jam-packed realm of everything that is noncognitive. In the case of Rortian postmodernism, it is because there is no adequate common denominator for human experience.) Bruno Latour is among the few thinkers who have noted this remarkable situation. In a 1993 interview, for example, he charged “much of postmodernism” with being scientistic: “They are not indignant at the ahuman dimension of technology—again they leave indignation to the moderns—no, they like it. They relish its completely naked, sleek, ahuman aspect. In other words, they accept the disenchantment argument, but they just take it as a positive feature instead of a negative one.”

How did Dewey go beyond postmodernism in this context? How did he resolve some of its core difficulties? Put simply, he argued that there is a commonality of human experience that can ultimately trump the compartmentalizing, hyperrelativistic tendencies latent in most forms of postmodernism. This view, which is a part of his evolutionary naturalism, is grounded in the empirical observations and experimental work of anthropologists and evolutionary biologists. For human beings inquiry is an essential component of communication, which can construct pluralistic links across otherwise isolated cultures and disciplines. Another important common feature humans share, Dewey contends, is our ability to do the type of cognitive, reconstructive work with respect to our environing conditions, including our social conditions, that allows us to think in terms of those common features.

This general cultural point is sharpened and called upon to do a prodigious amount of philosophical work in Dewey’s famous remark about the role of philosophy as “liaison officer.” In *Experience and Nature* he writes, “Thus philosophy as a critical organ becomes in effect a messenger, a liaison officer, making reciprocally intelligible voices speaking provincial tongues, and thereby enlarging as well as rectifying the meanings with which they are charged” (LW 1.306). This metaphor, by the way, has distinct advantages over some of its
alternatives. It is more positive than getting flies out of fly bottles, it is more active than philosophy as *platzhalter*, and it is less imperious than philosophy as *platzfinder*. The first of these alternative metaphors, of course, we owe to Wittgenstein. The latter two we owe to Habermas, who accepts the first and rejects the second.

Dewey is thus a postmodernist in the sense that he rejects the notion that there is some foundation of certainty on which we can stand. He made that much clear early on, and put the matter to rest in his important little book *The Quest for Certainty*. But he is post-postmodernist in the sense that he reconstructed and put to work what the postmodernists had simply dismissed: a set of organic functions or activities that are natural to human beings as a group, that reveal their common evolution, and that can be employed as a part of the process of testing and securing desired ends. He argued, for example, that human communication, within which inquiry is embedded, is as natural an activity as chewing or walking.

If we fast-forward some thirty-two years past the “metaphysics is dead” remark that Dewey wrote to Angell and take the measure of his understanding of metaphysics in *Experience and Nature* (1925), then we find him criticizing both modernist and postmodernist conceptions. Whereas he had washed his hands of systematic metaphysics earlier in his career, he rejects the view that metaphysics should be abandoned altogether. His naturalism compels him to reconstruct the term and the enterprise for which it stands. He wants to break new ground. Of course there is still a postmodernist component to his efforts: he has jettisoned what philosophers from Plato to Hegel and beyond held dear, namely an “antecedent metaphysics of existence” (LW 1.49). This is without a doubt one of the features of his thought that has led Appiah to include him among postmodernists, or at least as having inspired postmodernists.

Put another way, if we take Ermarth’s suggestion that for postmodernism “there is no common denominator—in ‘nature’ or ‘God’ or ‘the future’—that guarantees either the One-ness of the world or the possibility of neutral or objective thought,” then Dewey’s naturalistic metaphysics goes beyond this skeptical claim to the more mature
position that there are, after all, common features of human experience, among which are those he calls “the generic traits of existence.” As for the matter of objectivity, Dewey’s treatment is similar to that since advanced by Bruno Latour: objectivity means that something can be experimentally objected to within a community of inquiry, perhaps even one that is very broad indeed.

So we must read Dewey with care. To his attentive readers, it is clear he is not interested in merely exhuming the corpse of Enlightenment reason and giving it a new set of clothes. That critics as different as Bertrand Russell and Max Horkheimer accused him of doing something like this is a comment not about his work but about their careless reading of it. For all of his praise of Francis Bacon’s experimentalism, Dewey is doing something much more interesting than merely restating, or even reinstating, modernism. He seems to be saying that once opponents of Enlightenment rationality tire, and once cultural criticism mires in irrelevant or divisive relativism, self-reflexivity that eclipses referentiality, or hopeless preoccupation with irony, then it will be time for a renewed attention to what he terms “the denotative method,” that is, experimental attention to the pushes and pulls of existential affairs. Philosophy, having abandoned observation and experiment in favor of arcane stylistic felicities, will once again have to become more public, more vigorous. Philosophy will once again have to regain its footing by addressing some of the core problems of postmodernism.

Philosophy can remain relevant, indeed vigorous, as it employs what Dewey called “the denotative method.” This denotation is, of course, not one of simple correspondence. It is rather experimental, reconstructive, and dialogical. The experiential or denotative method, Dewey writes,

tells us that we must go behind the refinements and elaborations of reflective experience to the gross and compulsory things of our doings, enjoyments and sufferings—to the things that force us to labor, that satisfy needs, that surprise us with beauty, that compel obedience under penalty. A common divisor is a convenience,
and a greatest common divisor has the greatest degree of convenience. But there is no reason for supposing that its intrinsic “reality” or truth is greater than that of the numbers it divides. The objects of intellectual experience are the greatest common divisor of the things of other modes; they have that remarkable value, but to convert them into exclusive reality is the sure road to arbitrary divisions and insoluble problems. (LW 1.375–76)

Dewey’s post–postmodernist assessment of the human situation will, I suggest, turn out to provide the advantage of objectivity without the disadvantages of inflexible modernist foundationalism and disconnected, deracinated postmodernist topologies.

In order to see what is at stake, it may be helpful to understand this dialectic between modernism and postmodernism as reflecting the ancient struggle between classicism and romanticism. The classical position of the modernists—with its emphasis on foundationalism, essentialism, and realism—demands narrow discipline and thus forecloses many of our options. The space it provides now seems closed and cramped. But the romanticism of the postmodernists—with its emphasis on uprootedness, narrativity, and nominalism—tends to be short on discipline and thus promise what it cannot deliver. The space it provides is so open that it is able to provide little in the way of obstacle. It is within the arena where these two positions come into conflict that we find some of Dewey’s most fertile insights.

Dewey expands these ideas when he contrasts his post–postmodernist metaphysics to the modernist metaphysics of fixity and certainty only forty-seven pages into Experience and Nature. A careful reader can also ascertain a response to those postmodernists who argue that metaphysics überhaupt, including metaphysics as the study of the generic traits of existence, is now defunct.

We live in a world which is an impressive and irresistible mixture of sufficiencies, tight completenesses, order, recurrences which make possible prediction and control, and singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibilities, processes going on to consequences as yet indeterminate. They are mixed not mechanically but vitally like the wheat and tares of the parable. We may recognize them
separately but we cannot divide them, for unlike wheat and tares they grow from the same root. Qualities have defects as necessary conditions of their excellencies; the instrumentalities of truth are the causes of error; change gives meaning to permanence and recurrence makes novelty possible. A world that was wholly risky would be a world in which adventure is impossible, and only a living world can include death. Such facts have been celebrated by thinkers like Heracleitus and Lao-tze; they have been greeted by theologians as furnishing occasions for exercise of divine grace; they have been elaborately formulated by various schools under a principle of relativity, so defined as to become itself final and absolute. They have rarely been frankly recognized as fundamentally significant for the formation of a naturalistic metaphysics. (LW 1.47)

Dewey then clarifies what he means by a naturalistic metaphysics, returning to the theme of communication, and thus inquiry, as natural functions of the human organism.

A naturalistic metaphysics is bound to consider reflection as itself a natural event occurring within nature because of traits of the latter. It is bound to inference from the empirical traits of thinking in precisely the same way as the sciences make inferences from the happening of suns, radio-activity, thunder-storms or any other natural event. Traits of reflection are as truly indicative or evidential of the traits of other things as are the traits of these events. (LW 1.62)

In short, we live in a world that is both precarious and stable. Ours is a world in which a certain amount of knowledge is necessary if we are to avoid disaster, and in which even more knowledge is required if we are to flourish. Common-sense knowledge, based on observation, and scientific knowledge, based on experimentation, are key ingredients in this mix, but they are not enough. The problem is that inquiry has proceeded over the centuries in ways that have left vestigial structures, cul-de-sacs, detritus, and other impediments to clear thinking. Once-valuable materials, now toxic, separate mind from body, subject from object, human beings from nature, individual
from society. Infelicitous remnants of dualistic metaphysical expeditionary adventures continue to block the road to inquiry. In short, there is a lot of junk that has been left rusting on the philosophical landscape, some of it corrosive of thought.

One of the ways to clean up this polluted landscape is to develop a sound philosophical ecology. Against the modernists, Dewey therefore proposes that we cease our attempts to attain certain knowledge of Being in general, and proceed instead with an investigation of the generic traits of existence. Against the postmodernists, he argues that these traits are empirically available, that they are assumed by science, and that they include such items as “structure and process, substance and accident, matter and energy,” to name a few (LW 1.67).

This, then, is the “special service” that Dewey thinks the study of philosophy renders. At its most basic level, philosophy employs a set of discipline-specific tools in its attempt to come to terms with lived experience. But this enterprise often runs into difficulties. Our experiences are already “overlaid and saturated with the products of the reflection of past generations and by-gone ages.” We encounter the many interpretations, classifications, and abstractions that Dewey terms “prejudices” (he uses this term in its neutral sense). It is not possible to go back and see how all these prejudices got established, but we can use philosophical tools to criticize them and sort them out. As Dewey puts it, “These incorporated results of past reflection, welded into the genuine materials of first-hand experience, may become organs of enrichment if they are detected and reflected upon. If they are not detected, they often obfuscate and distort. Clarification and emancipation follow when they are detected and cast out; and one great object of philosophy is to accomplish this task” (LW 1.40).

The prejudices that lie strewn all about us can either cause us to stumble, endangering ourselves and others, or we can seek them out, haul them in, melt them down, and recycle them as materials for fabricating something more useful. The one thing we should not do, however, is declare that metaphysics is at an end and retire to the cocktail party or the library. The wreckage of modernist metaphysics cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand any more than can the
wreckage of past industrial excess. This is because there are still people attempting to negotiate a terrain that is littered with religious and philosophical junk. As long as it is accepted that the mind and the body are ontologically distinct, for example, then insurance companies will be able to claim rational grounds for insuring the health of the body while ignoring the health of the organism as a whole. And as long as it is accepted that human beings are bodies in which there dwells a literal, immortal soul, then many men and women will be tempted to neglect the pressing needs of the here and now even while attending to the putative prospects of the hereafter.19

It is in this connection that Dewey characterizes metaphysics as a “ground-map” of the province of criticism. On one interpretation this means that we need a map to find our way among potentially dangerous metaphysical entities so that we can avoid injuring ourselves. But we also need the map to find out what such things are covering up, what they conceal, thereby getting a better picture of the landscape. In a passage that is now quite famous, Dewey writes, “Qualitative individuality and constant relations, contingency and need, movement and arrest are common traits of all existence. This fact is source both of values and of their precariousness; both of immediate possession which is casual and of reflection which is a pre-condition of secure attainment and appropriation. Any theory that detects and defines these traits is therefore but a ground-map of the province of criticism, establishing base lines to be employed in more intricate triangulations” (LW 1.308–9).

Dewey’s post–postmodernist metaphysics, then, constitutes an attempt to reconstruct that enterprise along naturalistic lines. In Experience and Nature he works out what he had tentatively advanced ten years earlier, in 1915, in his essay “The Subject Matter of Metaphysical Inquiry.” He continues to eschew speculation about first and last things, he continues his attempt to undercut reliance on unwarranted hypostatized entities, and he treats inquiry into Being qua Being as a historical curiosity.

He also denies the claims of those who argue that there is no longer any place for metaphysics. He attempts to take account of the fact
that the generic traits of existence are too complex to be the subject of common-sense observation and too general to be the subject of scientific experimentation. He expands on his claim that the generic traits are assumed by science. He locates his reconstructed metaphysics in the context of the live creature transacting business with its environing conditions.

Dewey’s attack on modernist metaphysics thus provides an alternative to the claim of some postmodernists that metaphysics is at an end, as well as an alternative to the claim that philosophy no longer has anything interesting to say about cruelty or kindness, for example, and an alternative to the claim that there is “no common denominator . . . that guarantees the One-ness of the world or the possibility of neutral or objective thought.” Dewey’s post-postmodernism calls each of these positions to account.

There are no doubt those who will object that at the end of his life Dewey had a change of heart regarding the possibility of a naturalistic metaphysics. In an essay published in 1949, as he was approaching his birthday, Dewey announced that his attempts to reconstruct the term had failed. He promised never to use the word again in connection with his own position.

But that is not the full story. Dewey gave up the word, but not the enterprise. As for the enterprise, or what he had accomplished in terms of reconstructing the traditional discipline of metaphysics, he happily stood by that. And why? Simply because the point of recognizing generic traits, as he put it, “lies in their application in the conduct of life: that is, in their moral bearing provided moral be taken in its basic broad human sense” (LW 16.389). In other words, his reconstructed metaphysics—whatever it might come to be called—has a connection to the existential, which is to say objective, world that exhibits certain generic traits.

Returning once again to Lyotard’s famous remark, there is a third interpretation. If the first interpretation has to do with the end of abstract metaphysical systems, and the second with the end of metaphysics generally, then the third might be understood to mean the end of the idea that the physical sciences are the models and measures
for all other types of experience. In this sense it would signal the end of the positivist program advanced by philosophers such as Rudolf Carnap and Hans Reichenbach from the 1930s to the 1960s. Proponents of this view, in its most extreme form, held that, “all philosophy can be reduced either to the physical sciences or to lexicography,” as one of the professors for whom I worked as a graduate student was still moved to tell his freshmen as late as 1965. But of course Dewey was postmodernist in this special sense as well. He was an ardent opponent of the positivists, rejecting their protocol sentences, their view of the nature of truth, and their various forms of reductionism and foundationalism.

Of the logical positivists Dewey wrote to Arthur F. Bentley, in a letter dated March 5, 1939, that “the profession seems to absolve them for responsibility for examining their own basic postulates—or finding out what they are.”22 On July 10, 1940, Max Otto wrote to Dewey, “I was talking with a number of students this morning who are here for summer school and have had courses in Positivism before they came. They wanted to know what illumination or help of any kind they were expected to get out of a study which they were assured [sic] demonstrated the meaninglessness of philosophy. I was not able to help them out. Perhaps you can help me out. If you do, I will pass the information on to them.”23

Dewey responded, “It seems to be at least hopeful that the students reacted to Logical Positivism they [sic] way they did—of course there are a number always who like manipulating symbols, but who haven’t had the energy or opportunity or skill to learn to do it in mathematics where at least it is something with a background & foreground. Im [sic] about convinced that most of this logistics is just pseudo-mathematics.”24

In his revised introduction to Experience and Nature, written in 1949, Dewey’s assessment of the positivists was even more acerbic. They assume, he wrote,

that science as a total enterprise is inherently non-self-supportive,
that it is necessarily incapable of supplying itself with whatever
“foundations” it may need and hence it is the task of the new type of rigoristic philosophers and their Logic to do for science what science cannot do for itself.

In view of the fly-blown condition of most of what passes as “logic” today there is something outright comical, rather than merely ironical, in the assumption that Logic is the author of and authority for the required foundations. This claim of competence is supposedly based on the fact that the new Logic is formulated in esoteric symbols which simulate, at least in form, the symbolism of mathematics. But the “foundations” of mathematics have undergone a radical, indeed, a revolutionary change. The old view that mathematical subject-matter is deduced from an ultimate set of self-evident or axiomatic truths has been supplanted by the view that the ultimates, the “foundations” of the mathematical enterprise are deliberately designed postulates. The method of postulation puts mathematical subject-matter beyond the need of any “foundation” supplied from without. The old view produced Kant. The ultra-moderns are, unwittingly, neo-Kantians of a very special and very peculiar sort. (LW 1.350)

These texts should provide sufficient evidence that Dewey viewed the brief reign of the logical positivists as one of modernism’s final gasps, since new ways of thinking had already rendered their versions of foundationalism untenable. It was, of course, highly ironic that the positivists’ criticism of traditional metaphysics tended to be buttressed by stripped down metaphysical positions of their own.

Nevertheless, Dewey refused to respond to the outsized claims of modernism as have some postmodernists. Take the claim by Ermarth, for example, that “all human systems operate like language, being self-reflexive rather than referential systems—systems of differential function which are powerful but finite, and which construct and maintain meaning and value.” (See Ermarth, endnote 10) If not taken cautiously, this remark would be understood to disallow even the minimal referentiality that is required to account for the successes of common-sense inquiries, to say nothing of the experiments mounted by the natural sciences. In Dewey’s post-postmodernism, scientific results are constructed, to be sure. But they are neither arbitrary nor are they constructed out of nothing.
If Dewey was postmodernist in his disdain for the modernist program of the positivists, as well as in developing his own version of constructivism, then he was anything but postmodernist in terms of his interest in logic and his commitment to working out a theory of living inquiry, of which his treatment of metaphysics was an integral part. I have trolled the works of Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and even the master postmodernist Lyotard, in search of a comprehensive and coherent theory of inquiry. Nothing I have found approaches the treatment that Dewey gave the subject in his logic books of 1903, 1916, and 1938, and in the numerous published essays that served as sketches for, and clarifications of, those works.

Dewey developed his own moderate form of constructivism, then, and this is one of the senses in which he was a postmodernist. From a Pragmatist perspective, however, what seems to be missing in postmodernism, and what Dewey provides as a corrective, is a theory of experimental inquiry that takes its point of departure from real, felt existential affairs. And this analysis of the generic traits of existence is one of the areas in which Dewey’s work shines brightly as what I have termed post-postmodernism.