I argue that Dewey and the pragmatic thinkers were really ahead of their times. Dewey is relevant today in helping us to gain some perspective on our extremely confused and chaotic cultural condition. Furthermore, the dialectic of contemporary philosophy keeps leading us back to the point of departure for the pragmatic thinkers. This is especially evident in the revival of the centrality of the concept of a democratic community. I also seek to clarify what is most important about the pragmatic understanding of pluralism. For, while there is a deep sensitivity to irreducible difference and the variety of experience, there is also a conviction that we are not prisoners locked into our own perspectives, frameworks, and paradigms. We can always reach out, communicate, and share with what is other and different from ourselves.

When I was asked to give the John Dewey Lecture, I considered it a marvelous opportunity to return to my intellectual roots, for I started my philosophic career by writing my dissertation on John Dewey. "Return" is not quite the appropriate expression, for everything that I’ve written since the early 1950s has been infused and informed by the spirit of Dewey and, more generally, by what I take to be best and most enduring in the pragmatic tradition. I know all too well that, for a long time, Dewey has been considered rather passé, a fuzzy-minded thinker who perhaps had his heart in the right place but not his head. And there are those who still think that Dewey is the source of the ills that have plagued American education. I think this is a slander. More boldly, I believe not only that Dewey and the pragmatic thinkers are not passé but that they were really ahead of their times. What I see happening now is a reemergence of pragmatic themes. It is almost as if the dialectic of contemporary philosophy in its diverse modes keeps leading us back to the point of departure for the pragmatic thinkers. Dewey was never more relevant than he is today—in helping...
us to gain some perspective, some orientation on our extremely confused and chaotic cultural condition. This is the thesis that I want to explore with you.

Let me begin with a claim that Dewey made in *Democracy and Education.* “If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education” (Dewey 1966, p. 328). This was a central motif in Dewey, and it has a classical ring. Dewey, who called for a reconstruction in philosophy, or rather of philosophy, never abandoned the idea that philosophy as the “criticism of criticisms” ought to be concerned with nurturing practical wisdom, with the fostering of “creative reflective intelligence.” He was suspicious of the tendency of philosophers to become exclusively preoccupied with the “problems of philosophy” and to forget about the “problems of men”—the problems of human beings in their everyday lives. He rejected the very idea of philosophy as some sort of super science with its own distinctive problems and methods—a discipline that has special access to Truth and Reality. He thought that philosophy is—or rather ought to be—grounded in the deepest cultural conflicts of one’s time, seeking to define and clarify them, to provide us with guidance in resolving them and enabling us to work toward a more desirable future. He was a relentless critic of what he took to be the sterility of epistemology and the obsession of so much of modern philosophy with “the quest for certainty” and “the spectator theory of knowledge.” He believed, to use the Heideggerian expression, that we are “thrown” into the world with no absolute foundations or absolute ends. But this should be a cause for neither radical skepticism nor despair. For all of Dewey’s emphasis on future consequences, he knew that we are always being shaped by inherited traditions. It is the constant task of the reconstruction of the present that was his central concern. What he once wrote about William James might well be said about Dewey himself. “And long after ‘pragmatism’ in any sense as an application of his *Weltanschauung* shall have passed into a not unhappy oblivion, the fundamental idea of an open universe in which uncertainty, choice, hypotheses, novelties and possibilities are naturalized will remain associated with the name of James; the

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more he is studied in his historic setting the more original and daring will the idea appear” (Dewey 1970, p. 440).

Like Peirce and James, Dewey emphasized that the cosmos and our experience are an inextricable mixture of the stable and the precarious. We are neither simply playthings of forces that are always working behind our backs nor creatures who can gain complete understanding and control over our destinies. We are always confronted with uncertainty and choice.

Dewey knew that much of modern philosophy and culture has been plagued by “The Cartesian Anxiety”—the grand Either/Or. As I have written elsewhere, “either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelope us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos.” In both word and deed, Dewey sought to exorcise this anxiety, to cure us of the conviction that these are the only alternatives open to us.

He shared with Peirce the belief that “we cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned” (Peirce 1931–35, 5:264). But, although we can never escape from our historical situatedness, we can risk, test, and modify our prejudgments through communal critical inquiry. Dewey had a strong sense of both the historicity and the contextualism of all inquiry and experience, but he was well aware of, and deeply opposed, what Karl Popper has called the “Myth of the Framework,” a metaphor that suggests that “we are prisoners caught in the framework of our theories; our expectations; our past experiences; our language” (Popper 1970, p. 56), and that we are so locked into these frameworks we cannot communicate with those encased in “radically” different frameworks or paradigms. My own belief is that a primary reason why philosophers have recently become so obsessed with radical relativism and incommensurability is that this reflects what is happening in our everyday lives where we experience the phenomenon of becoming entrenched in limited languages, horizons, and paradigms. Even the term “dialogue” has been debased so that it frequently means little more than attempting to manipulate each other. But for Dewey genuine communication, dialogue, or critical encounter based on mutual understanding is always a real possibility, but it is a possibility that requires passionate practical commitment to be realized.

There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in
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virtue of the things which they have in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding. . . . Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another, like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces. The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions—like ways of responding to expectations and requirements. [Dewey 1966, p. 4]

And for Dewey, the very idea of such a community and communication—carried to its logical conclusion—entailed the ideal of a democratic community. Democracy for Dewey was not primarily a form of government or a set of formal procedures for making decisions. It was a moral ideal, a way of life. “For every way of life that fails in democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation . . . which all share and to which all contribute” (Dewey 1951, p. 394).

What breathes through these passages about communication and democracy is the sense of community as a practical task, a task requiring commitment and that “has to be carried on day by day.” Dewey would have strongly endorsed a recent eloquent statement of the quintessence of democratic politics.

Democratic politics is an encounter among people with differing interests, perspectives, and opinions—an encounter in which they reconsider and mutually revise opinions and interests, both individual and common. It happens always in a context of conflict, imperfect knowledge, and uncertainty, but where community action is necessary. The resolutions achieved are always more or less temporary, subject to reconsideration, and rarely unanimous. What matters is not unanimity but discourse. The substantive common interest is only discovered or created in democratic political struggle, and it remains contested as much as shared. Far from being inimical to democracy, conflict—handled in democratic ways, with openness and persuasion—is what makes democracy work, what makes for the mutual revision of opinions and interest. [Pitkin and Shumer 1982, pp. 47–48]

Dewey was well aware of all those tendencies in contemporary technological societies that undermine, distort, destroy, and inhibit the
material conditions required for democratic communities. And it is because of this that he was so concerned with the character and fate of our schools.

This theme was already clearly announced in 1897 in “My Pedagogic Creed,” when he declared “much of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life” and told us that “education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience” (Dewey 1981, pp. 446, 450). Let us not forget that, from his earliest reflections on education and the schools, Dewey not only opposed “deadness and dullness, formalism and routine” but also “sentimentalism”—“our education is threatened with no greater evil than sentimentalism.” “Extreme depreciations of the child morally and intellectually, and sentimental idealizations of him, have their root in a common fallacy. Both spring from taking stages of a growth or movement as something cut off and fixed” (Dewey 1981, p. 473).

Dewey constantly advocated the cultivation of creative intelligence. Intelligence “is not the faculty or intellect honored in textbooks and neglected elsewhere, but...is the sum-total of impulses, habits, emotions, records, and discoveries which forecast what is desirable and undesirable in future possibilities.” (Dewey 1981, p. 96). The meaning of intelligence for Dewey is similar to what the Greeks called phronesis—practical moral judgment. And, like Aristotle, Dewey believed it only comes into being when it is carefully nurtured, when moral character (hexis) is formed.

What Dewey wrote in 1917 strikes me as even more appropriate and relevant for us today.

We thus tend to combine a loose and ineffective optimism and assent to the doctrine of take who take can: a deification of power. All peoples at all times have been narrowly realistic in practice and have then employed idealization to cover up in sentiment and theory their brutalities. But never, perhaps, has the tendency been so dangerous and so tempting as with ourselves. Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation. And it is a faith which must be nurtured and made articulate: surely a sufficiently large task for our philosophy. [Dewey 1981, p. 97]

James once wrote that “A man’s vision is the great fact about him” and that, “If we take the whole history of philosophy, the systems reduce themselves to a few main types which, under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelopes them, are
just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience, and on the whole preferred—there is no other truthful word—as one's best working attitude" (James 1977, pp. 14–15). There are many professional philosophers who are scandalized by this characterization of philosophy, but I have always felt that what James says is both incisive and honest. And certainly—in this sense—Dewey was a man of vision.

But what happened? Why did Dewey fade from the American philosophic scene? Why is it that Dewey, who inspired so many during his lifetime, has become such a “marginal” figure? For the brutal truth is that Dewey has been scarcely taken seriously by professional philosophers—almost ruled out of the “canon” of reading lists of our graduate philosophy departments. To properly answer these questions would require nothing less than an analysis of American culture during the past 30 years. Let me fill in one small part of this story—a story that can serve as a parable for not only understanding what has happened to us but also for grasping why I believe the time is ripe for a robust reappropriation of the pragmatic spirit.

By the 1950s, Dewey had already been thrust aside to the margins of mainstream professional philosophy. There was a new “tough-mindedness” and the reiteration of a pattern that has been repeated over and over again in the course of modern philosophy. This pattern, exemplified by Descartes in his Meditations, is one where there is profound discontent with previous styles of philosophizing, an attempt to diagnose precisely what has gone wrong, a need to place philosophy on firmer foundations, to specify what are and are not legitimate philosophic problems, and to articulate the correct methods for solving and/or dissolving them—so that philosophy will finally escape being the endless battleground of competing opinions and discover a secure pathway for achieving genuine knowledge. Not only Descartes, but Spinoza, Hume, Kant, and Husserl—logical positivists and phenomenologists have all shared this basic conviction. Indeed it is the typical stance of most modern philosophers. Ever since the rise of modern science, philosophers have frequently been on the defensive and have desired to secure their discipline on firm foundations. Let us remember that, already during the 1930s, the émigré philosophers from Europe who were associated with logical positivism and empiricism were becoming the new philosophic heroes in America. Reichenbach, Feigl, Bergmann, Carnap, Tarski, and Hempel (among others) were rapidly replacing the classic American philosophers as setting the agenda for philosophy. Logical positivism in the militant form of the Vienna Circle or in the polemical form of A. J. Ayer did not take deep roots
in America, but the positivist temper and the legacy of the philosophy of the natural sciences and logic did flourish. There was even the creation of the myth that what was viable and enduring in the American pragmatic tradition was stated with greater clarity and precision by the logical empiricists. After the Second World War, there was a growing confidence among professional philosophers. Yes, it was felt philosophy must give up its claims to synthesis, speculation, and “vision.” Its domain needed to be severely restricted to the analysis of well-defined problems. But we presumably now had discovered the conceptual and logical tools to make real progress in solving the outstanding problems of philosophy.

My contemporary, Richard Rorty, has captured the mood of this time when he writes,

In 1951, a graduate student who (like myself) was in the process of learning about, or being converted to, analytic philosophy, could still believe that there were a finite number of distinct specifiable philosophic problems to be resolved—problems which any serious analytic philosopher would agree to be the outstanding problems. For example, there was the problem of the counterfactual conditional, the problem of whether an “emotive” analysis of ethical terms was satisfactory, Quine’s problem about the nature of analyticity, and a few more. These were problems which fitted nicely into the vocabulary of the positivists. They could easily be seen as the final, proper formulation of problems which had been seen, as in a glass darkly by Leibniz, Hume, and Kant. Further there was agreement on what a solution to a philosophic problem looked like—e.g., Russell on definite descriptions, Frege on meaning and reference, Tarski on truth. In those days, when my generation was young, all the conditions for a Kuhnian “normal” problem-solving discipline were fulfilled. [Rorty 1982, p. 215]

Ironically, Dewey’s and James’s worst fears about what might happen to philosophy in America with the growth of academic professionalism seemed to be coming true with a vengeance. During the 1950s, there was almost a scurrying to reshape graduate philosophy departments into “respectable” analytic departments. There were, of course, pockets of resistance, but, at the time, those who resisted this “new wave” felt that they were on the defensive. Professional philosophers were tone deaf to Dewey’s warning when he wrote, “I believe that philosophy in America will be lost between chewing a historic cud long since reduced to woody fiber, or an apologetics for lost causes (lost to natural science), or a scholastic, schematic formalism, unless ... can somehow bring to consciousness America’s own needs and its own implicit prin-
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ciples of successful action” (Dewey 1981, p. 96). As far as philosophers were concerned, the philosophy of education was relegated to the dustbin of history, along with much of political and social philosophy.

I do not want to denigrate the achievements of analytic philosophy or what we have learned and continue to learn from it. It certainly has brought a finesse of argumentation to a whole variety of issues. But it was the ideology of this new style of philosophy—its intolerance to other styles of philosophizing, its exclusionary tactics—that were so objectionable and soon exploded. What has happened, even in analytic philosophy since those early days of arrogant optimism, is a complex story. Rorty’s characterization is perhaps an exaggeration but is nevertheless revealing.

In the interlocking “central” areas of analytic philosophy—epistemology, philosophy of language, and metaphysics—there are now as many paradigms as there are major philosophy departments. . . . Any problem that enjoys a simultaneous vogue in ten of the hundred or so “analytic” philosophy departments in America is doing exceptionally well. The field these days is a jungle of competing research programs which seem to have a shorter and shorter half-life as the years go by. . . . There is no more consensus about the problems and methods of philosophy in America today than there was in Germany in 1920. . . . The best hope for an American philosopher is Andy Warhol’s promise that we shall all be superstars, for approximately fifteen minutes apiece. [Rorty 1982, p. 216].

Rorty’s sketch may be an oversimplification, but I do not think it is a caricature. It does not do justice to the achievements of the analytic style of philosophizing, and it fails to take account of the sheer variety of philosophy in America. For, no school, orientation, or paradigm has ever completely dominated the scene.

When Kuhn in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions describes what he calls the “response to crisis,” he tells us, “The proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the recourse . . . to debate over fundamentals, all of these are symptoms of a transition from normal to extraordinary research” (Kuhn 1970, p. 91). Something like this certainly seems to characterize the present philosophic scene. When I said earlier that the story of philosophy during the past 30 years might serve as a parable, I meant that the almost chaotic babble of competing voices is characteristic of the range of cultural experience, including education. It has become increasingly fashionable to speak of our time as a “postera”—“postmodernity,” “poststructuralist,” “postempiricist,” “post-
Western,” and even “postphilosophic,”—but nobody seems to be able to properly characterize this “postera,”—and there is an inability and anxiety in naming it. Fragmentation, jaggedness, decentering, deconstruction, a frenetic giddy whirl of overturning seems to be the “common” experience of our time. If we are honest, then I think we must realize that the confusion and chaos of our cultural lives are themselves a reflection of what is happening in our everyday lives where there is a spread of almost wild pluralism. There is a further irony. For all the squabbles among intellectuals, for all their talk of radical critiques, their discourse does seem to be more and more remote from the felt needs and problems we experience every day.

We can roughly distinguish three responses to our current situation. There are those who perceive it as a sign of a dangerous wave of irrationalism and nihilism. Among philosophers, there are those who think that now more than ever we must be “guardians of reason,” upholding rigorous standards of argumentation and clarity. There are those who delight in the present disorder and see it as liberating us from the exclusions, hierarchies, and blindness of inherited patterns of thought and language. And there are those (I include myself in this group) who think that, while we must confront penetrating critiques, nevertheless, we can see the present as an opportunity and challenge for reconstruction—the type of reconstruction that Dewey called for.

When *Reconstruction in Philosophy* was republished in 1950, Dewey wrote a new introduction in which he declared, “Today Reconstruction of Philosophy is a more suitable title than Reconstruction in Philosophy. For the intervening events have sharply defined, have brought to a head, the basic postulate of the text: namely that the distinctive office, problems and subject matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life in which a given form of philosophy arises, and that, accordingly, as its specific problems vary with the changes in human life that are always going on and that at times constitute a crisis and a turning point in human history” (Dewey 1950, pp. v, vi). There are many signs that we are now coming to appreciate what Dewey meant when he wrote this. Without denying the apparent confusion in philosophy and cultural life, what impresses me is the way in which pragmatic themes keep surfacing.

Also, there is a growing sense that professional philosophy has become marginal to what Rorty calls the “conversation of mankind” and a need for philosophy to confront again the problems of human beings. There is a growing realization that the foundational projects that have marked so much of modern philosophy are intellectual dead ends. There is an awareness that the dichotomies and dualisms that have been the staple of modern philosophy are unstable and shifting. There
is an awareness that philosophy must be wary of falling prey to the varieties of scienticism, that philosophy itself degenerates when it desperately tries to ape the hard sciences. The themes of community and communication are once again coming into the foreground of discussion, with the Deweyan emphasis on the practical task of nurturing such communities. For the most ominous threat to our everyday-life world is the breakdown and distortion of any form of recognizable community life.

What I find exciting in the current confused situation is how many diverse lines of inquiry lead us in this direction—how we can even begin seeing an interweaving and crisscrossing of philosophic movements that, until recently, have seemed to share little in common. In the breakup of the hegemony of “analytic philosophy,” much of what is marginalized now seems to be becoming central.

Consider, for example, the work of Hannah Arendt, who always was—and still is—a marginal figure for many professional philosophers and political scientists. She has provided us with one of the most moving and incisive analyses of public community life in which human beings face each other, form, test, and purify opinions when they confront each other as equals and seek to argue and rationally persuade each other. Action or praxis, which she took to be the highest form of human activity, only comes into being in those public spaces that are created where human beings appear to each other in their plurality. It is in such spaces that public freedom becomes a tangible worldly reality. Arendt well knew how fragile such a space of freedom is and how much in the modern age conspires against it and deforms it. Yet such joint action rooted in the condition of human plurality is always a real possibility that can break out in a spontaneous manner. This is what she took to be the lost treasure of the revolutionary spirit. For Arendt, an exemplar of this revolutionary spirit was our own American Revolution.

A similar theme is echoed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. He, too, sees that, in the contemporary technological world, where we are always appealing to so-called expert knowledge, there has been a deformation of praxis. He, too, seeks to recover and reclaim the sense in which dialogue is the very quintessence of our being-in-the-world—dialogue based on differences but where we seek for mutual understanding. In answering the question “What is practice?” he tells us that it “is conducting oneself and acting in solidarity . . . [that] is the decisive condition and basis of all social reason” (Gadamer 1982, p. 87).

Despite the long-standing debate between Habermas and Gadamer, Habermas does not essentially disagree about Gadamer’s characterization of genuine dialogue. He himself has sought to discriminate
what he calls “communicative action” that is oriented to mutual understanding from the type of “purposive-rational” action that is oriented to success. He, too, like Dewey, sees the multifarious ways in which such communicative action is threatened in the contemporary world and calls for the need to overcome systematically distorted communication. We find a similar motif in a very different register in Alasdair MacIntyre when he concludes his *After Virtue* with the plea, “What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained . . .” (MacIntyre 1981, p. 245).

Compare this with Dewey’s statement in *The Public and Its Problems* when he tells us “Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself” (Dewey 1927, p. 216). What Dewey meant by community life has recently been given an elegant expression when Michael Sandel characterizes what he calls the “strong view” of community. “On this strong view, to say that the members of a society are bound by a sense of community is not simply to say that a great many of them profess communitarian sentiments and pursue communitarian aims, but rather that they conceive their identity—the subject and not just the object of their feelings and aspirations—as defined to some extent by the community of which they are a part” (Sandel 1982, p. 147).

Rorty, too, calls for a “renewed sense of community” and, with a self-conscious appropriation of the pragmatic tradition, he declares, “Our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature’s, shaped rather than found. . . . In the end, the pragmatists tell us, that what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right” (Rorty 1982, p. 166). I would even argue that, when we think through and work through all the fashionable talk of “postmodernity,” we come to a similar cluster of insights, emphases, and concerns.5

One must be extremely careful here. The differences among the thinkers I have cited are as consequential as anything that they have in common. We must be cautious about smoothing out real disagreements. But I hope, at least, I have suggested to you how many different voices are speaking to a concern that is at the very center of the pragmatic tradition.

The major point I want to emphasize can be seen in regard to the shifting meanings of pluralism. Pluralism itself is part of a much larger theme—one that is the oldest and deepest in Western (and non-Western)
thinking—the theme of the one and the many. I speak of it as a theme rather than a problem because it spins off innumerable problems and because it is a theme with endless variations. We find it at the core of Greek philosophy, discernible already in the fragments of the pre-Socratics. And, although it has been played out and replayed in such abstract forms as the relation of the one to the many, the relation of sameness or identity and difference, the universal and the particular, it is also a theme that has concrete and practical consequences. It is frequently the most vital issue in political, social, or ethical concerns. Thus, for example, there are a whole range of political and social theories that stress the centrality of what is shared, held in common, and universal—so much so that they endanger the integrity of what is different and genuinely plural among individuals. And there are opposing doctrines that are so fixated on the integrity of what is individual and different that they cannot legitimately account for what is genuinely common.

The theme of the one and the many, and the articulation of a viable pluralism, was central for all the major pragmatic thinkers. It is evidenced in Peirce's lifelong struggle against the varieties of nominalism, which he took to be so pervasive in modern thought. It is manifest in his defense of the nonreducibility of the three primary categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. For, whether Peirce boldly speculated about cosmological questions or explored the phenomenology of experience or elaborated a comprehensive theory of signs, he attempted to show that we cannot account for the relevant phenomena without an appeal to his plural triadic scheme. He was an incisive critic of all those philosophies that failed to do justice to the sameness and difference that we encounter in experience and reality. Peirce was also sensitive to the practical consequences of his triadic pluralism. This is evident in his defense of Scotist realism, for he argued that what is at issue is whether human beings are more than isolated individuals limited to their selfish desires and needs. He was alarmed that the metaphysical nominalism of his time reflected itself in what he called "the doctrine of Greed."

One of the most intense philosophic periods in William James's life was consumed with struggling with an adequate "resolution" of the problem of the one and the many—a period of reflection that culminated in his Essays in Radical Empiricism and A Pluralistic Universe. It is almost as if all the issues that were central to James's thinking, whether their origins were psychological, epistemological, metaphysical, or moral, came into focus in his doctrine of a pluralistic universe.

Dewey's entire theory of experience was oriented by this concern. He was at once critical of the tendencies—especially as manifested in
“traditional” empiricism—toward extreme atomism, and the equally pernicious tendencies in the varieties of idealism, to smother all differences in a single “organic” totality. Dewey thought of experience, transactions, and situations as a via media between the Scylla and Charybdis that marked so much of philosophic reflection.

What is most important about the pragmatic understanding of pluralism is the practical twist that they gave to this theme. This is especially clear in Dewey and in his understanding of democracy. There is no escape from the tangled plurality of human experience and from the multiple interpenetrating forms of life. There is no single totality in which everything can be encompassed. In moral, social, and political life, pluralism means that we must always respect and do justice to differences and seek to understand what presents itself as other and alien without violently imposing our own blind prejudices and ideologies. Our experience and the universe in which we live are an inextricable mixture of the stable and the precarious, of law and chance or spontaneity. There is tendency toward centrifugal decentering and fragmentation, which can result in a solipsistic atomism. And there is the opposite danger of eliminating or obscuring all real differences into a false totality. Anyone who has lived through the twentieth century knows that these are not just abstract theoretical possibilities, but rather they characterize the practical social reality in which we have lived our lives. But pluralism for the pragmatists never meant a self-enclosed relativism where we are forever doomed to be prisoners limited to our own conceptual schemes, frameworks, or horizons. Such a form of relativism is precisely what the pragmatists were constantly combating.

Long before the current fascination (obsession?) with radical incomensurability, Dewey was aware of the danger of the type of degenerate pluralism that would block community and communication. He was perspicacious in seeing this not primarily as a theoretical problem but as a practical problem—a problem that demands working toward a type of society in which we can at once respect and even celebrate differences and plurality but always strive to understand and seek a common ground with what is other and different.

At a later stage in the development of American thought, “pluralism” took on very different connotations. It was associated with a “theory” of so-called democratic politics in which the political arena was seen as a marketplace for negotiating competing plural interests of individuals, groups, and classes. Insofar as this “theory” was intended to describe and account for what happens in our political life, it has been exposed by its critics as an ideological mystification. For it glossed over and concealed hidden forms of power and domination. It was one of those “idealizations” that cover up “brutalities.”
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But now we are threatened by what I earlier called “wild pluralism,” which has infected almost every aspect of our everyday lives and has spread to virtually every area of human culture. This is a pluralism in which we are so enclosed in our own frameworks and our own points of view that we seem to be losing the civility, desire, and even the ability to communicate and share with others. It can be facile and dangerous to generalize about a current mood. But we do seem to be living through a time when there is a wild fluctuation between the anxiety and celebration of radical differences. There is a deep suspicion of all forms of what Lyotard calls “metanarratives”—grand stories that try to make sense of what is happening in history. There is an almost instinctive reaction against any and all aspirations toward universality and totality. This is one of the many reasons why there is so much disenchantment with the Enlightenment tradition and what has come to be called “modernity.” In part this is a legitimate reaction against the tendencies toward total schemes and totalitarianism—whether social, political, or theoretical. For we have all painfully witnessed how easily claims to totality—even in the name of human emancipation—turn into their opposite and become rationalizations for violence and terror. What does appear to be distinctive about the mood of our time is the odd and unstable mixture of a sense of fragmentation and of an interlocking system that develops according to its own logic and over which we do not seem to have any control.

I also think there is a great deal of truth in Alasdair MacIntyre’s claim “that to a large degree, people now think, talk, and act as if emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be,” and that, while “the surface rhetoric of our culture is apt to speak complacently of moral pluralism” (MacIntyre 1981, pp. 21, 10), this is too often a thinly disguised cover-up for moral chaos. MacIntyre may be right in suggesting that we have already entered a new dark age. But the deeply felt need of our times is to break out of this “wild pluralism”—to cultivate phronesis and reflective intelligence, to learn to listen, speak, and act with others in mutual understanding, a mutual understanding that can recognize and honor genuine differences. This is what I take to be the central and most relevant message of the pragmatic understanding of pluralism. There is and can be no permanent solution to doing justice to the demands of commonality and difference. “Wild pluralism” may even be a dialectical necessity when there is a threat and blindness to repressed differences. This is one reason why it is so appealing to all those who have suffered from blindesses of those who pronounce a false universalism and humanism. But such a wild pluralism harbors its own ominous dangers. As I read the current intellectual scene, there is a growing awareness of
these dangers. It is almost as if, after a period of flirtation with the varieties of wild pluralism, we are returning to the point of departure of the pragmatic thinkers.4

There is a beautiful revealing passage in Freud's study of Leonardo da Vinci that captures the quintessence of the pragmatic significance of what it means to live in a pluralistic universe. Freud describes Leonardo as follows: “A man who has begun to have an inkling of the grandeur of the universe with all of its complexities and its laws readily forgets his own insignificant self. Lost in admiration and filled with true humility, he all too easily forgets that he himself is a part of these active forces and that in accordance with the scale of his personal strength the way is open for him to try to alter a small portion of the destined course of the world—a world in which the small is still no less wonderful and significant than the great” (Freud 1957, pp. 75—76).

Nothing would be more unpragmatic—a violation of the pragmatic spirit of Dewey—than the suggestion that a return to his texts is sufficient to gain illumination and guidance for confronting our problems and conflicts. And I hope that my apologia of Dewey and the pragmatists is not mistaken for this sort of return. What can be recovered, reclaimed, and appropriated is the vision that informs their thinking—a vision that can, of course, become empty and irrelevant unless we seek new ways to appropriate it and to confront the practical tasks of fostering the type of interpenetrating pluralism that they advocated.

I have been speaking today primarily as a philosopher, but I share Dewey's conviction that philosophy can be conceived of as the general theory of education. And the tendencies to wild pluralism, chaos, and confusion are reflected in our educational institutions. We are in danger of losing any sense of common vision and purpose. We are pushed and pulled by the latest fads and fashions. We, too, have to seek common understanding. We, too, must learn how to say “we” together—and not only to say it but to practice it.

I would like to conclude with one of my favorite quotations from Dewey: “As far as any plea is implicit in what has been said, it is, then, a plea for casting off of that intellectual timidity which hampers the wings of imagination, a plea for speculative audacity, for more faith in ideas, sloughing off a cowardly reliance upon those partial ideas to which we are wont to give the name facts. I have given to philosophy a more humble function than that which is often assigned to it. But modesty as to its final place is not incompatible with boldness in the maintenance of that function, humble as it may be. A combination of such modesty and courage affords the only way I know of in which
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the philosopher can look his fellow man in the face with frankness and humanity” (Dewey 1931, p. 12).

Notes

2. See my discussion of Hannah Arendt in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, pp. 207–23.
4. Thomas Kuhn, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jacques Derrida are frequently cited to support some version of “wild pluralism” and extreme relativism. In the case of Kuhn, it is his thesis about the incommensurability of scientific paradigms that is cited in support of this doctrine. Many commentators on Wittgenstein think that something like this is entailed by his notions of a plurality of language games and forms of life. And, with Derrida, this is frequently the interpretation that commentators give to deconstruction and difference. But, in each case, the drawing of such conclusions tells us more about those who have “appropriated” their texts for their own purposes than it does about what their texts say. I have argued that this type of relativistic reading of Kuhn is a gross distortion of his insights. (See my discussion of Kuhn in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism.) I also think that the fashionable reading of Wittgenstein that ascribes to him the “doctrine” that language games and/or forms of life are like self-contained monads that cannot be properly compared with each other is a perversion of what he says, shows, and does in his Philosophical Investigations. Nor do I think one can legitimately base such a “wild pluralism” on a careful reading of Derrida’s texts. For one of the clearest and most forceful statements of his understanding of deconstruction and the inescapable plurality of languages, see his imaginative interpretation of the Tower of Babel, “Des Tours de Babel,” in Difference in Translation, edited by Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985). See also the “Roundtable on Translation” in The Ear of the Other (New York, 1985). The type of pluralism that emerges from Kuhn’s, Wittgenstein’s, and Derrida’s reflections on paradigms, language, and translation is much closer to what I have characterized as being quintessential to the pragmatic understanding of pluralism.

References


