Consequences of Pragmatism
(Essays: 1972-1980)

Richard Rorty
the Metaphysics, Kant’s “Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection,” Hegel’s Phenomenology, Lovejoy’s Great Chain of Being, and Foucault’s The Order of Things. Given such an assimilation, one can see the book not as an “empirical metaphysics” but as a historico-sociological study of the cultural phenomenon called “metaphysics.” It can be seen as one more version of the polemical critique of the tradition offered in Reconstruction in Philosophy and The Quest for Certainty.

For most of his life, however, Dewey would not have relished this assimilation. For better or worse, he wanted to write a metaphysical system. Throughout his life, he wavered between a therapeutic stance toward philosophy and another, quite different, stance—one in which philosophy was to become “scientific” and “empirical” and to do something serious, systematic, important, and constructive. Dewey sometimes described philosophy as the criticism of culture, but he was never quite content to think of himself as a kibitzer or a therapist or an intellectual historian. He wanted to have things both ways. When Santayana, reviewing Experience and Nature, remarked that [naturalistic metaphysics] was a contradiction in terms,\(^3\) Dewey responded as follows:

This is the extent and method of my “metaphysics”:\(^4\) the large and constant features of human sufferings, enjoyments, trials, failures and successes together with the institutions of art, science, technology, politics, and religion which mark them, communicate genuine features of the world within which man lives. The method differs no whit from that of any investigator who, by making certain observations and experiments, and by utilizing the existing body of ideas available for calculation and interpretation, concludes that he really succeeds in finding out something about some limited aspect of nature. If there is any novelty in Experience and Nature, it is not, I should say, this “metaphysics” which is that of the common man, but lies in the use made of the method to understand a group of special problems which have troubled philosophy.\(^5\)

In this passage, Dewey wants to say simultaneously “I am just clearing away the dead wood of the philosophical tradition” and “I am using my own powerful invention—the application of scientific and empirical method in philosophy—to do so.” But two generations of commentators have been puzzled to say what method might produce “a statement of the generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds without regard to their differentiation into mental and physical”\(^6\) while differing “no whit” from that employed by the laboratory scientist. Nor has it been any clearer how displaying such generic
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traits could either avoid banality or dissolve traditional philosophical problems.

Yet another way of putting this tension in Dewey's thought is suggested by some remarks of Sidney Hook describing Dewey's view of the place of philosophy in culture:

Traditional metaphysics has always been a violent and logically impossible attempt to impose some parochial scheme of values upon the cosmos in order to justify or undermine a set of existing social institutions by a pretended deduction from the nature of Reality. . . . But once crack the shell of any metaphysical doctrine, what appears is not verifiable knowledge but a directing bias . . . the preeminent subject matter of philosophy has been the relation between things and values. 6

Given this view, one has a dilemma: either Dewey's metaphysics differs from “traditional metaphysics” in not having a directing bias concerning social values because Dewey has found an “empirical” way of doing metaphysics which abstracts from any such biases and values, or else when Dewey falls into his vein of talking of the “generic traits manifested by existences of all kinds” he is in slightly bad faith. The first horn of this dilemma is not one which any Deweyan would want grasped. The best thing about Dewey, one may well feel, is that he did not, like Plato, pretend to be a “spectator of all time and eternity,” but used philosophy (even that presumably highest and purest form of philosophy—metaphysics itself) as an instrument of social change. Even if, somehow, one could explain what “empirical method” in metaphysics came down to, it ought not (on Dewey's own principles) to be something with the magisterial neutrality which traditionally belongs to a discipline that offers us "generic traits of existence of all kinds." Even if Dewey could explain what is “observational and experimental” about Experience and Nature, his own remarks about observation and experiment as tools for solving some given problem involving social values should be brought to bear upon his own work. If, as I have said, the actual content of Experience and Nature is a series of analyses of how such pseudo-"problems of philosophy" as subject-object and mind-versus-matter arose and how they can be dissolved, the nature of that project is clear. But it is also clear that the talk of "observation and experiment" is as irrelevant to the accomplishment of the project as it was to the great predecessor of all such works of philosophy-as-criticism-of-culture, Hegel's Phenomenology.

This point is well brought out by Hook's contrast between the logical positivists' attitude toward philosophical problems and Dewey's own:

Dewey had shown that most of the traditional problems of philosophy were pseudo-problems, i.e., they could not be solved even in their own terms. In a much more formal way the logical empiricists did the same thing and stopped. But instead of stopping with the demonstration of the logical futility of continuing the controversy over formulations which in principle could never be adequate to any concrete problems, Dewey went on to inquire what the genuine conflicts were which lay at the bottom of fruitless verbal disputes.

This seems to me an accurate account of the relevant differences, and also to help explain various changes of fashion in the last forty years or so of the history of American philosophy. Deweyan naturalism, after a period of dominance, was shoved off the American philosophical scene for a couple of decades, during the heyday of logical empiricism. This can easily be explained if one is willing to grant that writers like Russell, Carnap, Ayer, and Black were doing a better job of showing the "pseudo-ness" of pseudo-problems than Dewey had been able to do. They could do so because they had the virtues of their vices. What now seems to us (in the light of, for example, Quine's and Sellars's criticisms of its assumptions) the dogmatism and artificiality of the logical empiricist movement was precisely what permitted this movement to criticize the tradition so sharply and so effectively. Following Kant in wishing to put philosophy upon the secure path of a science, and writing as if Hegel had never lived, the logical empiricists carried assumptions common to Descartes, Locke, and Kant to their logical conclusion and thus reduced the traditional problematic of philosophy to absurdity. By exhibiting the implications of the quest for certainty, and the inability to resist Hume's conclusions once one had adopted Descartes' spectatorial account of knowledge and what Austin called "the ontology of the sensible manifold," they made clear what Dewey had been unable to make clear: just why the pictures common to the great philosophers of the modern period had to be abandoned.

But in doing this, the logical empiricists encompassed their own destruction, as Austin pointed out against Ayer, and Wittgenstein against Russell, Moore, and his earlier self. "Oxford philosophy," an even shorter-lived movement than logical empiricism, helped us see how logical empiricism had been the reducend ad absurdum of a tradition, not the criticism of that tradition from the standpoint of magisterial "logical" neutrality which it had thought itself to be. The narrowness and artificiality of the dualisms which logical empiricists presupposed enabled them to do what Dewey, precisely because of his broader scope and his ability to see the tradition in perspective,
This contrast brings me back from an excursion on recent philosophical fashions to the tension in Dewey’s thought which I want to discuss. To give one more illustration of this tension, consider Dewey’s devastating remark about the tradition: “Philosophy has assumed for its function a knowledge of reality. This fact makes it a rival instead of a complement to the sciences.”

To pursue this line of thought consistently, one must renounce the notion of an “empirical metaphysics” as wholeheartedly as one has already renounced a “transcendental account of the possibility of experience.”

I see no way to reconcile such passages as this, which I think represent Dewey at his best, with his answer to Santayana—his talk of “generic traits.” Sympathetic expositors of Dewey-as-metaphysician—such as Hofstadter, who describes “the aim of metaphysics, as a general theory of existence” as “the discovery of the basic types of involvements and their relationships”—cannot, I think, explain why we need a discipline at that level of generality, nor how the results of such “discoveries” can be anything but trivial. Would anyone—including Dewey himself—really believe that there is a discipline that could somehow do for the “basic types of involvement,” something left undone by novelists, sociologists, biologists, poets, and historians? All one might want a philosopher to do is to synthesize the novels, poems, histories, and sociologies of the day into some larger unity. But such syntheses are, in fact, offered us on all sides, in every discipline. To be an intellectual, rather than simply to “do research,” is precisely to reach for such synthesis. Nothing save the myth that there is something special called “philosophy” that provides the paradigm of a synthetic discipline, and a figure called “the philosopher” who is the paradigm of the intellectual, suggests that the professional philosopher’s work is incomplete unless he has drawn up a list of the “generic traits of all existence” or discovers “the basic types of involvements.”

So far I have been saying that it is unlikely that we shall find, in Experience and Nature, anything which can be called a “metaphysics of experience” as opposed to a therapeutic treatment of the tradition—on the ground that Dewey’s own view of the nature and function of philosophy precludes it. To confirm this, one needs to look at what Dewey actually says about experience in this book, and I shall do so shortly. But first I want to insert an account of one of Dewey’s earlier views—the notion of “philosophy as psychology” which he held in the 1880s and which became the center of a controversy with Shadworth Hodgson. Turning back the pages to the beginnings of Dewey’s philosophical career will show us, I think, why he thought it was so important to “redescribe experience” and will also suggest
why he was tempted to describe that redescriptions as "the whole of philosophy." Dewey was a hedgehog rather than a fox; he spent his life trying to articulate and restate a single vision, and in the writings of his third decade he already exhibits the tension I have claimed to find in the later writings.

Hodgson reacts indignantly to Dewey’s youthful claim that “Psychology is the completed method of philosophy, because in it science and philosophy, fact and reason, are one.” He writes:

The passage [in Dewey’s articles] which comes nearest to a description of the method of psychology is the following:

But the very essence of psychology as method is that it treats of experience in its absolute totality, not setting up some one aspect of it to account for the whole, as, for example, our physical evolutionists do, nor yet attempting to determine its nature from something outside and beyond itself, as, for example, our so-called empirical psychologists have done.

The method is here described by negatives only. It consists in the precepts to avoid the faults exemplified by the physical evolutionists on the one hand and the empirical psychologists on the other. But as to any positive direction how to go to work in investigation, there is a blank. This is quite what we should expect from the identification of psychology with transcendental philosophy.\(^ {12} \)

Hodgson’s criticism is, I think, entirely justified. It parallels Santayana’s criticism of the possibility of a “naturalistic metaphysics,” and neatly singles out a recurrent flaw in Dewey’s work: his habit of announcing a bold new positive program when all he offers, and all he needs to offer, is criticism of the tradition. “Psychology as method” was only the first of a series of resounding but empty slogans that Dewey employed, but it is important to see why this particular slogan attracted him. He ends one of the articles attacked by Hodgson by saying:

The conclusion of the whole matter is that a “being like man,” since self-conscious, is an individualized universe, and hence that his nature is the proper material of philosophy, and in its wholeness the only material. Psychology is the science of this nature, and no dualism in it, or in ways of regarding it, is tenable.\(^ {13} \)

In this passage, and in the pages leading up to it, we get the following doctrines: (1) most of the troubles philosophy has encountered stem from untenable dualisms; (2) traditional empiricism (as represented by Hume, Bain, and Hodgson) puts forward a “partial account of experience” which separates percepts from concepts;\(^ {14} \) (3) the way to overcome such dualisms as those produced by empiricism’s separation of percepts from concepts, and thus of consciousness from self-consciousness, is “psychology,” the discipline which tells us that no such separations are possible. In his reply to Hodgson, Dewey never really answers Hodgson’s question about what the method of psychology might be, but blandly says

I speak, not as a Germanizing transcendentalist, but according to my humble lights as a psychologist, when I say that I know nothing of a perceptual order apart from a conceptual, and nothing of an agent or bearer apart from the content which it bears. As a psychologist, I see the possibility of abstractly analyzing each from the other, and if I were as fond of erecting the results of an analysis into real entities as Mr. Hodgson believes me to be, I should suppose that they were actually distinct as concrete experiences. But, sticking fast to what Psychology teaches me, I must hold that they are aspects, analytically arrived at, of the one existing reality-conscious experience.\(^ {15} \)

It was not, of course, "psychology" which taught Dewey this, but rather T. H. Green, who had spent a great deal of energy reiterating Kant’s criticism of Hume, viz. that no set of percepts juggled about could produce self-consciousness, and who drew the moral that the British empiricist notion of a sensory impression was a confusion between a physiological causal process and a self-conscious perceptual belief.\(^ {16} \) Dewey, however, is not content to let Green’s analysis of experience be a better one than Bain’s and Hodgson’s Humean account: he needs to insist that what Green tells us is also told us by experience itself:

We may see how the matter stands by inquiring what would be the effect upon philosophy if self-consciousness were not an experienced fact, i.e., if it were not one actual stage in that realization of the universe by an individual which is defined as constituting the sphere of psychology. The result would be again, precisely, that no such thing as philosophy, under any theory of its nature whatever, is possible. Philosophy, it cannot be too often repeated, consists simply in viewing things sub specie aeternitatis or in ordine ad universum. . . . To deny, therefore, that self-consciousness is a matter of psychological experience is to deny the possibility of any philosophy.\(^ {17} \)

Though Dewey was soon to recant this definition of philosophy, he was never to escape the notion that what he himself said about experience described what experience itself looked like, whereas
what others said of experience was a confusion between the data and the products of their analyses. Others might be transcendentalizing metaphysicians, but he was a “humble psychologist.” Other philosophers produced dualisms, he was to insist throughout his life, because they “erected the results of an analysis into real entities.” But a nondualistic account of experience, of the sort Dewey himself proposed, was to be a true return to the Sache selbst. Though he gave up the term “psychology” for his own “philosophical method,” replacing it with still vaguer notions like “scientific method in philosophy” and “experimentalism in metaphysics,” he was always to insist that his opponents were those who erected dualisms because they “abandoned” the acknowledgment of the primacy and ultimacy of gross experience—primary as it is given in an uncontrolled form, ultimate as it is given in a more regulated and significant form—a form made possible by the methods and results of reflective experience.”

What exasperated Hodgson in the 1880s was to exasperate another generation of critics in the 1930s. These critics welcomed with enthusiasm Dewey’s suggestions about the cause and cure of traditional empiricisms and rationalisms, but were unable to see much point in Dewey’s own “constructive” attempts to produce a philosophical jargon that was dualism-free, nor in his claim to be more “empirical” in method than his opponents.

To conclude this look at Dewey’s earliest formulation of a program and method, I think we can see from the passages I have cited how easy it would have been for him, once he had, as he put it, “drifted away from Hegelianism,” to have tried to do justice both to his earlier belief that the Kant-Hegel-Green critique of empiricism was the key to an understanding of man, and to his growing distrust of philosophy as a view of the universe sub specie aeternitatis. His resolution of the conflict amounted to saying: there must be a standpoint from which experience can be seen in terms of some “generic traits” which, once recognized, will make it impossible for us to describe it in these misleading ways which generate the subject-object and mind-matter dualisms. The view would not be sub specie aeternitatis, since it would emphasize precisely the temporality and contingency which Augustine and Spinoza used the notion of “eternity” to exclude. But it would resemble traditional metaphysics in providing a permanent neutral matrix for future inquiry. Such a naturalistic metaphysics would say, “Here is what experience is really like, before dualistic analysis has done its fall work.” Such a philosophy would thus enjoy the benefit of that “immense release and liberation” which young Dewey bad found in Hegel, while spurning all temptations toward “German transcendentalizing.”

Such some notion of doing equal justice to Hegel and to “naturalism” lies behind the project Dewey set himself in Experience and Nature, and I hope this backward look at the young Dewey may have helped lend additional plausibility to the criticisms I now want to make of that book. The first and most general criticism just repeats Santayana’s claim that “naturalistic metaphysics” is a contradiction in terms. One can put this point best, perhaps, by saying that no man can serve both Locke and Hegel. Nobody can claim to offer an “empirical” account of something called “the inclusive integrity of experience,” nor take this “integrated unity as the starting point for philosophic thought,” if he also agrees with Hegel that the starting point of philosophic thought is bound to be the dialectical situation in which one finds oneself caught in one’s own historical period—of the problems of the men of one’s time. Only someone who thought, with Locke, that we can free ourselves from the problems of the day and pursue a “plain, historical method” in examining the emergence of complex experiences out of simple ones would have written the following:

That the physiological organism with its structure, whether in man or in the lower animals, is concerned with making adaptations and uses of material in the interest of maintenance of the life-process, cannot be denied. The brain and nervous system are primarily organs of action-undergoing; biologically it can be asserted without contravention that primary experience is of a corresponding type. Hence, unless there is breach of historic and natural continuity, cognitive experience must originate within that of a noncognitive sort.

Again, only someone who thought that a proper account of the “generic traits” of experience could cross the line between physiology and sociology—between causal processes and the self-conscious beliefs and inferences that they make possible—would have written the chapter in Experience and Nature called “Nature, Life and Body-Mind,” or have attempted to develop a jargon that would apply equally to plants, nervous systems, and physicists. But this return to Locke’s modes of thought, under the aegis of Darwin, betrayed precisely the insight which Dewey owed to Green: that nothing is to be gained for an understanding of human knowledge by running together the vocabularies in which we describe the causal antecedents of knowledge with those in which we offer justifications of our claims to knowledge. Dewey’s naturalistic metaphysics hoped to eliminate
epistemological problems by offering an up-to-date version of Locke’s “plain, historical method.” But what Green and Hegel had seen, and Dewey himself saw perfectly well except when he was sidetracked into doing “metaphysics,” was that we can eliminate epistemological problems by eliminating the assumption that justifications must repose on something other than social practices and human needs. To say, as Dewey wants to, that to gain knowledge is to solve problems, one does not need to find “continuities” between nervous systems and people, or between “experience” and “nature.” One does not need to justify our claim to know that, say, a given action was the best we could take by noting that the brain is an “organ of action-undergoing,” any more than by pointing out that the particles which make up the brain are undergoing some actions themselves. Dewey, in short, confuses two ways of revolting against philosophical dualisms. The first way is to point out that the dualism is imposed by a tradition for specific cultural reasons, but has now outlived its usefulness. This is the Hegelian way—the way Dewey adopts in “An Empirical Survey of Empiricisms.” The second is to describe the phenomenon in a nondualistic way which emphasizes “continuity between lower and higher processes.” This is the Lockean way—the way which led Locke to assimilate all mental acts to raw feels, thus paving the way for Human skepticism. It was this assimilation which provoked Kant’s remark that whereas Leibniz “intellectualized” appearances, “Locke sensualized all concepts of the understanding” and which led German thought to turn away from the “naturalism” which Locke seemed to represent. Its reappearance in Experience and Nature led the logical empiricists to accuse Dewey of confusing “psychological” with “conceptual” issues.

Dewey wanted to be as naturalistic as Locke and as historicist as Hegel. This can indeed be done. One can say with Locke that the causal processes that go on in the human organism suffice, without the intrusion of anything non-natural, to explain the acquisition of knowledge (moral, mathematical, empirical, and political). One can also say, with Hegel, that rational criticism of knowledge-claims is always in terms of the problems that human beings face at a particular epoch. These two lines of thought neither intersect nor conflict. Keeping them separate has the virtue of doing as Dewey wanted to do—preventing the formulation of the traditional, skeptically motivated “problems of epistemology.” But it also leaves “systematic philosophy” or “metaphysics” with little to do. Dewey never quite brought himself to adopt the Bouwsma-like stance that philosophy’s mission, like that of therapy, was to make itself obsolete. So he thought, in Experience and Nature, to show what the discovery of the true “generic traits” of experience could do.

To make this line of criticism a bit more specific, consider Dewey’s treatment of the mind-body problem. He thought to “solve” this problem by avoiding both the crudity and paradox of materialism and the “unscientific” theorizing offered by traditional dualisms. The solution is to say that

Feelings make sense; as immediate meanings of events or objects, they are sensations, or more properly, sensa. Without language, the qualities of organic action that are feelings are pains, pleasures, odors, noises, tones, only potentially and proleptically. With language, they are discriminated and identified. They are then “objectified”; they are immediate traits of things. This “objectification” is not a miraculous ejection from the organism or soul into external things, nor an illusory attribution of psychical entities to physical things. The qualities never were “in” the organism; they always were qualities of interactions in which both extra-organic things and organisms partake. Such phrases as “qualities of interactions” soothe those who do not see a mind-body problem and provoke those who do. Tell us more, the latter say, about these interactions: are they interactions between people and tables, say? Is my interaction with this table brown, rather than, as I had previously thought, the table being brown? Is Dewey saying something more than that nobody would know that the table was brown unless he understood what the word “brown” meant? Is that, in turn, to make the Kantian point that there are no divisions between objects, or between objects and their qualities, until concepts have been used to give sense to feelings? But can that point be made without committing oneself to transcendental idealism? Have we solved the problem of the relation between the empirical self and the material world only to wind up once again with a transcendental ego constituting both?

This sequence of rhetorical questions expresses the exasperation which readers of Dewey often feel at his attempt to be as commonsensically realistic as Aristotle while somehow sounding as idealistic as Kant and Green. There is obviously some sense in which Dewey agrees with Kant that only the transcendental idealist can be an empirical realist. I think the sense is this: Dewey believed that only someone who broke with Humean empiricism in the way in which Kant and Green did, who recognized that intuitions without concepts were blind, and that no data were ever “raw,” could say that both brown tables and swirls of colorless atoms were equally “given in
that needs to be said. But, once again, he wanted not merely skeptical diagnosis but also constructive metaphysical system-building. The system that was built in *Experience and Nature* sounded idealistic, and its solution to the mind-body problem seemed one more invocation of the transcendental ego, because the level of generality to which Dewey ascends is the same level at which Kant worked, and the model of knowledge is the same—the constitution of the knowable by the cooperation of two unknowables. Sounding like Kant is a fate that will overtake any systematic account of human knowledge which purports to supplant both physiological Lockean accounts and sociological Hegelian accounts by something still more generic. The "ontology of the sensible manifold" is the common destiny of all philosophers who try for an account of subject-and-object, mind-and-body, which has this generic quality.

I have now made all the criticisms of Dewey's "naturalistic metaphysics" which I have to make, and I should like to end by offering a brief encomium on what Dewey accomplished, sometimes despite himself. Dewey set out to show the harm which traditional philosophical dualisms were doing to our culture, and he thought that to do this job he needed a metaphysics—a description of the generic traits of existences that would solve (or dissolve) the traditional problems of philosophy, as well as open up new avenues for cultural development. I think that he was successful in this latter, larger, aim; he is one of the few philosophers of our century whose imagination was expansive enough to envisage a culture shaped along lines different from those we have developed in the West during the last three hundred years. Dewey's mistake—and it was a trivial and unimportant mistake, even though I have devoted most of this essay to it—was the notion that criticism of culture had to take the form of a redescriptions of "nature" or "experience" or both. Had Dewey written the book called *Nature and Culture*, which was to replace *Experience and Nature*, he might have felt able to forget the Aristotelian and Kantian models and simply have been Hegelian all the way, as he was in much of his other (and best) work.

By being "Hegelian" I mean here treating the cultural developments which Kant thought it was the task of philosophy to preserve and protect as simply temporary stopping-places for the World-Spirit. Kant thought that there were three permanent data of philosophy: (1) Newtonian physics and the resulting conception of a unified science centering on mathematical descriptions of micro-structures; (2) the common moral consciousness of a North German Pietist; (3) the sense of delicacy, of playful freedom from the imperatives of scientific
inquiry and moral duty, offered by the eighteenth-century aesthetic consciousness. The aim of philosophy was to preserve these cultural accomplishments by drawing the lines between them (preferably writing a separate book about each) and showing how they could be rendered compatible with one another and made “necessary.” Philosophy, for Kant, as it had been for Aristotle, was a matter of drawing boundaries to keep scientific inquiry from interfering with morals, the aesthetic from interfering with the scientific, and so on. For Hegel, on the other hand, Newtonian physics, the contrite consciousness, and the delight in landscape gardens were brief episodes in the development of spirit: stepping-stones on the way to a culture that would encompass all of these without dividing them from one another. For Dewey, the quests for truth, for moral virtue, and for aesthetic bliss are seen as distinct and potentially competing activities only if one thinks of truth as “accuracy of representation,” of moral virtue as purity of heart, and of beauty as “purposiveness without purpose.” He did not question the accuracy of Kant’s description of the eighteenth century’s ways of thinking of these things, but with Hegel, he questioned the necessity of staying in the eighteenth century.

If one abandons the Kantian distinctions, one will not think of philosophy as a matter of solving philosophical problems (for example, of having a theory of the relation between sense-experience and theoretical knowledge which will reconcile rationalists and empiricists, or a theory of the relation between mind and body which will reconcile materialists and panpsychists). One will think of it as a matter of putting aside the distinctions that permitted the formulation of the problems in the first place. Dewey, I suggested earlier, was not as good at dissolving philosophical problems as the followers of either the early or the later Wittgenstein—but he had a larger aim in view. He wanted to sketch a culture that would not continually give rise to new versions of the old problems, because it would no longer make the distinctions between Truth, Goodness, and Beauty which engender such problems.

In doing this larger job, his chief enemy was the notion of Truth as accuracy of representation, the notion later to be attacked by Heidegger, Sartre, and Foucault. Dewey thought that if he could break down this notion, if scientific inquiry could be seen as adapting and coping rather than copying, the continuity between science, morals, and art would become apparent. We would no longer ask ourselves questions about the “purity” of works of art or of our experience of them. We would be receptive to notions like Derrida’s—that language is not a device for representing reality, but a reality in which we live and move. We would be receptive to the diagnosis of traditional philosophy which Sartre and Heidegger offer us—as the attempt to escape from time into the eternal, from freedom into necessity, from action into contemplation. We would see the social sciences not as awkward and unsuccessful attempts to imitate the physicist’s elegance, certainty, and freedom from concern with “value,” but as suggestions for ways of making human lives into works of art. We would see modern physics both as Snow sees it—as the greatest human accomplishment of the century—and as Kuhn sees it, as one more episode in a series of crises and intervening calms, a series that will never terminate in “the discovery of the truth,” the finally accurate representation of reality.

Finally, we might move out from under the shadow of Kant’s notion that something called “metaphysics of experience” is needed to provide the “philosophical basis” for the criticism of culture, to the realization that philosophers’ criticisms of culture are not more “scientific,” more “fundamental,” or more “deep” than those of labor leaders, literary critics, retired statesmen, or sculptors. Philosophers would no longer seem spectators of all time and eternity, or (like social scientists) unsuccessful imitators of the physical sciences, because the scientists themselves would not be seen as spectators or representers. Philosophers could be seen as people who work with the history of philosophy and the contemporary effects of those ideas called “philosophic” upon the rest of the culture—the remnants of past attempts to describe the “generic traits of existences.” This is a modest, limited enterprise—as modest and limited as carving stones into new shapes, or finding more basic elementary particles. But when sometimes produces great achievements, and Dewey’s work is one of those achievements. It is great not because it provides an accurate representation of the generic traits of nature or experience or culture or anything else. Its greatness lies in the sheer provocativeness of its suggestions about how to slough off our intellectual past, and about how to treat that past as material for playful experimentation rather than as imposing tasks and responsibilities upon us. Dewey’s work helps us put aside that spirit of seriousness which artists traditionally lack and philosophers are traditionally supposed to maintain. For the spirit of seriousness can only exist in an intellectual world in which human life is an attempt to attain an end beyond life, an escape from freedom into the atemporal. The conception of such a world is still built into our education and our common speech, not to mention
the attitudes of philosophers toward their work. But Dewey did his best to help us get rid of it, and he should not be blamed if he occasionally came down with the disease he was trying to cure.

Notes


7. Ibid., p. 44.


11. Here again there is a useful analogy to be drawn with Heidegger. The notion that one should discover "the basic types of involvements" is just what led Heidegger to draw up a list of Existentielle in Sein und Zeit. The realization that this was part of the "humanist" tradition of metaphysics which he wished to set aside led him, in his later work, to renounce any such project.


14. For the notion of "empiricism" as the view in which a "partial account of experience, or rather account of partial experience, is put forward as the totality," see Early Works, 1, p. 161.


17. Early Works, 1, p. 152.


19. The phrase is from the autobiographical essay "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," reprinted in Bernstein, op. cit., p. 12. On the same page he remarks that "I should never think of ignoring, much less denying, what an astute critic occasionally refers to as a novel discovery—that acquaintance with Hegel has left a permanent deposit in my thinking."


22. Ibid., p. 23.

23. The sort of jargon which Dewey and Bentley were still aiming for in Knowing and the Known.

24. Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, A271 = B327.