Introduction
By Richard Rorty

The material collected in this volume does not show Dewey working out new lines of thought, changing his mind, or exploring new areas. It is tempting to describe the volume as consisting of more or less popular expositions of views which he had previously developed. The articles on “Logic” and “Philosophy” for the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* are condensed versions of stories previously told in such books as *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and *The Quest for Certainty*.¹ The coauthored contributions to *The Educational Frontier* do not break fresh ground in the philosophy of education. Revision and enlargement of *How We Think*,² a book whose first edition had become the bible of those who came to be called “progressive” educators, gave Dewey an occasion to clear up some misunderstandings, as well as the chance to make the book even more readable. So we might describe Dewey, in these writings, as repackaging his thought in the interest of greater accessibility.

But the notion of “popular exposition” is misleading and rather un-Deweyan, as is that of “repackaging.” Dewey was not inclined to distinguish between serious, “professional,” work and “popularization.” For him, to write up old ideas for a new audience was to produce new ideas, new instruments for advancing the projects he was promoting. He thought of himself as reshaping


tools for use on new materials rather than as providing "applied" versions of a previously "pure" body of knowledge. He did not think of his fellow philosophy professors as his "real" audience, nor of elementary school teachers, or readers of the New Republic, as supplementary constituencies to be supplied with a "popular," less demanding, version of the same material. Rather, he thought that philosophy professors had their special problems, teachers theirs, and politically conscious citizens theirs, and that there were no relations of precedence among these sets of problems.

Nevertheless, there is a certain inevitable tension which runs through Dewey's relation to his various audiences, and also through his own presentation of his work: the tension between the image of the philosopher as social activist, concerned to keep the spirit of reform alive by constant criticism of the adequacy of current practises and institutions, and the philosopher as politically neutral theoretician—a specialist in, and authority upon, such peculiarly philosophical topics as the rules of logic, the nature of science, or the nature of thought.

From a theoretical angle, this tension can be viewed as a special case of the tension between pragmatism's conception of inquiry (in any sphere, not just in philosophy) as a response to particular historical circumstances, and the traditional conception of inquiry as the discovery of eternal "objective" truths. This theoretical tension is one which Dewey discussed often—usually under the rubric of the "pragmatist theory of truth." Much of his work among his fellow philosophy professors was devoted to reconciling the purported "intuition" that truth is a timeless property of beliefs with the pragmatist claim that beliefs are rules for action, to be judged in terms of their effectiveness in resolving problems.

But a theoretical resolution of a theoretical tension cannot, by itself, resolve the tension between two public images. The tension between the image of the philosopher as activist and as sage is between rhetorical tropes rather than between contradictory doctrines. It was one which Dewey never entirely resolved. Sometimes he presents himself as saying "Here are philosophical views adhesion to which the public would advance my socio-political projects; the point of formulating and propagating such views is to break up the crust of convention which impedes social reform." But sometimes he seems to be saying "You should share my desire for social reform, for it is grounded upon my philosophical research, certified by that 'scientific method' which I have identified as the best way of thinking." The former style gave occasion for attacks from Dewey's enemies—those who considered him a dangerous radical. The latter style comforted his radical friends, who liked to think that their socio-political outlook was more "reflective" or "intelligent" or "scientific" than that of their conservative opponents.

Dewey was quite happy with both images, and moved insouciantly back and forth between them. He saw no need to choose between these two self-conceptions, no need to find a natural order of precedence between, for example, his view about the current socio-economic order and his view of the nature of logic. It was one of his chief tenets that there is no natural order of priority and posteriority among subject-matters of inquiry or among disciplines. But since this view was not widely shared, since his various audiences were inclined to take for granted, for example, the political and moral neutrality of such subject-matters as "logic" and "psychology," Dewey was, in some measure, forced to acquiesce in the role of neutral specialist. He had to accept, and make use of, his role as sage, even while insisting that the image of the sage was a relic of undesirable and obsolete ways of thinking.

Dewey sometimes did not bother with the pretense of neutrality. For example, the chapters of The Educational Frontier which Dewey coauthored with John L. Childs are remarkably frank in commending the philosophy of education embodied in How We Think as one calculated to change the character of American institutions—to move society to the political left by


4. Dewey was, of course, neither the first nor the last philosopher to be caught in this position. Any thinker who is historicist enough to question the traditional conception of truth as a relation between the human mind and an unchanging reality is going to be challenged by the same dilemma: is your historicism ahistorically true, or are you saying merely that historicism is an appropriate attitude in our present historical circumstances? The challenge is as appropriate a response to Protagoras, Hegel, Heidegger, or Nelson Goodman as to Dewey.
moving successive generations of students to the left of their parents. Dewey and Childs write that the philosophies of education which they oppose buttress "legal and economic institutions which encourage an exaggerated and one-sided development of egoistic individuality in a privileged few, while militating against a full and fair opportunity for a normal individuality in the many" (this volume, p. 81). Such a passage leaves Dewey wide open to the charge, often made by his enemies, that he is making socialist propaganda and disguising it as a "philosophical," and thus presumptuously neutral, discussion of the nature of thought.

At other times, however, Dewey writes as if there were some neutral, more or less professional, ground which he occupies in his capacity as philosopher or psychologist, rather than as social critic. From this high ground, he suggests, we can survey ways of thinking and discriminate the better from the worse. This was his typical stance when commending the virtues of what he sometimes called "scientific method" and sometimes, as in How We Think, "reflective thinking." But his description of this method is marked by an ambiguity—the same ambiguity between the descriptive and the normative which plagues his metaphilosophical account of his own activity.

Sometimes it seems as if Dewey is telling us that the seventeenth century discovered not only the true layout of the solar system and the laws of motion but a new method of inquiry, one with spectacular advantages over previous methods. Dewey recommends that we try this method out in areas where it has not been previously applied—that we "generalize the experimental side of natural science into a logical method which is applicable to the interpretation and treatment of social phenomena." When Dewey writes in this vein, it sounds as if he were saying "All of us, no matter whether we would prefer a more religious or a more secular culture, or whether we are politically radical or politically conservative, naturally want to use the best possible tools in our work. The method discovered in the seventeenth century is a better, unfortunately neglected, tool. A study of the nature of thought, of how we think, will make the virtues of this tool clear to us."

Yet at other times it seems obvious that this tool is much more suited to the projects of the secularizing and left-leaning intellectual than to those of his conservative, religious, counterpart, and that this is precisely why Dewey is commending it. For in these passages it sounds as if there is little more to this "method" than an innovative and experimental attitude, a willingness to redescribe things in a new vocabulary and see what happens. What Dewey describes as "reflective thinking" sometimes sounds like something everybody does quite naturally, something which is the common property of the ancients and the moderns, and of any reasonably literate and articulate person, no matter what his or her persuasion. But sometimes, particularly when Dewey is comparing this sort of thinking invidiously with "intellectualism" and "rationalism," reflective thinking sounds like something quite particular, something which the moderns do more of than the ancients did, something more commonly found among laboratory scientists than among medieval schoolmen, and more prevalent among liberals than among conservatives.

This ambiguity is not a surface phenomenon. It presents Dewey with a real problem. To resolve it Dewey would have to find some sort of middle ground between a well-defined procedure—a method in the sense of a set of directions for what to do next, something like a recipe—and a mere recommendation to be open-minded, undogmatic, critical, and experimental. This is what he tries to do in How We Think, as in the earlier Essays in Experimental Logic and the later Logic: The Theory of Inquiry. In all these books, he wants to broaden the idea of "logic" so as to make it more than a collection of rules for judging the validity of inferences, yet not to broaden it so far that it becomes just a set of platitudinous maxims, encouraging one to think hard, gather lots of data, try out different theories, etc. He wants, on the one hand, to claim that most attempts to specify a "method for correct thinking" have merely hypostatized the vocabulary and practises of a certain period or of a certain preferred area of culture. But, on the other hand, he does not wish to conclude (as such recent writers as Paul Feyerabend have concluded) that the

5. "Logic," Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, this volume, p. 11.


7. See, for example, his polemic against the idea that we can lay down a preformed grid upon a subject-matter in order to divide it up into its "elements": chapter 5 of How We Think, this volume, pp. 177ff.
way to encourage experimental thinking is to give up the very idea of “method” as an outdated shibboleth. He is torn between the temptation to say that the only rule of logic we require is Peirce’s “Do not block the road of inquiry!” and the need to lay out some procedures which, if adopted, will improve people’s thinking.

To put the problem slightly differently: Dewey wants to praise certain ways of thinking which he thinks have become more common since the seventeenth century, but he cannot specify these ways too narrowly, for fear of erecting an abstract formalism as constrictive as any of those erected by his more “rationalistic” predecessors. He thinks that any specific patterns of analysis—any recipes for how to think—will inevitably be parochial and thus potentially restrictive, likely to discourage inventive problem-solving. But he nevertheless writes _How We Think_ in the conviction that teachers can train students to think better: “The better way of thinking that is to be considered in this book is called reflective thinking; the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration” (p. 113).

The trouble with this characterization of “reflective thinking” is that the only people who do not practise it are those whom we think of as either mentally deficient or morally flawed. Putting aside the former—those who, because of physiological incapacity, cannot focus on a topic long enough to perform consecutive inferers—as ineducable, the target of instruction and reform must be those who are dogmatic, opinionated, unwilling to listen, difficult to converse with. Yet it is inappropriate to say to such people “Come, I shall teach you something to your advantage: a new method.” For such an invitation would appeal only if the method commended were a method for doing something which those addressed already want to do. Yet people of this kind do not want to be critical and experimental. They cherish their certainties; the last thing they want is to change the vocabularies in which they are habituated to describing things. Such people may conceivably be converted by an exhibition of the concrete advantages of particular changes in particular vocabularies, but it is hard to see how they could be converted by a general _methodological_ exhortation.

It is easy to dislike this character type, and to view it as morally flawed—as exemplifying what it was once fashionable to call “an authoritarian personality.” It is natural to hope that our children will not have such personalities, and to try to raise them so that they do not. _How We Think_ was written precisely in order to encourage teachers to encourage children not to have such a personality, but instead to be critical and experimental in their reception of traditional practises and institutions. But it is not evident that there is a subject called “psychology,” or one called “logic”—a discipline charged with studying “the nature of thought”—which can be called upon to undertake such an attempt. It is not clear that we can ground a judgment about the ends of education—about the character-types we wish the schools to develop—upon an inquiry into the nature of thought.

The attempt to do so runs into the difficulty sketched above: the problem of whether one is trying to describe or reform, whether one is doing “science” or “politics.” More specifically, it runs into the problem of whether one can find some way of describing the difference between, e.g., the laboratory scientist and the medieval schoolman (one of Dewey’s favorite contrasts) which makes the difference sound like one of “logic” or “method.” It is hard to find in _How We Think_ a description of “reflective thinking” which could not be used to describe the activity of, say, Duns Scotus. Scotus and Charles Darwin certainly differed in their self-characterization—in the terms they used to describe the nature and purpose of their intellectual labors. They also dif-

8. See Paul Feyerabend, _Against Method_ (London: New Left Books, 1975). There are many “against method” passages in _How We Think_, as, for example, the critique of “overconscious formulation of methods of procedure” at p. 217 and the emphasis on the importance of inarticulatable skill at pp. 213–14. But there are also many pro-method passages, as at p. 249. One difficulty in interpreting Dewey in this area is his tendency to use “method” synonymously with “procedure,” with “style,” and with “philosophy”—to describe stages in the development of children, of individual disciplines, and of Western intellectual history in terms of the use of different “methods.” See, for example, his use of “method” interchangeably with “logical theory” and with “climate of philosophical opinion” in his article on “Logic,” pp. 3–12.

9. Thus in this second edition of _How We Think_, we find him cautioning those who took the famous description of “the five phases of reflection” too seriously. He is clearly worried that over-enthusiastic readers of the first edition have begun to treat his divisions of the process of thought with the same reverence that over-enthusiastic readers of the _Prior Analytics_ brought to Aristotle’s syllogistic. “There is nothing especially sacred,” he says, “about the number five” (p. 207).
ferred in what they thought relevant—what sorts of evidence and objection they were prepared to take seriously. But it is not clear that, apart from having different goals and therefore different criteria of relevance, they thought differently—that we can find an interesting contrast between their intellectual activities at a level of description which might plausibly be called “psychological” or “logical.”

Dewey defines “reflective thought”—the better way of thinking he wishes to recommend—as “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 118). He contrasts this sort of thinking with reliance on “tradition, instruction, imitation”—with “prejudices; that is, prejudgments, not conclusions reached as the result of personal mental activity, such as observing, collecting, and examining evidence” (p. 116). Can one accuse Scotus of the latter sort of thinking? Not if one looks at his activity in his own specialty: his handling of certain philosophical and theological questions is as reflective (in Dewey’s sense) as anyone’s thought has ever been. One can, of course, point out that he did not question a lot of beliefs which he would have done well to question—e.g., those which the Enlightenment was later to question. But it would not make sense to suggest that Scotus (or anyone else) question all beliefs. Nor would Dewey, who shared Peirce’s conviction that “Cartesian doubt” was a pointless exercise, make such a suggestion. Yet is there any “method” by which Scotus could have known which beliefs he should have questioned?

Dewey does not offer one, and it seems evident that there can be no general procedure for deciding which of the beliefs one has picked up from “tradition, instruction, and imitation” to treat skeptically and which to leave alone. So, for example, Dewey’s praise of Columbus for being skeptical about the flatness of the earth seems unfair to Columbus’s contemporaries. Dewey says that these contemporaries held a belief which “rested on laziness, inertia, custom, absence of courage and energy in investigation” (p. 117). Granted that it was fortunate that somebody should eventually have become skeptical about the shape of the earth, should we really say that those who were not skeptical were unreflective, lazy, or cowardly? Was it lazy for physicists prior to Einstein not to question Newtonian absolute time? Unreflective for

muralists prior to Giotto not to envisage the greater realism which he was to achieve? Cowardly for medieval theologians not to envisage the possibility of a secular and democratic polity? Is it unreflective of us contemporary secularists, brought up on Dewey, not to ponder the evidences of the Christian religion?

Dewey would, if challenged, probably have agreed that we cannot formulate a strategy which will help one be skeptical about all and only the right things—one which will encourage a Columbus or a Darwin while simultaneously discouraging (for example) childish resistance to harmless conventions, scatter-brainedness, Pyrrhonism, paranoia, and Cartesian doubt. He was aware that no study of how we think can produce any formula, or set of formulae, which would serve as such a panacea. But in How We Think and elsewhere he constantly talks as if he were offering us such a strategy. He verges on the “intellectualist” assumption (one he elsewhere combats vigorously) that all the intellectual options—all possible hypotheses, all possible ideas—are out there, waiting for skeptical and experimental minds to come upon them. He speaks as if a correct account of the nature of thought would make possible the sort of improvement in thinking which had been promised in the past by others who explicitly held that assumption (e.g., Ramus and Descartes).

To make this criticism of How We Think is not to cast doubt on Dewey’s goals, nor on his claim that something new and important came into the world with Bacon and the New Science. It is only to cast doubt upon his attempt to identify this new thing with a “way of thinking” (as opposed to some concrete suggestions about new hypotheses to try out) and upon his attempt to promote the goals he cherished by an appeal to a putatively descriptive, ideologically neutral, discipline called “psychology” or “logic.” That attempt should be viewed as an unfortunate after-effect of the nineteenth-century philosophical vocabularies on which Dewey was raised, vocabularies which suggested that “the nature of judgment” or “of reasoning” or “of thought” or “of science” were suitable topics for “philosophical research.”

Dewey did a great deal to break up these vocabularies, and thus to make obsolete the idea of a discrete, permanent, range of problems which formed the distinctive subject-matter of a discipline called “philosophy” (or, for that matter, of one called “psychology”). But, like all of us, he could not question all his beliefs
at once. So, part of the time, he worked with a set of distinctions, and a rhetoric, which was ill suited to his own purposes. This rhetoric led him to blinker his own sense of the relativity of thought to particular concrete problems and historical situations, in order to offer something like a general, abstract, characterization of a “better way of thinking.”

Insofar as philosophy has “advanced” since Dewey, the advance may consist in the realization that, like the logical empiricists, Dewey overdid the attempt to make the natural scientist a model for the rest of culture. Both were too concerned to isolate a “method of experimental action called natural science” (p. 68). Both overestimated the differences between science, art, and politics. Recent philosophy of science (e.g., the work of Kuhn and Hesse) has been concerned to emphasize the similarities between these areas. Such emphasis has, however, helped increase our appreciation of Dewey’s attack on the subject-object model of knowledge and on the cluster of Platonic and Cartesian ideas which buttress this model. It has also given us new intellectual tools to use in promoting the socio-political goals which Dewey cherished, and which provided the impetus (and, despite his occasional pretense of neutrality, the best justification) for his philosophical doctrines.
John Dewey
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