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VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY PRESS • NASHVILLE & LONDON
1995
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PREFACE

I want to express my thanks to those who contributed to this volume. The authors of the articles on Richard Rorty's philosophy have placed themselves in the unusual position of inviting a direct response by Rorty. Such dialogue decidedly promotes philosophical discussion, and it also requires a high level of maturity and scholarship. And I am grateful to Richard Rorty for his responses to each article, which clearly enhance the level of communication in philosophy and also present an apologia of his outlook.

I am particularly grateful to Dan Unger, a graduate student at Texas A&M University, for his assistance in scanning and editing much of the material. His knowledge of philosophy and his good will have been of considerable value in the preparation of this volume. The members of the editorial board of the Vanderbilt Library of American Philosophy have offered wise counsel, and the staff of Vanderbilt University Press have provided clear and thoughtful guidance.

Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr.
DEWEY BETWEEN HEGEL & DARWIN

Richard Rorty

James Kloppenberg sees Dewey as one of the philosophers of "the via media," a *via media* between idealism and empiricism. The second chapter of his *Uncertain Victory* is entitled "The Radical Theory of Knowledge." The heart of that theory, as Kloppenberg tells the story, consists in a new, nonatomistic conception of experience—a conception that is the least common denominator of Dilthey's notion of *Erlebnisse* and James's notion of "a world of pure experience." In Kloppenberg's account, this new conception of experience has a pragmatist account of truth as a corollary.¹

Like Kloppenberg, David Hollinger emphasizes the connections between pragmatism and radical empiricism in William James.² Both Kloppenberg and Hollinger see James and Dilthey's talk about the inner life and the flux of experience—talk that is continuous with Bergson's and Whitehead's talk of misplaced concreteness—as an important part of what Hollinger calls "a cluster of assertions and hopes about the basis for culture in an age of science."³ They both see what Hollinger calls James’s "shift toward the panpsychism of the idealists" as an important part of the contribution of German idealism to American pragmatism. Kloppenberg rightly says that Dewey's claim that experience "carries principles of connection and organization within itself" is an "echo" of Green and Hegel.

I have no wish to challenge the claim that this sort of panpsychism, and this rejection of Humean atomism, loomed large in James's and Dewey's minds. A survey of the most interesting and original philosophers of the
year 1900 would indeed show, as Kloppenberg suggests, that most of them wanted to close the epistemological gap between subject and object by some form of the panpsychist claim that the two are continuous. For panpsychism seemed an obvious way to perform what Kloppenberg calls "the marriage of Hegel and Darwin." Bracketing these two men under the rubric "evolutionary thought"—something Dewey did constantly—is helped considerably if one can answer to the question What evolves? with "experience," and if one can manage to treat that term and the term nature as quasi-synonymous. Insofar as there was an emerging consensus in philosophy in 1900, it was that we could get beyond the sterile arguments of the philosophical tradition only if we became able to see nature and experience as two descriptions of the same thing. Peirce spoke for the best philosophical thought of his time when he said: "All the creations of our mind are but patchworks from experience. So that all our ideas are but ideas of real or transposed experience."4

But if one looks at the end of the twentieth century rather than at its beginning, one finds pragmatism enjoying something of a renascence but no similar renascence of panpsychism.5 The philosophers of today who speak well of James and Dewey tend to speak ill of Dilthey and Bergson. They tend to talk about sentences a lot but to say very little about ideas or experiences, as opposed to such sentential attitudes as beliefs and desires. They would reject the question Are relations given immediately in experience? as presupposing a notion of "givenness" that is just one more "dogma of empiricism." Following Sellars, they would deny that they do not think anything is "given immediately in experience." They are enthusiastic about Peirce's claim that "my language is the sum total of myself,"6 and about the passages in which Peirce distinguishes sharply between cognitions and sensations—between sentential attitudes and mental states that can be described without reference to sentences. But they regret that these are passages to which neither James nor Dewey, nor even Peirce himself, paid much attention.7

In short, contemporary philosophers who profess sympathy with pragmatism show little sympathy with empiricism—they would rather forget empiricism than radicalize it. Donald Davidson speaks for many when he rejects—as one more hangover of Hume's attempt to be the Newton of the mind—Quine's notion of "stimulus meaning" (stated in terms of such nerve endings as the retina). Davidson substitutes a "distal" theory of meaning formulated in terms of public external objects; his philosophy of language has no use for Lock's and Hume's specifically psychic terrain, intermediate between physiology and linguistically formulated beliefs.8

As an alternative to Dewey's own self-understanding of his relation to Hegel and Darwin—a self-understanding accurately presented by Kloppenberg—I want to suggest an account of this relation that emphasizes Hegel's historicism rather than his idealism, and Darwin's affinities with positivism rather than with vitalism. So I shall be describing what Dewey might have and, in my view, should have said, rather than what he did say. I shall be constructing a hypothetical Dewey who was a pragmatist without being a radical empiricist, and a naturalist without being a panpsychist. The point of constructing such a Dewey is to separate what I think is living and what I think is dead in Dewey's thought, and thereby to clarify the difference between the state of philosophical play around 1900 and at the present time.

When thinking about Dewey, it pays to begin by thinking about Hegel. Charles Taylor has helped us see Hegel as having brought Kant together with Herder and Humboldt—as having combined transcendental idealism with a sense of historical relativity—the same sense of relativity that C. I. Lewis urged in his Mind and the World-Order. Manfred Frank, in his important book What is Neostucturalism? has helped us see "the fundamental insight of all post-Hegelian philosophy" as the abandonment of a "claim to a transhistorical frame of orientation beyond linguistic differentiability."9 Frank speaks of this insight as "perhaps the fundamental insight of postclassical philosophy in its entirety, insofar as it participates in the linguistic turn.10 In Frank's account, the sense of historical relativity, the sense of relativity to available linguistic resources, the sense of human finitude, and the sense that "it is not possible to interpret our world from an Archimedean point"11 are at bottom the same. Frank thinks that the linguistic turn was first taken by Herder and Humboldt, thinkers who made it possible, as Frank puts it, to think of "transnational and transhistorical reason" as an "image of the world" inscribed in a linguistic order.12

Frank's account suggests a new way of viewing Dewey as a "philosopher of the via media." From this angle, the extremes between which Dewey hopes to navigate are not idealism and empiricism, but rather historicism and scientism. By historicism I mean the doctrine that there is no relation of "closeness of fit" between language and the world: no image of the world
projected by language is more or less representative of the way the world really is than any other. By *scientism* I mean the doctrine that natural science is privileged above other areas of culture, that something about natural science puts it in closer touch with reality than any other human activity.

If one wishes to wed historicism and scientism, then one will marry Hegel and Darwin not by finding a holistic, panpsychist way of describing the relations between experience and nature, but rather by finding a historicist, relativist way of describing Darwin’s claim upon our attention. By a historicist and relativist way, I mean a way of seeing natural science, and Darwin in particular, as simply one more description of the world to be placed alongside others, rather than as offering the *one* image that corresponds to reality. Whereas Kant, Fichte, and Hegel had had to condemn natural science’s image of the world to the realm of “appearance” in order to avoid conflict with our common moral consciousness—had had to say that natural science did not, appearances to the contrary, *really* coincide with reality as it was in itself—a historicist way of avoiding this conflict cannot invoke an appearance-reality distinction. Nor can it resort to notions of misleading abstraction and misplaced concreteness, for *concrete* implies a special relation of closeness to reality for which historicism has no room. In a historicist account, there is no description either of nature or experience that is more or less accurate or concrete than some rival (unless “more accurate” and “more concrete” are construed pragmatically, as “more useful for the following purposes . . .”).

In the interpretation of Dewey that I want to suggest, the point of the pragmatist theory of truth is to provide such a nonidealistic, historicist way of avoiding the conflict between science and the religious or moral consciousness. That theory substitutes *expediency* for *accuracy* or *concreteness* as a term of epistemic approbation. But the pragmatist theory of truth, notoriously, comes in two distinct forms, only one of which will do for my interpretation of Dewey. This is the form embodied in James’s claim that “the true . . . is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in our way of behaving.”¹³

This statement of the theory of truth is quite distinct from James’s unfortunate claim that “ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience.”¹⁴ This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, it runs together the truth of a sentence (which, unless it contains a reference to a time, is eternally true or eternally false and cannot “become” true) with the expediency of believing a sentence to be true. Second, it runs together sentences with experiences—linguistic entities with introspectible entities.

James and Dewey usually spoke as if these two formulations came to much the same thing—as if anyone who accepted the first would be inclined to accept the second. But whereas the former statement of the pragmatist theory points in the direction of Herder, Humboldt, and a historicist sense of truth as a property of linguistic entities, the latter does not. The first formulation can easily be made compatible with the linguistic turn, but not the second. The second, but not the first, contains the germ of panpsychism and radical empiricism. “Getting into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience” will be acceptable as an account of true beliefs only if the distinction between the propositional and the nonpropositional, and the distinction between properties of the agent and properties of her environment, are blurred in the way in which Dewey went on to blur them in *Experience and Nature*.

One way of highlighting the difference between the first and the second formulation is to reflect on pragmatism’s relation to Darwin. Darwinism requires that we think of what we do and are as continuous with what the amoebae, the spiders, and the squirrels do and are. One way to expound this continuity is suggested by the second formula: we may think of these members of other species as sharing with us something called experience—something not the same as consciousness or thought, but something of which consciousness or thought are more complex and developed forms. This way of obtaining continuity is illustrated by Locke’s attempt to tell a story about how we get from the baby’s mind to the adult’s—by adding in more simple ideas and then joining them up to produce complex ideas. This way of procuring continuity blurs the distinction that Peirce draws between cognitive and noncognitive mental states—between, for example, sensations and beliefs. As I have argued in my *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, it also blurs the distinction between the question What causes our beliefs? and the question What justifies our beliefs?—a blurring that is essential for any representationalist theory of knowledge.

This blurring is characteristic both of British empiricism and of British idealism. All that the “radical empiricism” side of pragmatism did was to blur things further by denying that relations between ideas are “con-
tributed by the mind” rather than being “given” in the way in which qualia are purportedly “given”—denying that, as Green put it, “only thought relates.” As Dewey said, “Unless there is breach of historic and natural continuity, cognitive experience must originate within that of a noncognitive sort.” Because Dewey was committed to such blurring, he refused to separate intentionality and intelligence from consciousness in the manner of contemporary philosophers who (like Daniel Dennett) have gotten on intimate terms with intelligent but insensate machines. Even at late as Experience and Nature, a book in which language gets considerable play, we find Dewey saying, “Sentience in itself is aneotic . . . but nevertheless it is an indispensable means to any noetic function.”

The problem with this way of obtaining continuity between us and the brutes is that it seems to shove the philosophically embarrassing discontinuity back down to the gap between, say, viruses and amoebae. But why stop there? Only by giving something like experience to protein molecules, and perhaps eventually to quarks—only a full-fledged panpsychism—will eliminate such embarrassments. But when we invoke panpsychism in order to bridge the gap between experience and nature, we begin to feel that something has gone wrong. For notions like “experience,” “consciousness,” and “thought” were originally invoked to contrast something that varied independently of nature with nature itself. The philosophically interesting sense—the only sense relevant to epistemology—of experience is one that goes back to phainomena rather than to empeiria, to a realm that might well be “out of touch” with nature because it could vary while nature remained the same and remain the same when nature varied. Much of Dewey’s work was a desperate, futile attempt to get rid of the phainomena versus ontia onia, appearance versus true reality, distinction, and to replace it with a distinction of degree between less organized and directed and more organized and directed empeiria. This attempt was futile because his fellow philosophers insisted on language in which they could discuss the possibility of our being “out of touch with reality” or “lost in a realm of mere appearance.” Dewey often rejoined by insisting that we replace the appearance-reality distinction by a distinction between beliefs useful for some purposes and beliefs useful for others. If he had stayed with that rejoinder he would have been on firm ground. But unfortunately he also rejoined that his opponents had “mismarked experience.” This rejoinder was utterly ineffectual.

In his “Empirical Survey of Empiricism,” Dewey said that we needed “a new concept of experience and a new type of empiricism”—one that invoked neither the Greek contrast of experience and reason nor the atomistic sensationalism of Hume, Mill, and Russell. But he admitted that “this third view of experience . . . is still more or less inchoate.” Most of Dewey’s critics felt that it was not only inchoate but confused and disjunctive. For it seemed to them that any sense of experience that did not acknowledge a possible divergence between experience and nature merely blurred the issues that a theory of knowledge ought to discuss. So they saw Dewey not as presenting what Kloppenberg calls a “radical theory of knowledge” but as dodging hard epistemological questions by redefining the terms in which they had been raised.

I think that these critics were justified, and that the force of the pragmatist theory of truth was blunted by Dewey’s unpersuasive redefinitions. James and Dewey never, alas, made up their minds whether they wanted just to forget about epistemology or whether they wanted to devise a new improved epistemology of their own. In my view, they should have opted for forgetting. Dewey should have dropped the term experience rather than redefining it and should have looked elsewhere for continuity between us and the brutes. He should have agreed with Peirce that a great gulf divides sensation and cognition, decided that cognition was only possible for language users, and then said that the only relevant break in continuity was between non-language-users (amoebae, squirrels, babies) and language users.

He could then have gone on to note that the development of linguistic behavior—of social practices that used increasingly flexible vocal cords and thumbs to produce longer and more complex strings of noises and marks—is readily explicable in naturalistic, Darwinian, terms. We can tell as good stories about the success of species that gradually developed such practices as we can about the success of species that developed practices of migrating or hibernating. How meaning became a property of certain strings of marks and noises is as mysterious as how tableness became a property of batches of molecules. So, my alternative Dewey would have said, we can construe “thinking” as simply the use of sentences—both for arranging cooperative enterprises and for attributing inner states (beliefs, desires) to our fellow humans. If we have thinking in this sense—the ability to have and ascribe sentential attitudes—we can see it as something that has nothing in
particular to do with "experiences of a non-cognitive sort." To be sure, there is a causal continuity between experience as what Dewey called "a matter of functions and habits, of active adjustments and readjustments, of co-ordinations and activities" and thinking, but for that matter there is a causal continuity between nutrition and thinking. Such continuity does not require us to find a sort of proto-intentionality in the amoeba.

The point of these last paragraphs may be summed up as follows: Dewey's and James's attempt to give a "more concrete," more holistic, and less dualism-ridden account of experience would have been unnecessary if they had not tried to make "true" a predicate of experiences and had instead let it be a predicate of sentences. For then they would not have thought of "ideas (which are themselves but parts of our experience)" becoming true or being made true. They would not have set themselves the bad question, Granted that truth is in some sense the agreement or correspondence of experiences with reality, what must experience and reality be such that they can stand in such relations?"

Asking this question made James and Dewey think that the cause of the endless disputes about subject and object, mind and body, was a misunderstanding of the nature of experience or reality or both. But this was not the cause. The cause was the idea that truth is a matter of a certain relation between subject and object, mind and the physical world—a relation of "agreement" or "correspondence." James and Dewey agreed that this relation could not be a matter of "copying"—of features shared by the experience and the reality. But they thought they had to find a substitute for copying and asked what agreement might mean instead. James said that it must mean "verification" in the sense of "agreeable leading" from one bit of experience to another. "Truth happens to an idea," James said, when it succeeds in marrying new experience to old experience.

Again, "To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality, can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagree." Dewey's version of this goes as follows:

... the pragmatist holds that the relation in question is one of correspondence between existence and thought; but he holds that correspondence instead of being an ultimate and unanalyzable mystery, to be defined by iteration, is precisely a matter of correspondence in its plain, familiar, sense. A condition of dubious and conflicting tenen-
cies calls out thinking as a method of handling it. This condition produces its own appropriate consequences, bearing its own fruits of weal or woe. The thoughts, the estimates, intents, and projects it calls out, just because they are attitudes of response and of attempted adjustment (not mere "states of consciousness") produce their effects also. The kind of interlocking, or interadjustment that then occurs between these two sorts of consequences constitutes the correspondence that makes truth.

These redefinitions of agreement and correspondence would be harmless enough if they were simply ways of saying "truth is what works"—if they were simply restatements of what I previously called "the first formulation" of the pragmatist theory of truth. But James and Dewey thought of them as more than that, and that is why they were led down the garden path of radical empiricism. It is why they ran together an insistence on what Kloppenberg calls "the contingent quality of our most basic categories of thought" with the claim that we needed what he calls "a new conception of immediate lived experience."

Much of what I have been saying can be summarized as the claim that Dewey and James thought that an appropriate philosophical response to Darwin required a kind of vitalism—an attempt to coalesce the vocabulary of epistemology with that of evolutionary biology. This was the attempt whose most notorious products were the jargons of A Pluralistic Universe, Creative Evolution, Process and Reality, Experience and Nature, and Knowing and the Known. But in his "Influence of Darwin on Philosophy" Dewey suggests another, better alternative. This is that we see Darwin as showing us how to naturalize Hegel—how to have Herderian historicism without Kantian idealism, how to hold on to a Hegelian narrative of progress while dispensing with the claim that the real is the rational.

One problem with wedding Hegel and Darwin has always been that Hegel seems to say that human civilization just couldn't casually be wiped out by a plague or a comet, and that language-using beings just had to emerge from the evolutionary process so that the Idea could finish off Nature and get started on Spirit. He seems to say that there really is a power, not ourselves, which is more like us than it is like amoebas or squirrels—or, more precisely, a power of which we are better manifestations than they are. So the purely mechanical account of biological evolution
offered by a synthesis of Darwin with Mendel, though commending itself to atheists, seems antithetical to a philosophy built, as Hegel's was, around the idea of the Incarnate Logos.26

The nice thing about purely mechanical accounts of nature, from an atheist's point of view, is that they tell us that there are no purposes to be served save our own, and that we serve no purposes except those we dream up as we go along. As Dewey said in his Darwin essay: “The classic [Greek] notion of species carried with it the idea of purpose. . . . Purposefulness accounted for the intelligibility of nature and the possibility of science, while the absolute or cosmic character of this purposefulness gave sanction and worth to the moral and religious endeavors of man.”27 Dewey argued that Darwin had finished the job that Galileo began—the job of eliminating from nature any purpose that transcends a particular organism's needs in a particular situation.28 But once purpose leaves nature, then there is no longer a philosophical problem about the “possibility of science” (or, more generally, of knowledge). For there is no longer a problem of reconciling the subject's purposes with the object's—of getting the two on the same wavelength. The object becomes an object of manipulation rather than the embodiment of either a telos or a logos, and truth becomes “the expedient in the way of thinking.” The contrast between the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of expediency goes when the notion of truth as “agreement” or “correspondence” with something that has purposes of its own goes.

In other words, if one wholeheartedly adopts the first formulation of the pragmatist theory of truth, one will feel no need to follow it up with the second formulation. So one will feel no need to ask about what experience is really like, as opposed to the way in which the Greeks or the British empiricists described it, nor to ask whether nature is better described in vitalistic or mechanistic terms. For all descriptions of experience, nature, and their relation to one another will be evaluated simply in terms of expediency—of suitability for accomplishing the purpose at hand. That is how Dewey wanted the pragmatic theory of truth evaluated: “Naturally, the pragmatist claims his theory to be true in the pragmatic sense of truth; it works, it clears up difficulties, removes obscurities, puts individuals into more experimental, less dogmatic, and less arbitrarily skeptical relations to life; aligns philosophy with scientific method; does away with self-made problems of epistemology; clarifies and reorganizes logical theory, etc.”29

Consider the claim that the pragmatist theory of truth “aligns philos-
as something that clears up all difficulties or removes all obscurities connected with the topic, but as something useful in clearing up our difficulties and removing our obscurities. If one claims that one’s theory of truth works works better than any competing theory, one will be saying that it works better by reference to our purposes, our particular situation in intellectual history. One will not claim that it was what it would have paid, always and everywhere, to have thought of truth as, but simply as, as James says, what it would be better for us to believe about truth. Taken as part of an overall philosophical outlook, such a theory would be part of an attempt to hold our age in thought.

I can describe this area of overlap between Hegel and Dewey in another way by considering a standard objection to pragmatist theories of truth. This objection is that pragmatism tells you that truth is what works, but doesn’t answer the question Works for what? It doesn’t tell you what purposes to have; its ethics is situational at best. So, of course, was Hegel’s ethics, and that was another reason why Dewey consistently preferred Hegel to Kant. The dualism of “ought” and “is,” of categorical and hypothetical imperatives, was for Dewey one more symptom of Kant’s “scholastic” presuppositions.37

Dewey’s fundamental contribution to moral philosophy has always been taken as his insistence on a “means-end-continuum”—that is, as the claim that we change our notions of the Right and of the Good on the basis of the particular mixture of success and failure produced by our previous efforts to act rightly and do good. From the point of view I am adopting, this insistence can be seen as one more consequence of his historicism. The historicism that Taylor and Frank find in Herder and Humboldt is one that insists that the language of moral deliberation, and of moral praise or blame, is a function of the needs that a society hopes to fulfill. Societies evolve into other societies, therefore, by finding that the moral language they have been using brings with it consequences they do not like—just as species evolve into other species by finding that some of the habits their ancestors developed for coping with one environment have become liabilities in coping with a changed environment. To say that moral progress occurs is to say that the later societies are more complex, more developed, more articulate, and above all more flexible than their predecessors. It is to say that later societies have more varied and interesting needs than amoebae.

If one asks why flexibility, articulation, variety, and interestingness are worthy ends to pursue—why they are morally relevant ends for individuals or societies—Dewey has nothing more to tell you than “so act as to increase the meaning of present experience.”38 “We do not,” he says, “require a revelation of some supreme perfection to inform us whether or not we are making headway in present rectification.”39 It is as futile for human communities to ask “Is our recent political history, the one we summarize in a narrative of gradual progress, taking us in the right direction?” as it would be for the squirrels to ask whether their evolution from shrews has been going in the right direction. The squirrels do what is best by their lights, and so do we. Both of us have been moving in the direction of what seems, by our respective lights, more flexibility, more freedom, and more variety.

In this attitude toward morality, it seems to me, we get a genuine marriage of Darwin with a de-absolutized Hegel. Just as, in the case of truth and knowledge, we had to introduce a seemingly un-Darwinian discontinuity between language and sentence in order to get an unparadoxical account of truth and to capture the point of Hegel’s distinction between Nature and Spirit, so here we have to introduce a seemingly un-Hegelian sense of irrationality and contingency in order to get a suitably Darwinian account of morality. But just as in the previous case we can give a naturalistic account of the difference of kind between the intentional and the nonintentional (by viewing the social practices that make language and intentionality possible as continuous with those that made cooperative tiger-hunting possible), so here we can give a more or less teleological account of seemingly irrational accident. We can say that a given irrational and accidental event (for example, the decline of the dinosaurs, the desire for gold on the part of bigoted and fanatical sixteenth-century monarchs) in fact contributed to an admirable result (the anthropoids, the United States of America), not because world-historical Reason was cunning, but just by good luck.

Teleological thinking is inevitable, but Dewey offers us a relativist and materialist version of teleology rather than an absolute and idealist one. Whereas Hegel had held that the study of history brings over from philosophy the thought that the real is the rational, the Hegel-Darwin synthesis Dewey proposes must de-ontologize this claim and make it simply a regulative, heuristic principle. Narratives of historical progress are legitimized not
by the philosopher’s explanation that the slaughter-bench of history is where the Incarnate Logos is redemptively tortured, but because the nature of the historian’s craft requires her to discern what Hegel called “the rose in the cross of the present.” It requires her to tell her community how they are now in a position to be, intellectually and morally, better than predecessor communities, thanks to their knowledge of the struggles of those predecessors. As the saying goes, we know more than our ancestors because they are what we know; what we most want to know about them is how to avoid their mistakes.40

I said earlier that the most Dewey can claim is that truth as what works is the theory of truth it now pays us to have. It pays us to believe this because we have seen the unhappy results of believing otherwise—of trying to find some ahistorical and absolute relation to reality for truth to name—and we must now try to do better. Similarly, the theory that, as Dewey said, “growth itself is the only moral end” is the moral theory it now pays us to have, for we have seen the unhappy results of trying to divinize and eternalize a given social practice or form of individual life.41 In both epistemology and moral philosophy, in short, we have seen the unhappy results of trying to think of normative terms like true or good or right as signifying relations of “agreement” or “correspondence” between something human and something nonhuman.

From this perspective, the question Does Dewey give us a satisfactory theory of the true, the good, and the right? presupposes an answer to the question What, at the present moment in history, is the function of such theories? Dewey thought that the function of all philosophical theories was the same: not to “deal with ultimate reality” but to “clarify men’s ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day.”42 This function is, however, that of high culture in general, rather than of philosophy in particular. So I think it would have been a bit more precise to say that the particular charge of philosophy is to make sure that old philosophical ideas do not block the road of inquiry—that continued use of the normative language employed in the social and moral strifes of an earlier day does not make it harder to cope with contemporary problems.

Dewey thought that the reductionist use of Darwin and the rationalist use of Hegel had produced some normative language that was, in fact, blocking our road. Darwin’s scientific followers (those who emphasized what he had in common with Hobbes rather than what he had in common with St. Francis) had suggested that there was an underlying reality—the struggle for survival—which high culture is a conspiracy to conceal. Hegel’s rationalist followers (those who read him as a historicized Spinoza rather than a metaphysicized Herder) had suggested that there was an underlying reality called the Absolute—a reality that somehow validated our religious and moral aspirations. The nineteenth century spent a lot of time dithering between these alternative conceptions of what “ultimate reality” or “human nature” was really like, and thus between traditional and scientific ways of describing the moral and political choices it faced.

Dewey would have been pleased by the fact that the twentieth century has spent increasingly little time talking about the nature of ultimate reality. In part this has been because the increasing prominence of Language as a topic, accompanied by an increasing recognition that one can describe the same thing in different ways for different purposes, has helped to make pragmatism, as a doctrine of the relativity of normative judgments to purposes served, more palatable. More important, perhaps, is that lots of different developments in our century—Freudian accounts of inner moral conflicts, ethnographic descriptions of alternative forms of social life, experimentalism in literature and the arts—have made it steadily easier for us to substitute Deweyan questions such as, Which communities’ purposes shall I share? and What sort of person would I prefer to be? for the Kantian questions, What Should I Do? What May I Hope? What is Man?