Matthew Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory: From Dewey to Rorty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 1-viii, 1-237.

Depending what one is willing to assume, there are some importantly different conclusions one might come to regarding the publication of Matthew Festenstein's *Pragmatism and Political Theory*. If one takes for granted the current state of higher education, academic publishing and mainstream academic philosophy in America, one must conclude (with, e.g., Richard Bernstein) that it is a valuable addition to the literature. It is a well-argued and informed examination of Dewey's political theory and of three theories which are offered as "New Pragmatisms." For Festenstein, Dewey is not the technocratic, bourgeois thinker that he is too often taken to be, nor "a hazy utopian," nor, as Richard Rorty would have it, is he a premature post-modernist who having rejected metaphysical realism and representational epistemology creates "room only for unjustifiable hope, and an ungroundable…sense of human solidarity." Rather, for Festenstein, "Dewey's political philosophy must be understood against the background of his ethical, psychological and metaphysical thought" (p. 10). While this has been seen before,[1] the burden of Part I is to develop, in a systematic way, the underpinings of Dewey's theory of democracy. There is much that is sound here, including his careful reconstruction of Dewey's claims regarding the "the objective character of human freedom and its dependence upon a congruity of environment with human wants" (p. 22), and perhaps especially his idea that "our reasons for valuing the imperfect forms of political democracy are not the same as our reasons for revering democracy" (p. 80). Part II considers the writings of Rorty, Habermas and Hilary Putnam. According to Festenstein, the critical force of Dewey's view derives from establishing "some distance between his own conception of individuality and the beliefs and values which he thinks are still embodied in the practices and thinking of his society. But, if Festenstein is right, Dewey cannot vindicate this conception, Accordingly, "his is simply a differing opinion about those values and beliefs [and] not a critical vantage point which his fellow citizens should themselves adopt" (p. 99). Rorty, of course, bites this bullet. Festenstein's criticism of Rorty is careful and very much located within the contemporary philosophical debate. Habermas and Putnam, like Rorty, "are sensitive to a sceptical threat which is alien to Dewey's thought" (p. 105) and they offer "reconstructions." Their response, flawed in ways different from Dewey's, is "to construct a vantage point on different foundations from Dewey's teleological naturalism" (ibid.). Since Dewey looks good compared to both Habermas and Putnam, partisans of pragmatism may like the outcome, even if I have my doubts that they should. My doubts on this derive from two sources, one is the question of whether Festenstein has caught Dewey's philosophical significance, the other from my unwillingness to make the assumptions just identified. Let me, if briefly, start with this last.

Festenstein's book would not be useful either to undergraduates or to the general reader. His over-riding concern is to argue, against the background of "the sceptical threat," that Dewey offers a plausible, if incomplete, philosophical justification for his normative ethical and political theory. Moreover, it is written in the argumentative style of analytic philosophy. Thus, there is no concern for the historical or problem-context of Dewey's work, for his cultural or social significance, nor for more straightforward political matters: what follows, perhaps, in the way of political institutions, practices, policies or even political vision, whether, e.g., liberal democracy has already given us the last word. The book is abstract (and abstracted) theory, justified on the perfectly plausible ground that "extending to a past thinker's work a degree of theoretical articulation which the texts themselves do not overtly display may be a means of discovering what, if anything, can be learned from that thinker" (p. 11). The book is "well-argued" in the sense that philosophical argument is currently understood: it responds to "arguments" in "the literature," tries to be clear about implicit assumptions and the warrant of inferences, made or implied. And it is "dialectical" in the sense that after all the objections and qualifications are considered, one is never quite sure what the author wants us to believe. Accordingly, the "market" for this book is restricted. Rorty identified the pertinent group: "first rate minds" who "are busy solving problems which no nonphilosopher recognizes as problems: problems which hook up with nothing outside the discipline."[2] I am not, to be sure, thinking of this as a marketing problem for the University of Chicago (and Polity) Press. Rather it is meant to speak to what is happening in higher education, in academic publishing and academic philosophy, and more generally in public culture. Rorty's criticism of philosophy and of the role of philosophers surely gets a piece of this, even while Rorty is less interested in getting at the causes of what we would agree is an increasingly dangerous situation.[3]

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[1] Very ably, in my view, by Betty Flowers and Murray Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America, Two Vols.* New York: G.P. Putnams, 1977), and James E. Tiles, *Dewey* (London: Routledge, 1988) surely the very best effort to re-articulate systematically Dewey's philosophy from a mainstream point of view. Tiles well grasps the radical nature of Dewey's effort to transform philosophy. See below.

Plainly, I cannot here treat this. Still one must notice that the mass media, including academic publishing, *and* higher education are hostage to the changing capitalist political economy and its imperatives.[4] In 1927, the public was being eclipsed: Dewey brilliantly diagnosed the causes of this.[5] Today, the public is obliterated: mass media, as Marcuse saw, both numb our minds and encourage irrelevant expression. The modern research university makes its contribution. Despite the protests of Dewey and a few others, it would not be long before disciplinary fragmentation would make its contribution to the disintegration of "experience," vision would be displaced by technique—sometimes in the name of Dewey, and critical, humanistic student-centered teaching and learning would take second place to the imperatives of "research and publication." Philosophers and their students can read the books of philosophers in order to discover (remarkably!) that "neofascists are wrong (to put it mildly) without implying that this judgement can be justified to them as they are, with the beliefs and values they hold" (p. 185). It is thus that students are turned off, politically and otherwise, and that most of the stuff produced for publication in academic departments, not merely in philosophy, but in the humanities and social sciences is, intended or not, politically irrelevant (at its best?), or profoundly conservative.[6] I don't know what, these days, is the break-even point for a book, nor how many people will eventually read this very solid book. But it need not be many. And do not misunderstand me: no irony is intended in saying that this is a very solid book. It just isn't very Deweyan.

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[2] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country, Leftist Thought in 20th Century America* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 129 from his 1995 MLA Lecture, "The Inspirational Value of Great Works."

[3] Rorty's descriptions are trenchant. For example, he writes that "one of the scariest social trends is illustrated by the fact that in 1979 kids from the top socioeconomic quarter of American families were four times more likely to get a college degree than those from the bottom quarter; now they are ten times more likely" (p. 86). Add to this his further observation: "Humanistic education may become what it was in Oxbridge before the reforms of the 1870s: merely a turnstile for admission to the overclass" (p. 135). Given his (silly!) understanding of "the reformist left," Rorty waffles in trying to explain this, seeing on the one hand that "the international, cosmopolitan super-rich" will "make all the important decisions" and on the other, berating the Marxist left as either Stalinist stooges or apocalyptic revolutionaries. Missing here is acknowledgment that only Marxists gave plausible analyses of what was happening. While Rorty quite rightly puts weight on agency in historical change, he evidently fails to see that in both his incarnations as a philosopher, he was a major contributor to the outcome he describes.

[4] See my "Higher Education at the Brink," *Futures*

[5] *The Public and Its Problems, Later Works*, Vol. 2.

Festenstein writes that Rorty "sees in Dewey's pragmatism the rejection of the concern with 'accounts' and 'foundations' slavishly (sic) displayed in his [Festenstein's] approach." This is certainly true. According to Rorty, Dewey had two sides: an "enlightened" and a "retrograde" half. Quoting Rorty: "… in his `hedgehog life capacity as a philosopher, as opposed to his foxy capacity as columnist," [Dewey] kept insisting that a new logic and a new metaphysics were required if moral and political thought were to be rejuvenated' "(10). Rorty, of course, can see little to recommend Dewey's insistence on this , for Rorty, an unwelcome residue of his commitment to philosophy. Dewey, obviously, saw it otherwise: It was his goal to transform *both* the institutions of liberal democratic America *and* the philosophical tradition which stood as an obstacle to this. Accordingly, Dewey did not abandon philosophy; he tried to transform it. The irony here is this: Rorty approves of the "foxy columnist" who wrote marvelous analyses and critiques of our institutions, but he chucked what in Dewey was most profound—and radical: his efforts to replace epistemology with a naturalistic theory of inquiry. Festenstein wants to rescue Dewey from this "selective reading." But he does it without appreciating the radical force of Dewey's "new logic" and "new metaphysics, " beginning with a rejection of the "slavish" concern with accounts and foundations. [7]

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[6] Rorty is unduly hard on the "the Foucauldian academic left," whom, he says, "is exactly the sort of Left that the oligarchy dreams of: A Left whose members are so busy unmasking the present that they have no time to discuss what laws need to passed in order to create a better future" (p. 139). Were it only a matter of passing new laws!

[7] Festenstein cites Sleeper's 1960 intervention versus Morton White: "Even among those who have welcomed Dewey's plan for putting ethics on a scientific basis there is a general tendency to focus upon the *methodological* implications of his proposals and to neglect, the *metaphysical perspective* which accompanies them and without which that plan seems inevitably to go awry" (p. 21). Sleeper 1960 may well have encouraged the reading Festenstein gives, a reading not possible in Sleeper's much later, "Rorty's Pragmatism: Afloat in Neurath's Boat, But Why Adrift" (*Transactions of the Charles Peirce Society*, 21 (1985), pp. 9-20, and his important *The Necessity of Pragmatism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) which shows the connection between Dewey's theory of inquiry in the *Logic*

There were, of course, skeptics before Descartes raised his questions. As Rorty wrote, ancient Pysrrhonism was concerned to show that we could know nothing with certainty and that it "had been troubled principally by the `problem of the criterion'--the problem of validating procedures of inquiry while avoiding either circularity or dogmatism." Descartes, Rorty suggests, thought he solved this problem but in trying to do this--with his doctrine of "clear and distinct ideas," he created a new kind of problem: "the problem of getting from inner space to outer space--the `problem of the external world' which became paradigmatic for modern philosophy."[8]

Rorty was correct in arguing that since it was widely believed that *something* had to legitimate the new science, epistemology became the core of the fairly recent demarcation of philosophy and science. He is right also that metaphysics then had to be something which emerged out of epistemology rather than vice versa. This is part of our history--the Western tradition of philosophy and science. Like it or not, we have it. (There are other traditions which do not.)

But given this history, it doesn't follow that we need to reproduce *its* problems or as Rorty would seem to have it, to throw up our hands. Dewey did not. Instead, he tried to shift ground. For him, there was no problem of going from "inner space" to "outer space," so he had to redefine both "experience" and "metaphysics." Epistemology became "inquiry;" "truth" became warranted assertability and "knowledge," he insisted, was best understood as the product of competent inquiries in *any* domain. In effect, he agreed with that version of Pyrrhonism which accepted that we could have no certain knowledge of anything and that the genuine problem was "the problem of validating procedures of inquiry while avoiding either circularity or dogmatism." While Festenstein sometimes seems to be close to seeing this, ultimately, I believe, he misses.

It is thus that he concludes that Dewey had "a scientistic hope for a physics of problem-solving" (45) and that his "empirical theory of valuation seems to rest on the possibility of a prior science of problems and their resolution, which does not exist" (44). It is thus also that he finds serious, if not fatal, problems in Dewey's naturalistic ethical framework (62, 99, 145), and can seriously offer us the neo-Kantian "discourse ethics" of Habermas and the internal realism of Putnam as potential improvements.

(1938) and his "metaphysics of existence." That is, more than a naturalistic ethic is at stake. Festenstein seems to believe that Ernest Nagel provides an adequate understanding and assessment of Dewey's *Logic*. More typically, philosophers have tended to agree with Ryan's recent assessment that the *Logic* is "somewhat baffling" (Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 309). Although, as noted, Dewey's project was clear from very early on, it was not till the publication of the Logic that the theory of inquiry was fleshed out. As Sleeper observed, by this time it was misunderstood by the handful of philosophers who took the time to read it. By this time, of course, analytic philosophy, and as part of this, positivist philosophy of science, dominated Anglo-American philosophy.

[8] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 139f.

Dewey surely did contribute to being misread, and this was due not merely or mainly to his prose. Pragmatism, he insisted, "occupies a position of an emancipated empiricism or thoroughgoing naïve realism." Accordingly, it was content "to take its stand with science and…[and]daily life."[9] But innocence lost cannot be regained. Even if Dewey did insist that "objectivity" did not require "foundations" (warranted assertability was sufficient), he could hardly satisfy modern philosophers with the claim that he was content to take his stand with science and daily life without leaving himself open to the charge of scientism--and a naïve one at that.

It is critical to notice first, that although Dewey was fully aware that science was not the engine of human liberation it was so often thought to be,[10] he did not take the trouble to think of science in the concrete terms his own approach should have required. Instead of thinking of the sciences as practices with different methods, goals and relations to the larger society, he spoke abstractly of "science." Further, he had no philosophy of science and much of what he says in this regard seems both naïve and positivist.[11] Finally, at least until the *Logic*, he spoke of "scientific method" as pretty much equivalent to "inquiry, " and even to "critical intelligence." This was a disaster and encouraged the wide-spread view, well put by Festenstein:

> Dewey's writings suggest several kinds of connections between the sciences and ethical and political thought…These included the thesis that there is something called the 'scientific method' which is determinate and capable of abstraction from the intellectual and institutional context of the natural sciences; the view that this method can and should be exploited by the developing human sciences, and to some extent had already been taken up…; and the commitment to the use of the social

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[9] "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy' (1917), *Middle Works*, Vol. 10, p. 39.

10. Dewey fully acknowledged this as early as 1893. In agreeing with Ernest Renan's *The Future of Science*, he wrote: The forty years since Renan wrote have not done much to add to the human spirit and the human interpretation of the results of science; they have rather gone to increase its technical and remote character." Indeed, "Renan does not seem to have realized sufficiently the dead weight of class interest which resists all attempts of science to take practical form and become a 'social motor' (*Early Writings* 4: 16).

[11] See my "Pragmatic Philosophy of Science and the Charge of Scientism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. XXIV, No. 2 (Spring, 1988). For a more positive interpretation see my "John Dewey and American Social Science," in Larry A. Hickman, *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998). For example, Dewey firmly rejected the positivist (empiricist!) conception of scientific laws as "formulations of uniform and unconditional sequences of events": 437) and the Humean event ontology which he saw that it presumes (*Logic, LW*, vol. 12). Since this undermines "the predictive criterion" as that is understood in empiricist philosophy of science, Festenstein's discussion of Rorty's "contribution to the long-standing debate between hermeneutic and empiricist conceptions of the human sciences" is, within a Deweyan frame, utterly irrelevant. See pp. 132-140, Section 4, "Contingency and Social Inquiry."

> sciences, and of scientific technology more generally, in addressing social problems (p. 30).

But Dewey's theory of inquiry is not some metaphysically neutral abstracted "scientific method" (whatever that may be) and it is surely is not the typical sort of nonsense one still gets in introductions in textbooks with silly talk that, e.g., "hypotheses" are confirmed only insofar as they allow us to make "good predictions." While features of his theory of inquiry were suggested by what Dewey took to be features of successful science, it was meant to replace the problems of epistemology with a different set of questions. For example:

> …[W]hen a writer endeavors to take a frankly naturalistic, biological and moral atttitude, and to account for knowledge on the basis of the place it occupies in such a reality, he is treated as if his philosophy were, after all, just another kind of epistemology.[12]

Just as his metaphysics is "new" in that he refuses Kant's transcendental move, his "logic," which flows from his metaphysics, is new in rejecting Russellian strictures in the theory of science.

Thomas Burke says, "Dewey's conception of inquiry has to be understood not so much as cognitive problem solving but more generally in terms of an adaptive stabilization propensity of organism/environment relations."[13]This starting point led Dewey to totally reject the taken-for-granted Frege/Russell conception of logic assumed by all empiricist philosophy (and subsequently by "cognitive psychology") and to refashion "inference," "propositional content," "kinds" and other central terms in mainstream logical theory. Thus, the logicians concept of "inference" is an abstraction from the more elementary but very much ill-understood capacities of "organisms" to handle "information" which does not require human language. Indeed, as Hacking has said, deduction and induction (as understood by logicians) "play little role in the scientific method, no more than the once revered syllogism.[14] Burke summarizes the upshot of this:

The complexity of Dewey's logical theory as a whole is due to the fact that there is more to consider than simply comparing sentences against facts. His focus on inquiry and experience, his reformulation of the notion of facts in information-theoretic terms, his relatively complicated taxonomy of propositions (as distinct, moreover, from judgments), and so forth are all part of an attempt to explain (1) what it means to say that a statement about how things are many or may nor correspond to how things actually are, when at the same time, (2) it is not possible to step back and treat this correspondence as if it were a matter of comparing the statement against reality (p. 240).

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[12] "Pure Experience and Reality: A Disclaimer" (1907), *Middle Works*, Vol. 8.

[13] See Thomas Burke *Dewey's New Logic: A Reply to Russell* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

14. Ian Hacking, "Language, Truth and Reason," in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), p. 57. Festenstein sees some parallels in post-Kuhnian philosophy of science and in Dewey, e.g., that standards are internal to practices and rejection of the idea that there is a "tight deductive theory into which all theories can fit, and where hypotheses are not justified by reference to some neutral transcendent reality…For both inquiry is embedded in a matrix of cultural and historical norms" (p. 40). Of course, Dewey 's concern is "inquiry," not the theory of science.

Nor was Dewey scientistic in the sense that he assumed that the social sciences should model themselves on the natural sciences, especially as they were then understood. He regularly spoke of "alleged scientific social inquiry" and was often very critical of both the natural and the social sciences. He offered, e.g., that "the existing limitations of 'social science" [Dewey's quotation marks!] are due mainly to unreasoning devotion to physical science as a model, to a misconception of physical science at that."[15] In another place, he notes that the "backwardness of social knowledge is marked in its division into independent and insulated branches of learning," and "it is not conceived in terms of its bearing on human life."[16] Dewey was anything but a naïve defender of the fragmented, ideologically driven social sciences and he envisaged, it is safe to say, a research program which has been stunningly ignored. As early as 1897, he had this to say:

> The sociologist, like the psychologist, often presents himself as a camp follower of genuine science and philosophy, picking up scraps here and there and piecing them together in somewhat aimless fashion...But social ethics represents the attempt to translate philosophy from a general and therefore abstract method into a working and specific method; it is the change from inquiring into the nature of value in general to an inquiry of the particular values which ought to be realized in the life of everyone, and of the conditions which shall render possible this realization.[17]

This well summarizes Dewey's naturalistic philosophical project, dubiously consistent with the Festenstein's idea that he assumed that there was "some a prior science of problems and their resolution," or that "scientific technology" would be of any help in addressing social problems. Finally, as Dewey well recognized, achieving the conditions which would render possible the realization of these values is the problem of democracy. Despite the scientistic claims by "experts," "the prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist."[18]

It may be that Festenstein's able book will further stimulate efforts to restore what is viable in Dewey. My fear is that is may do just the opposite.

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[15] "Social Science and Social Control" (1931), *Later Works*, Vol. 6, p. 64.

[16] *Later Works*, Vol. 2, p. 342.

[17] "The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge" (1897), *Early Works*, Vol. 5., p. 23.

[18] *The Public and Its Problems*, *Later Works*, Vol. 2. P. 339.

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