

## BOOK REVIEWS

Ryan, A. (1995). *John Dewey and the high tide of American liberalism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 414 pp. (Hardcover).

In this comprehensive intellectual biography of John Dewey, Alan Ryan attempts to recast Dewey's educational ideas as part of a general reevaluation of his social and political philosophy. Though Ryan is himself a distinguished political theorist, this approach is not merely a reflection of his particular interest in Dewey's political thought. Ryan devotes a large part of the book to the epistemological and ethical dimensions of Dewey's pedagogical theory, but in general emphasizes the philosophical difficulties they fail to overcome and the educational concerns they do little to allay. He tries to persuade us that:

Dewey's originality lay [rather] in his obsessive concern with using elementary education to recreate social ties ... [and with] the role of education in social reform ... his politics have educational overtones, and his educational philosophy is essentially political. It was not a matter of what went on in the classroom so much as a matter of how we were to approach what went on in the classroom. (p. 277)

Ryan does not ignore Dewey's deep concern for classroom organization and instructional method; but we are meant to take Ryan's conclusion here as reconstructive rather than exegetical. Ryan's claim is that Dewey's contemporary relevance derives from his vision of schools as agents of democratic renewal in society, and that developing this vision further may require dissociating it from the experimentalist premises of his pedagogy.

This selective approach to the recovery of Dewey's insights makes *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* unique among recent comprehensive treatments of his life and thought. While Ryan is guided by "enthusiasm for Dewey's work and almost unalloyed admiration for its author" (p. 34), he rarely hesitates to unleash the full force of a pertinent philosophical objection. Some of these objections arise out of discussions of the academic adversaries with whom Dewey clashed in his lifetime, but most are prompted by Ryan's own reflections. Indeed, Ryan's criticisms are at times so unforgiving that his admiring devotion can seem slightly incongruous. But in principle, his critical method is sound. Attempting to rescue an entire body of philosophical work intact can yield the misleading

impression that a single irredeemable flaw would bring the whole house of cards down, when in fact the flawed premise might be philosophically inessential to the system, by our lights if not by the author's. Ryan's willingness to isolate and bracket flawed premises, however conspicuous in Dewey's own arguments, should in principle allow him to do full justice to Dewey's more compelling philosophical insights. Ryan puts it a little more mischievously: "Dewey put together an astonishing combination of old hankerings and new understands and ... it is a fascinating and still-open question what parts give under pressure" (p. 86).

I repeat 'in principle' because this approach does pose special problems in the case of Dewey, as noted below. In any case, the alternatives have been consistently unsatisfying. Waves of educational commentators in the 1950s and the 1980s routinely attacked Dewey's philosophy along with his pedagogy, often without bothering to distinguish them. The pendulum has once again swung to the opposite extreme, with the two most comprehensive treatments of Dewey's thought in recent years (Rockefeller, 1991; Westbrook, 1991) frustratingly overlooking opportunities for interesting philosophical counter-argument, at best occasionally mentioning traditional objections only to show how they rest on a misunderstanding or oversight. Even in the work of contemporary political theorists, Dewey's pronouncements are now often reverentially invoked without due acknowledgement of the philosophical minefields they lead into, as in recent books by such influential philosophers as Jürgen Habermas (1996) and Michael Sandel (1996). Ryan does not attempt to identify every mine to which Dewey exposed himself, but he acknowledges several of the great unresolved problems in Dewey's work, and does not pretend or assume that they can all be overcome. In this respect, Ryan's book is a refreshing change of pace.

The book is in the same genre as Rockefeller's and Westbrook's in that the chapters are organized chronologically rather than topically. Roughly the first half of the book is therefore focused on Dewey's philosophical development, though Ryan keeps an eye out for substantive points of philosophical interest that either nourished or haunted Dewey in his mature work. Major philosophical turning points are duly emphasized, including Dewey's abandonment of religious idealism in the mid-1890s, the controversy surrounding his endorsement of American intervention in the First World War, and his development of the notion of 'consummatory experience' in the 1920s and 1930s as a way of addressing growing concerns over the 'ultimate values' of pragmatism. A major theme throughout the book is Dewey's concern to bridge the empiricist's gap between moral and scientific understanding (or more precisely, between the categories of fact and value) both before and after his turn to pragmatism. This aspect of the

book should be of general interest, as the fact/value problem remains at the heart of moral philosophy today, and is a growing concern among theorists of educational administration and planning (Maddock, 1995). Of more particular interest is Ryan's account of the influence of the 19th century philosopher T.H. Green on Dewey in regard to the fact/value problem, an influence that is sometimes underrated by commentators preoccupied with Dewey's reading of Hegel.

As Ryan shows, it was precisely his philosophical vision of reuniting our moral and scientific sensibilities, in its pragmatist form, that led Dewey to conclude that an education comprising open-ended cycles of collaborative empirical problem-solving would by itself constitute the deepest moral education schools could offer. Ryan develops an appreciative account of Dewey's transition to this way of thinking about education, but in the latter half of the book, he increasingly reveals his misgivings about Dewey's pedagogical prescriptions and the theory behind them. He finds little that compensates for Dewey's tendency to "slight training in the humanities" (p. 143) or for his "antipathy to the distinction between high and low culture" (p. 347). For all his charitable commentary, Ryan is almost exasperated at times by the realization that there is not more to say in Dewey's defence in this regard.

Where he applauds Dewey is in his emphasis on the role of progressive education in furthering the ideal of participatory democracy in society. But even here, Ryan implies that some rethinking is in order. He suggests, for instance, that a system of democratic education might more profitably focus on the curricular requirements for preparing young citizens for intelligent debate (p. 347) than on simulating democracy in miniature. This change of emphasis will be attractive to many, but it can leave one wondering whether anything distinctively Deweyan has been preserved.

One could also argue that this selective approach precludes doing justice to Dewey's own belief in the intrinsic holism of his philosophical work. Ryan sometimes treats this belief as just one more case of a detachable philosophical liability: "The risk that Dewey ran was that confusion in one area implied trouble everywhere" (p. 315). But the element of system in Dewey's philosophy, the sense of an overarching whole binding his arguments together, is certainly one of its charms, and Ryan is clearly enchanted enough to show weakness for it. Comparing Dewey with Bertrand Russell, on whom he has also written extensively, he suggests that "the superiority of Dewey to Russell as a social theorist ... lies largely in the fact that Dewey's philosophy led up to and underpinned his social and political ideals, while Russell's philosophy was irrelevant to his politics or at odds with it (p. 116). But later, he considers whether Dewey "wonderfully

integrated his philosophical, educational, and political interests or ... got into a terrible intellectual and emotional tangle because he found it impossible to discuss any one issue without bringing in all the rest" and bluntly admits, "I incline to the second view ... Dewey would have been more persuasive if he had been less 'holistic'" (p. 171). One wonders here if Ryan is entirely certain about his own expository approach. Eventually, Ryan settles for the view that his holism is one of the things that makes Dewey interesting, though it is largely a rhetorical rather than a philosophical virtue (p. 315). The disconcerting fact of the matter, though, is that *is* an important philosophical virtue, provided one's philosophical foundations have a measure of plausibility. The problem Ryan leaves us is not only whether Dewey's fundamental premises are plausible, but whether they should be treated as foundations at all.

In the final chapter, Ryan traces the revival of interest in Dewey's work in recent political philosophy. He pursues some interesting comparisons with contemporary communitarian theorists such as Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, and discusses the influence Dewey has exerted on philosophers as diverse as Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty. Ultimately, however, he puts more emphasis on the relevance of Dewey's ideas to contemporary public debates in politics and education. Ryan is shrewd in using that relevance as a guide to what is worth preserving in a reconstruction of Dewey's philosophical vision. This is the great merit of *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, along with the fact that Ryan does not allow his reverence for Dewey to interfere with a candid critical appraisal of what may not be worth preserving. If anything, this is an important step towards making that reverence justifiable.

#### REFERENCES

- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy* (Trans. W. Rehg). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Maddock, T.H. (1995). Science, critique and administration: The debate between the critical theorists and the materialist pragmatists. *Educational Management and Administration*, 23(1), 58-67.
- Rockefeller, S. (1991). *John Dewey: Religious faith and democratic humanism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sandel, M.J. (1996). *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Westbrook, R.B. (1991). *John Dewey and American democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Gordon F. Davis  
Department of Theory and Policy Studies  
Massey College, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
University of Toronto  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Zipes, J. (1995). *Creative storytelling: Building community, changing lives*. New York: Routledge, 267 pp. (softcover).

This is a remarkable book, the best of the many books about storytelling that I have read. I write this as someone who has had ten years experience telling stories to young people in schools and elsewhere. Throughout these years, I always felt something was missing from what I was doing: I felt as if I was not actually preparing my audience to become storytellers in their own right. Had I been able to read a book like *Creative Storytelling*, I would have understood the accuracy of this feeling and I would have had the means to begin empowering those very listeners I seemed to be, in one sense, failing. Jack Zipes sets out with empowerment of the young person in mind; he has a programme and a clear sense of just what stories are and do. In writing about his activities as a storyteller, Zipes offers the reader not only tips on how to share stories with children and how to initiate their own storying, but also an introduction to literary genre and a clear sense of how a story functions to create community. The book deals with both practical and theoretical issues, and it does so without sentimentality or vagueness. Zipes's argument that storytelling can build an informed and critical citizenry and a cohesive community is presented with precision and informative examples.

Despite his disclaimer in the opening pages that he has written this book "not to instruct but to *share*," Zipes has written a deeply instructive book. The reader will find in these pages many games and creative activities to give young people the confidence to tell their own stories. In another sense, however, Zipes has written what he calls an "anti-manual" The experiences he shares in this book are those he has had working with children and adults over some 20 years. The activities and methods he describes are what he has picked up from others – "different critics, storytellers, teachers and children" – over the years.. The stories he tells in this book are those of classic tellers