

INTRODUCTION

DEWEY AND THE PROBLEM OF INTELLECTUAL RETRIEVAL

John Dewey's writings are widely recognized as an important contribution to democratic theory. As Robert Westbrook writes in his seminal intellectual biography, *John Dewey and American Democracy*:

Dewey was the most important advocate of participatory democracy, that is, of the belief that democracy as an ethical ideal calls upon men and women to build communities in which the necessary opportunities and resources are available for every individual to realize fully his or her particular capacities and powers through participation in political, social and cultural life.¹

This characterization is further crystallized in recent interpretations that locate Dewey firmly on the side of deliberative democracy.² Interpreters identify the normative content of his conception of participation, thus distinguishing it from the narrower descriptions of democratic politics that can be found in Walter Lippmann or Joseph Schumpeter.³ In Dewey's view both representative government and deliberation among the citizenry are fundamental interacting features of democracy. The connection between the two binds political accountability and justification and foregrounds the intersubjective or cooperative character of legitimate political action. Political action is instrumental in that it aims to solve specific problems. But for Dewey political action also includes the transformative intentions that we have come to associate with deliberative democracy.⁴ For him, democratic deliberation is fundamentally about crafting policy decisions that seek to be of benefit to the community at large rather than to just a single-party interest.

Yet fruitful retrieval is undercut by a long-standing criticism that centers on his attempt to link what he calls the “scientific method” to democracy (SSM [MW6:69–80]; L [LW12: pt. IV]). In brief, Dewey extends to democracy the model of science as it embodies publicity, fallibilism, and testing hypotheses against expected consequences. But the connection, or so his critics argue, does much more: it suggests that if we only extend the methods of science to social life, then will we be able to engineer a form of society that can manage the problems of collective organization and thereby eventuate in moral and political progress. This much Bertrand Russell has in mind when, in 1910, he writes: “Pragmatism appeals to the temper of mind which finds on the surface of this planet the whole of its imaginative material; which feels confident of progress, and unaware of non-human limitations to human power; which loves battle, with all the attendant risks, because it has no real doubt that it will achieve victory.”⁵ John Patrick Diggins makes a similar remark, linking Dewey to the Enlightenment tradition: “Although Dewey has been hailed for ridding philosophy of epistemology in order to bring it into the modern world . . . he appears to be returning to the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment in his conviction of a rational world responsive to scientific manipulation.”⁶ One who follows Dewey’s outlook, Diggins says earlier, “identifies knowledge with control rather than understanding, with mastery rather than meaning.”⁷

Diggins’ worry over Dewey’s faith in progress and the corresponding belief that it will come about by the use of the “scientific method” has an underlying meaning that cannot be understated. It is motivated, like Russell’s criticism, by the thought that Dewey lacks a sense of our limitations—an appreciation for the looming sense of catastrophe, whether it be in the form of power or sin. Connecting him to the Enlightenment, then, is meant to remind us that amid Dewey’s criticisms of certain aspects of modernity, he nonetheless appears to succumb to its hubris. This point is strongly asserted in Patrick Deneen’s recent book *Democratic Faith*, in which he argues, among other things, that what is missing from Dewey’s account is a sense of humility. For him, Dewey has bequeathed to us an orientation toward the world in which we move between an elevated sense of human possibilities and an intractable sense of despair that results from a confrontation with recalcitrant dimensions of the human condition.⁸

This general concern with the primacy of method, progress, and the lack of epistemic modesty and therefore humility in social action lends itself to two more specific criticisms. Hilary Putnam worries that in moral and political matters, Dewey seems unable to recognize genuine conflicts among

human values—conflicts that bespeak the limits of inquiry.⁹ As Eric MacGilvray recently remarks in agreement with him: “To be sure, social conflict exists, but they appear in Dewey’s political thought as symptoms of a kind of self defeating ignorance or blindness.”¹⁰ Dewey’s desire for reconciliation through intelligence—a residue of his earlier Hegelian commitments, as MacGilvray explains—obscures the possibility of irresolvable tension. C. Wright Mills, Christopher Lasch, and others argue that Dewey’s privileging of science ironically lends itself to an elitist conception of democracy, which blocks ordinary citizens from engaging in deliberation about matters of collective concern.¹¹ Modeling democracy after scientific communities, coupled with greater levels of complexity in modern society, seemingly shrinks the number of knowledgeable participants that can and should comprise the space of political reflection. As such, Dewey seems unable to address the potential eclipse of the public by a form of power that is grounded in expert knowledge and harnessed by political elites.¹²

AVOIDING THE CRITICISM:

DEWEY’S DARWINIAN ENLIGHTENMENT

To be sure, there are differences among Dewey’s critics. Nonetheless, their various worries are linked by two underlying claims. The first of these relates to ontology or metaphysics.¹³ MacGilvray summarizes its content when he says: “Dewey’s own faith in the experimental ideal rests upon three related assumptions about the nature of reality: that it has a fundamentally rational character, that its rational character can be grasped by unaided human reason, and that we can ultimately (and perhaps only) grasp its rational character in common.”¹⁴ These are striking assertions; Dewey appears to be less Darwinian and more Newtonian in both his reading of reality and his aspirations regarding inquiry.

In this context the second underlying worry emerges. This is the sense that the ontological claim is bound up with epistemological aspirations. If Dewey is saying what MacGilvray attributes to him, then any Deweyan inquirer will always already interpret the difficulties of life as resulting from a failure to think clearly or gain more information, a problem which can then be surmounted only if we delineate the demands of the scientific method and adhere to it consistently. Such a position, if this reading is accurate, merely relocates the source of human salvation, rather than abandoning how we understand that term altogether. Here we have a psychological orientation that raises the level of expectation, one that is on par with the

optimism of the Enlightenment. Indeed, all of the criticisms above can be drawn back to this ontological claim and its epistemological aspirations in one way or another.

The previous sentence is advanced with care. After all, I am placing both sympathetic and unsympathetic interpreters of Dewey under a single umbrella. Although the reader may concede that criticisms by Diggins and Deenen for example may well presuppose the description above, surely the same cannot be said of someone like Putnam or, as I shall suggest later, Cornel West and Dewey's most thoughtful reader, Westbrook. I will come back to the texture of these thinkers' views later, but at this juncture two points need to be observed. First, these thinkers often disagree about how the rational character of reality displays itself in Dewey's philosophy. For Diggins, in Dewey's philosophy reality is bent and manipulated by human will so as to affirm the will's aspirations. At crucial moments in Putnam and Westbrook's readings of Dewey, reality seems *always already* conducive to inquiry.¹⁵ Second, there are differences in the emphases these thinkers place on the hubris of inquiry. Putnam and Westbrook are thus very careful in laying out Dewey's sensitivity to the problems in experience and the role of experimentalism therein. Indeed, I see my views as continuous with theirs in some crucial respects. Yet when they examine his moral philosophy in particular, Dewey's account of inquiry seems far more ambitious and less attentive to moral conflict and value pluralism. An important question emerges. What is his lack of or inconsistent attentiveness to moral conflict meant to tell us about his philosophy? For these thinkers, I suggest, it means that Dewey presupposes that a rational and harmonious character for reality is always achievable. Here, the epistemological aspiration seemingly reveals both itself and the ontology from which it proceeds.

These criticisms invariably trade on a misconception. They assume that Dewey's faith in our ability to change our circumstances for the better blinds him to (1) the inability of human beings to completely control their environment, and therefore (2) the necessity of cultivating an orientation of responsiveness to the complexities of the modern world that chastens and conditions how we understand human intervention. To be clear, the differences among sympathetic and unsympathetic interpreters of Dewey will affect how this misconception is seen to play itself out, but this does not preclude the fact that this misconception is at work.

If the fundamental criticism hinges on his account of inquiry and the presumed self-assertion it encourages, we need a richer narrative that will allow us to receive Dewey in a different light. The overriding theme of this

book is that his conception of inquiry—particularly as it functions as a guide for life—is based on a balanced and defensible criticism of modern thought. As Dewey sees it, modern thought, at least as it comes to expression in the Cartesian and Newtonian quest for certainty, wrongly characterizes the relationship that obtains between human beings and the natural world. Indeed, there are key overlaps between the theological vision of certainty and modern thought more generally. But this mischaracterization emerges most clearly, I suggest, if we examine the problematic intersection of religious certainty and Darwinian evolution in late-nineteenth-century America—an intersection that captures a number of concerns with which Dewey is preoccupied at the beginning of the twentieth century.

I have no doubt that Dewey advances ontological claims. He devotes an entire book—*Experience and Nature* (1925)—to the subject. For him, it is unlikely one can offer a social and political philosophy without a vision of what it means to be a human being and to exist within the natural world. But these commitments are far weaker than his critics believe, owing to the importance of Darwin to his thought. If, as Ralph Ketcham notes, the first Enlightenment had as its exemplar “Newtonian guidelines of order, balance, and harmony,” and the second, which includes Dewey, has “Darwinian guidelines of struggle, competition, and indeterminacy,” then the Promethean possibilities that attend inquiry should proceed from a standpoint of humility.¹⁶

I do not attempt to offer a historical narrative in this book regarding the two Enlightenments, except where Dewey’s work itself implies such a distinction. Yet the distinction that Ketcham articulates cannot be understated and deserves modest elucidation. Newtonian guidelines of order, balance, and harmony (aspirations that Descartes shared) persisted into the nineteenth century and contributed then, as they had in the seventeenth century, to a desire to reconcile reason and faith, science and religion. The new science of the seventeenth century developed out of a practical engagement with the natural world that did not expunge God from the universe. In this context, the global distinction between some key rationalists and empiricists (which holds true along several lines) often belies a more subtle consensus. As Jonathan Israel explains in his exhaustive study, *Enlightenment Contested*, Descartes, Newton, Locke, and Kant believed in the force of reason precisely because “man . . . [dwelt] in a divinely ordered universe.”¹⁷ This string of names comprises a very complicated and deep intellectual history that Israel recently dubbed as the “moderate Enlightenment,” and which I identify as the Cartesian and Newtonian Enlightenment. But Israel’s use of “moderate” contains an important paradox; it denotes a circumspection of reason that

seemingly acknowledges its limits, but only because reason belongs to a universe that declares the splendor of God. The power accorded to reason, whose conceptual development we have come to associate with thinkers as diverse as Descartes and Hegel, contains more than a hint of the divine.

This is something that Dewey equally highlights in his classic 1929 Gifford Lectures, *The Quest for Certainty*, partly to indicate the more radical character of his own experimentalism. As he explains, the belief in a divinely ordered universe has been central to “modern spiritualistic philosophies since the time of Kant; indeed, since that of Descartes, who first felt the poignancy of the problem in reconciling the conclusions of science with traditional religious and moral beliefs” (QC [LW4:33]). But this approach, as Dewey goes on to argue in that work, often led to a bifurcation between *theoria* and *praxis*, and a relative inattentiveness to the internal uncertainty of the latter. Although the new science made experimentalism central to its outlook, the metaphysics of nature in which it was located meant that the experimental approach could only be half-hearted. The desire for reconciliation along with this half-hearted experimentalism played itself out no less in the late-nineteenth-century debates over religion and science, specifically evolution, helping to explain why, in America, Darwin disrupted what was otherwise an amicable relationship.¹⁸ Darwin centralized contingency, as opposed to order, harmony, and regularity, as the essence of existence, and Dewey exploited its significance to outline a vision of human enlightenment that at once encouraged self-assertion and cautioned epistemic and practical humility.

I begin, then, with an emphasis on the nineteenth-century debates over religion and evolution in the United States because this background will help to centralize the Darwinian horizon that figures so prominently in Dewey’s philosophy. Indeed, it allows us to disrupt the strong ontological claim attributed to him so that the other specific worries cited above will no longer seem viable. In the following, I want to argue for the importance of my beginning point and outline the argumentative moves it makes possible. In doing the latter I will indicate how my argument differs from other interpretations of Dewey’s philosophy.

REDIRECTION:

RELIGIOUS CERTAINTY AND THE QUEST FOR MEANING

In the latter of half of the nineteenth-century, America underwent dramatic social and political changes. Unlike earlier generations, Americans could no longer retain the belief in their special status—that of a chosen people—the

view that God had ordained the United States as that nation which would usher in a new world through its religious commitments, political tradition, and fluid class structure. The Civil War, for example, had pointed to the limits of America's political tradition—that it was not a nation beyond hypocrisy and violence. Industrialization and urbanization underscored differences of wealth, which, although not enshrined in a class structure akin to feudalism, nonetheless embodied divisions that cut against the belief that class boundaries were in fact fluid. Between the years 1870 and 1920 the otherwise amicable relationship discussed earlier between science and religion changed dramatically.¹⁹ Charles Darwin's 1859 work *The Origin of Species* marked an important advancement in theories of evolution, the result of which, however unintended, was to weaken religious orthodoxy. While it would be inaccurate to exaggerate the importance of this development above all the rest of the era, it nonetheless figures prominently because it shook the framework within which one might address the other concerns. In the minds of many Americans, slavery and the persistence of racism that followed after the Civil War were connected to the economic changes that undermined social responsibility and the persistence of a truly egalitarian society because both signaled a deficiency in America's moral compass.

Nowhere is the concern over Darwin's impact more explicit than among some of the most important theologians and preachers of the time.²⁰ Charles Hodge, professor of theology at Princeton Seminary and founder of the popular *Princeton Review*, is of singular importance in this regard. He stands as the most appropriate proxy for a more general worry and provides perhaps the clearest articulation of the perceived problem.²¹ In brief, like others of the time, Hodge worried about the radical contingency that informed natural selection. It denied the divine goodness that was otherwise attached to the unfolding of both the world and the lives of its inhabitants. As James Kloppenberg remarks on just this point: "If evolution proceeded by means of random variations and competition for scarce resources, then Darwin's ideas made nonsense of theological arguments from design" and of the claim that the meaningful character of the moral and political universe rested on something more certain than mere social volition.²² Natural selection implied a genuine unpredictability to life independent of one's knowledge of antecedent conditions, defying other goal-directed notions of evolution found in Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Robert Chambers, and Herbert Spencer. While Darwin lamented his use of "selection" because it implied intent, "natural selection" nonetheless meant that chance rather than necessity determined the adaptive viability of variations. There was no *telos* toward which those changes aimed and no es-

sence of which they were expressive. And this scientific reality, in Hodge's view, could not exist alongside the belief in an ordered universe constructed by God. More important for Hodge, in lacking the object of one's piety—i.e., God—Americans would be without a sense of purpose and commitment to self and society.

Still others amended Darwin's insights so as to sustain the larger faith in America's special place and retain the belief in progress that it implied. Here I am referring to liberal Protestants such as Henry Ward Beecher, Lyman Abbott, John Fiske, and James McCosh.²³ Indeed, the use of the qualifier "liberal" means to signal those who felt that an amicable relationship between religious commitments and science was nonnegotiable and indeed essential. But this second response, often articulated in Darwin's name, merely reconceptualized the theory by abandoning the view of contingency that was so central to it in order to reaffirm a vision of epistemic certainty that provided guidance at the moral and political levels of existence. One vision languished in the disappointment and despair that it attached to the ascendancy of Darwin's theory, while the other expressed a cosmic optimism about human abilities precisely because of it. This is but the barest sketch of a more complicated account to which we shall return in chapter 1.

To suggest, however, that Dewey's writings constitute a third way in this debate might seem altogether misguided. We find no explicit reference to this debate in his corpus. Nor does he discuss (if he does at all) the work of these thinkers in any substantive detail. From Dewey's perspective, among the three founding pragmatists, it was William James who concerned himself with the relationship among moral life, science, and religious commitments. This much Dewey explains when he says that James sought to give shape to "a *via media* between the natural sciences and the ideal interests of morals and religion" (WJ [MW6:96] [original emphasis]). But James, Dewey continues, was alone in his task.²⁴

Moreover, Dewey's mature philosophical position—a move away from Hegelian idealism to pragmatism in the 1890s—is characterized by a shift in venue from the University of Michigan, where he was actively involved as a member of the Congregational Church, to the University of Chicago, where we find no record of his participation in organized religion. Looking back over his earlier period, Dewey remarks in 1930 that he had "not been able to attach much importance to religion as a philosophic problem; for the effect of that attachment seems to be in subordination of . . . thinking to the alleged but factitious needs of some special set of convictions" (AE₁ [LW5:153]). Many commentators take this point seriously, thereby leaving me with very little upon which to stake my claim.

There is reason then to question my beginning point, given that Dewey never seems to address or acknowledge the problem identified above. To be sure, if we treat the crisis of religious certainty as merely a theological debate among academics about the existence of God, the importance of supernaturalism, or how we should interpret scripture and doctrinal obedience, then we conclude rightly about Dewey's lack of philosophical interest. He should therefore not be read as contributing to a set of debates and discourses from which he explicitly abstains.

But this conclusion, too, depends on whether we have accurately described the moment. For as D. H. Meyer writes, these issues were merely placeholders for something more: "Although the formal intellectual issue was the existence or non-existence of God, the God-question was really only a convenient symbol for the growing feeling that, as Nietzsche put it, the highest values were losing their value, and that certainty was no longer possible in matters of ultimate concern."²⁵ The worry was that without inalterable foundations all beliefs lose their meaningful quality and claim on us. Indeed, this theme figured prominently in Max Weber's classic reflections on disenchantment and rationality, which, like Hodge's arguments, elevated the issue to a problem of the cognitive attitude of modern individuals.²⁶ Of course, there was a difference between the two: Hodge's worry was limited to his analysis of Darwin whereas Weber's concern emerged from an interpretation of the internal logic of the modern scientific tradition. Still, the issue was the same: In the absence of a sacred bedrock, how could we find one value or end more compelling than another? Although more attention is given to how this question emerged in the American context, it should be observed that it extended beyond both the precinct of theological seminaries and America largely because it went to the very heart of the modern imaginary, suggesting that the crisis of religious certainty implied a crisis of normative evaluation.²⁷ Indeed, all these thinkers were animated by a constellation of ideas and concerns despite not explicitly engaging one another.

These common problems are more than sufficient to justify placing Dewey in conversation with them; this will also elucidate Dewey's philosophy. We are able to discern in his writings an attempt to contribute to the cognitive and practical health of modern societies, for his philosophy principally seeks to reorient us to our values—that is, to acknowledge their socially constructed character, the way their meaning is indexed to the likely consequences that follow in negotiating the world and so are therefore in need of justification, and their inescapable fragility. The necessity of reorientation comes about in part because of the larger worry Darwin sparks, suggesting a more fundamental connection to the debate above. As Dewey says, the genuine ten-

sion was not between “science on the one side and theology on the other,” but the more lasting issue of whether we will believe that our values emerge from “the mutual interaction of changing things” or look for “them in some transcendent . . . region” (IDP [MW4:6]). The first of these, says James in 1907, “turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. . . . It means the open air and possibilities of nature.”²⁸ While James was seemingly alone in his attempt to find a manageable relationship among science, religion, and morals in the nineteenth century, Dewey rightly adds that his approach was a siren call that changed the “temper of imagination” in the twentieth century (WJ [MW6:96]).²⁹ The content of this changed imagination, in my view, comes in significant part from Dewey’s philosophy.

His is a third way between spiritual sickness or disenchantment and Protestant self-assertion precisely because all three positions engage the same underlying existential concerns and generate reverberations that affect our moral, religious, and political outlooks. This much he suggests in a commencement address, “Philosophy and American National Life,” given at the University of Vermont in 1904. We shall return to this address in the next chapter, but it is worth noting here that he highlights the need for philosophical reflection in order to be attentive to the intractable features of ordinary existence. And he remarks on the need to refashion our vision of the self and its orientation toward the natural world. Here, in rudimentary form, we find the concern for articulating an alternative position:

If our civilization is to be directed, we must have such a concrete and working knowledge of the individual as will enable us to furnish on the basis of the individual himself substitutes for those modes of nurture, of restraint and of control which in the past have been supplied from authorization supposedly fixed outside of and beyond individuality. (PAL [MW3:75])

This emphasis on the individual does not bespeak a form of subjectivism, but rather a recentering of the human subject as the source from which meaning in life and its authorization spring. Meaning and authorization emerge not from exclusive appeal to antecedent phenomena as we find in both Hodge and liberal Protestants, but from consequent transactions between us and the larger natural environment (DAP [LW2:12]). Our continuity with nature as organic beings means that interaction and change are always about us, but when an interaction “intervenes which directs the course of change, the scene of natural interaction has a new quality and dimension.

This added type of interaction *is* intelligence” (QC [LW4:171] [original emphasis]). This position, as Dewey well knows, courts danger. As he says in *Experience and Nature*:

Everything that man achieves and possesses is got by actions that may involve him in other and obnoxious consequences in addition to those wanted and enjoyed. His acts are trespasses upon the domain of the unknown. . . . While unknown consequences flowing from the past dog the present, the future is even more unknown and perilous; the present by that fact is ominous. If unknown forces that decide future destiny can be placated, the man who will not study the methods of securing their favor is incredibly flippant. In enjoyment of present food and companionship, nature, tradition and social organization have cooperated, thereby supplementing our own endeavors so petty and so feeble without this extraneous reinforcement. Goods are by grace not of ourselves. (EN [LW1:44])

There is a two-pronged argument at work in this passage. In the first instance, Dewey does not deny that ours is a narrative that includes important advances in scientific developments. As he argues in both *Reconstruction in Philosophy* of 1920 and *The Quest for Certainty* of 1929, these advances bespeak an underlying method capable of avoiding the worst in our quest for the better (RIP [MW12: chap. 3]; QC [LW4: chaps. 3–6]). This is what the Enlightenment, whether in its Newtonian or Darwinian variants, has bequeathed to us. In his 1916 article “Progress” he writes the following of modernity: “[F]or the first time in history mankind is in command of the possibility of progress” (P [MW10:237]).

Here we sense at work the cognitive attitude Weber discerns in modern science that brings about disenchantment, the belief that there are no “mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” and that “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”³⁰ But as the passage above from *Experience and Nature* makes clear, this emphasis on progress exists alongside a fundamental uncertainty—a new repository of the mysteries of existence—that characterizes action and is more consistent with his Darwinian commitments. Our experiences of the world, on Dewey’s account, do not exhaust the complexity and mysteries of our natural and social horizons. My earlier use of the adjective *fundamental* is more than appropriate precisely because Dewey is keen to emphasize that the goods we seek depend on a grace “not of ourselves.” But for him the term denotes a grace that is bound up with the natural world to which we belong. Herein lies the problem of modern life: the experimentalist approach that he recommends for creating “new ideals

and values” simultaneously implicates us in an unknown future that threatens our efforts (EN [LW1:4]). And for him there is little we can do, to borrow from Weber, to rid ourselves of those “mysterious incalculable forces.” This is precisely why Dewey argues that “humility is more demanded at our moments of triumph than at those of failure. . . . It is the sense of our slight inability even with our best intelligence and effort to command events; a sense of our dependence upon forces that go their way without our wish and plan” (HNC [MW14:200]).

There is a crucial underlying difference that distinguishes Dewey from these other thinkers. Stephen White helps us capture this difference with his recent distinction between strong and weak ontological commitments—a distinction, I should add, that roughly lines up with the Newtonian and Darwinian Enlightenments discussed earlier. As he argues in *Sustaining Affirmation*, strong ontology, typically that of premodern and modern times, offers a vision of how the world is, the meaning of human nature, or visions of what God is and the responsibilities we have in relation to God.³¹ But a strong ontology not only is articulated through revelation and the existence of the divine, but equally lends itself to the idiom of scientific investigation. With both, there exists in experience or outside of it self-justifying and credible characteristics that ground all claims of knowledge and serve as the final destination for epistemic adjudication. On a moral and political level, these fixed truths anchor institutions and identities in ways that ignore or suppress, under the pretense of control, uncertainty and the possibility of tragedy. As Dewey remarks in “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy” of 1909, a strong metaphysics treats “change and origin as signs of defect and unreality” from which we must escape (IDP [MW4:5]). And he attributes this to both the eschatological narratives and the modern, philosophical quests for certainty.

A weak metaphysics, however, is different. As White remarks on this point:

Ontology figures our most basic sense of human being, an achievement that always carries a propensity toward naturalization, reification, and unity, even if only implicitly. A weak ontology must possess resources for deflecting this propensity at some point in the unfolding of its dimensions. Its elaboration of fundamental meanings must in some sense fold back upon itself, disrupting its own smooth constitution of a unity. In a way, its contestability will thus be enacted rather than just announced.³²

Ontological commitments are not neutral regarding identity and the natural world.³³ Dewey agrees on just this point: “Every social and political philoso-

phy will be found upon examination to involve a certain view about the constitution of human nature: in itself and in its relation to physical nature” (FC [LW13:72]). So a weak ontology does not avoid articulating descriptions of self and world, it only prevents those descriptions from receding so far into the background that they are beyond revision and contestability. As Charles Peirce says: “Every man of us has a metaphysics, and has to have one; and it will influence his life greatly. Far better, then, that that metaphysics should be criticized and not be allowed to run loose.”³⁴ Dewey’s acknowledgment of contingency and emphasis on inquiry intends to prevent our metaphysics from running loose. This is his intention when he employs the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes in *Experience and Nature*:

“That the universe has in it more than we understand, that the private soldiers have not been told the plan of campaign, or even that there is one . . . has no bearing on our conduct. We still shall fight—all of us because we want to live, some, at least, because we want to realize our spontaneity and prove our powers, for the joy of it, and we may leave to the unknown the supposed final valuation of that which in any event has value to us. It is enough for us that the universe has produced us and has within it, as less than it, all that we believe and love. If we think of our existence not as that of a little god outside, but as that of a ganglion within, we have the infinite behind us. It gives us our only but our adequate significance.” (EN [LW1:313])

To my mind, this cautionary note underwrites the reflective power of inquiry and constrains the ends to which it aims, whether those ends relate to religion, morality, or politics. This book attempts to follow this logic and its multifaceted character.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

Let me say a bit more about my argument here and simultaneously indicate the differences between my position and other interpretations. After all, critics will no doubt wonder about the extent to which my account adds value to our understanding of Dewey. Does it justify such a cavalier title as *The Undiscovered Dewey*? There is a wealth of scholarship on Dewey, and it would be a mistake to say that my view constitutes a wholesale rejection of it all. By way of analogy you can think of this book as a piece of music of which the elements are familiar but stunningly different because of the arrangement. And as with music, the arrangement has the effect of providing the listener with a new way of experiencing the music; it unleashes moods within the listener

and orientations toward the music that had gone untapped. Of course, it is true that the music is familiar, but it is in the arrangement that one experiences the music anew.

So my claim in making Darwin central to Dewey's later outlook is that important dimensions to Dewey's philosophy will emerge— aspects that have nonetheless been *overlooked*, *underappreciated*, or *denied*. As a result, we have not until now fully understood the resources he provides us for thinking about our religious, moral, and political commitments. I have sought in this work to provide a new arrangement—a way of appreciating and accepting these other aspects of Dewey's philosophy—so that we may experience his work anew. And if I am successful, it too will unleash moods within the reader and orientations toward his work that had otherwise gone untapped.

Isolating specific differences, in this regard, between my argument and the existing scholarship must therefore occur in the unfolding of the book. However, there is a group of thinkers (some more widely known than others) who cannot go ignored even at this early juncture, and so require explicit attention in the forthcoming outline. This is all the more important because they are sympathetic readers of Dewey, but readers whom I will nonetheless disagree with at critical junctures. Among these are Robert Westbrook, Steven Rockefeller, Alan Ryan, Raymond Boisvert, Michael Eldridge, James Campbell, Hilary Putnam, William Caspary, and Eric MacGilvray.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, "From Certainty to Contingency," situates Dewey's appropriation of Darwin for understanding inquiry in the context of the crisis of religious certainty or modern disenchantment in the late nineteenth century. Part II, "Religion, the Moral Life, and Democracy," explores the way inquiry functions in the context of these respective dimensions of his philosophy. Although I proceed in an order different from the one he sketches, I am merely following Dewey's claim that Darwin "introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion" (IDP [MW4:3]).

In chapter 1, I turn specifically to the impact of Darwin on America's religious imagination. I argue that this impact eventuates in a crisis that disrupts the moral economy of self and society, leading to spiritual sickness or disenchantment. Although my focus is largely on the American context, I have found it necessary to extend that analysis at several junctures via Weber's writings. This is largely because of the similarity among those who worry about the influence of Darwin on religion and Weber's own lament about the effects of modern science on the spiritual and moral foundations of exis-

tence. Moreover, employing Weber helps us to see that the worry expressed by Americans is not idiosyncratic, but rather taps into the deeper currents of modernity. Placing Dewey against this backdrop allows us to read his philosophy as an alternative to both the spiritual sickness that Hodge and Weber worry about and the cosmic optimism of some liberal Protestants. Dewey's alternative view, which emerges through his experimentalist approach to understanding knowledge formation and corresponding naturalistic account of human values, rejects the connection between meaning and certainty that is at work in these other positions. I go on to outline in the latter half of that chapter the general shape of this response.

This chapter will read more like a work of *stylized* intellectual history than of philosophy proper. And it is decidedly tilted away from Dewey. But I ask the reader to bear with me, for the story matters precisely to the extent that it casts into relief Dewey's alternative response. What I provide there has ample support from historians, but I am not a historian. I employ the historical framework and the questions therein to tease out similar concerns in Dewey. History, in this sense, is meant to inform but not wholly constrain, to direct but not wholly determine the philosophical resources and possibilities contained within Dewey's philosophy. It is above all else the possibilities of his philosophy with which this book is concerned, even though it will selectively employ history to access them.

In proceeding this way—that is, in showing how Dewey differs not only from Hodge and Weber but also from his liberal Protestant counterparts—I disagree slightly with Rockefeller's interpretation, which ironically links Dewey to liberal Protestantism. After all, to say, as he does, that Dewey humanizes Christianity implies a form of utopianism that must be then funneled through his account of inquiry. At the very moment when Rockefeller seemingly staves off the tendency to read Dewey as installing inquiry as the new key to the pearly gates, we read the following:

[Dewey] views faith and love as flowers that bloom naturally when all the conditions are right—conditions of body, mind, and environment. Human beings should concentrate on using their intelligence to improve the natural conditions of moral and spiritual growth like diligent gardeners who trust their seeds, fertile soil, and the sun. His approach assumes the immanence of a divine creativity in nature, including human nature.³⁵

Unfortunately, in Rockefeller's view, this divine creativity is identified with intelligence as such. With this, we easily lapse back into the critique advanced earlier. Dewey's faith in intelligence never seems tinged with the kind

of uncertainty that distinguishes him from liberal Protestantism. Rather, he becomes their secular variant.³⁶ But this view overlooks the way Dewey rearticulates the meaning of inquiry and religious experience, distinguishing himself from the larger historical context with which he is often identified.

Focusing primarily, although not exclusively, on such works as “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” *Experience and Nature*, and *The Quest for Certainty*, chapter 2 argues that when we examine Dewey’s experimentalism, the subtleties of inquiry come into focus—subtleties that seek to make us sensitive to the complexities of the horizon in which inquiry functions. This is because contingency saturates the domain of practical action; it stimulates the necessity of reflection and potentially frustrates or undermines its goals. The desire to escape peril as it relates to the moral life discussed in chapter 1 is a piece of what Dewey calls the quest for certainty that I set out to explain in chapter 2, and which he believes is central to the classical and modern outlook found in thinkers like Descartes, Newton, and Kant. Both obscure an appropriate understanding of our being-in-the-world, and this includes the extent to which value and meaning are coextensive with existence.

While such an account of inquiry bespeaks the fragility of life, it does not lead to a kind of spiritual malaise regarding the meaningfulness of the objects of inquiry.³⁷ Dewey’s appropriation of Darwin helps him to locate value within the evolving transactions between self and world, giving human action an overall aesthetic and creative quality.³⁸ As he says in his major work on aesthetics in 1934: “Art is prefigured in the very processes of living” (AE₂ [LW10:30]). Yet his use of Darwin suggests a potential discontinuity between the aims of human action and what the world will allow. This discontinuity is grounded within the same contingent horizon that makes possible opportunities for creatively transforming our environment for the better in the first instance. Given this general framework, Dewey articulates a modest psychological profile in which the epistemic status we accord inquiry’s productions is no longer bound up with the quest for certainty.

To be sure, inquiry as Dewey understands it does involve methodological elements. But given the field of value in which inquiry is located, especially in matters relating to moral and political governance, it cannot simply be a crass method. When read through a Darwinian framework, Dewey’s understanding of inquiry resuscitates and expands Aristotle’s notion of practical reason to all domains of human reflection. Inquiry’s legitimating character draws from two different directions, the character of the individuals confronted with specific ruptures in experience on the one hand, and the larger social background in which both they and the problem are located on the other. As

such, it involves fallibility, the willingness to engage in revision, and responsiveness to the larger horizon in which one is located.

This legitimating character is realized through the discursive medium of giving and asking for reasons for proposals or plans of action, and this constrains the radical aestheticism of human action that we see expressed by Richard Rorty.³⁹ But this view also begins to shed light on the normative resources of human self-understanding that are called into question by Hodge and Weber in the absence of a sacred foundation. In my view, Dewey's fundamental insight is that modernity read through Darwin raises the level of reflexivity to such an extent that to be a modern individual is at once to acknowledge the sources of a meaningful existence, the way they naturally direct our lives and generate obligations, and to understand that such sources are in no way shielded from critical reflection because their foundation is contingent. The result is that the anti-authoritarian character of inquiry—the sense that we are answerable to each other independent of wealth, birth, or intellectual endowment—exercises enormous influence over his reflections on religion, morality, and politics in modern life.

This anti-authoritarian character is not a value to which Dewey independently subscribes, but is bound up with his conception of situated intelligence. For him, the sociocultural contexts in which human reflection functions are subject to the vagaries of time. This means that there are no human-independent authorities that can adjudicate once and for all between rival claims, thus making any claim always contestable by others. Contestability simply means that because our beliefs about how to act in response to specific problems seek to be the best beliefs we can have, they are reason-responsive. In this sense, authority, whether it functions within our religious, moral, or political lives, is not divinely ordained or provided by intuition but rather emerges from a cooperative enterprise among human beings attempting to realize the good and avert the worse.

In many respects, the emphasis on contingency as distilled from Dewey's interpretation of Darwin is not new. We find this link articulated by Boisvert and Campbell.⁴⁰ And they emphasize, as I do, the way in which Dewey's turn to Darwin helps him to undermine the appeal to essences or some fundamental teleology. But they underappreciate the sheer unpredictability that informs human action. It is no wonder that Boisvert, in particular, can say that Dewey's emphasis on inquiry seems to have no sense of limitations.⁴¹ The problem is that too much attention is given to inquiry's aim and not to the background domain of action from which it emerges and to which it must return for assessment. Shifting our attention to the latter holds in view the

potential success as well as failure of inquiry. To be sure, there is still talk of human progress, but in my view it is consistently understood as a claim about historical possibility rather than ontological fact.

Understanding inquiry along these lines prepares the way for an examination of its connection to Dewey's religious, moral, and political philosophy in part II. Chapter 3 explores his religious naturalism by focusing primarily, although not exclusively, on *A Common Faith* (1934). The fundamental question here is the following: If contingency saturates the horizon from which inquiry proceeds, how are we to understand our religious commitments in the context of democracy? Here I focus on the relationship between inquiry and the moral virtues of piety and faith. In many ways, this chapter attends to the epistemic ethos that underwrites democracy. I reveal Dewey's profound sensitivity to modern pluralism, especially the absence of a unifying theological framework, and so begin to give texture to the anti-authoritarian character of his outlook. Similar to the approach taken by Ralph Waldo Emerson before him, Dewey argues for a view of self-reliance, but one that stands in between an account of identity that is exhausted by any one allegiance and one that denies the hold of allegiances altogether.

Indeed, he acknowledges that we must show pious allegiance to traditions, whether they derive from specific religions or from elsewhere. As he understands the matter, our ability to give meaning to the present would be crippled without piety. Precisely for this reason his position does not entail a constraint, as we see in John Rawls' *Political Liberalism*, on the source to which we can appeal in public debate even though he shares Rawls' aversion to philosophic and religious dogmatism and the place it could come to occupy in political life if left unchecked.⁴² Rather, he maintains that the immediacy of those traditions and their relevance emerges because they are held up against the critical lens of reflection in the light of different experiences. His is a critical piety that blocks the past from having a permanent claim on how we move forward even as he acknowledges the inescapable importance of the past.

Here too his understanding of faith is grounded in his experimentalism. Our cognitive abilities do not necessarily outstrip the complexities of the world in which our religious ideals are located. Unlike piety, faith is primarily forward looking. Although I mention it in passing in chapter 2, I take up the character of experimentalism more completely in the context of Dewey's religious proposal. To be sure, experimentalism involves attentiveness to an existing state of affairs, but it is also about imaginatively transforming the present to guide action. Commitment to religious ideals is not necessarily ex-

hausted by the existing state of evidence that may exist on their behalf. This does not, as one might think, place religion beyond the pale of inquiry, for the giving and accepting of reasons continues to function as we assess what affect our allegiance to those commitments will have on our current state of existence. The reflective capacity involved in belief-formation and ideal-formation is the same, but the two are distinguishable in Dewey's view by the fact that the latter produces a more comprehensive transformation in one's orientation in life.

Here my disagreement is not with Rockefeller, as one might think, but rather with Eldridge. To contend, as he does, that Dewey should have dropped the language of faith and piety because it departs from traditional accounts narrows the range of religious descriptions and therefore overlooks altogether Dewey's transformative intentions. If the account of chapter 1 is accurate, then Eldridge's argument seems overdrawn. To say that Dewey articulates his "secular project in religious language" makes him seem disingenuous and not interested in religious commitments at all.⁴³ This claim, however, is difficult to sustain. A more plausible view is that he seeks to articulate the democratic framework in which religious claims exist, and to explain how that framework partly conditions the functioning of those commitments. Dewey's claim, then, is quite similar to that expressed most recently by Jeffrey Stout: "The mark of secularization . . . is rather the fact that participants in a given discursive practice are not in a position to take for granted that their interlocutors are making the same religious assumption."⁴⁴

In chapter 4 I turn to Dewey's moral philosophy to address two distinct but related issues. The first relates to the considerations of chapter 1. For Hodge, Weber, and the liberal Protestants, without a sacred foundation moral life is emptied of its evaluative compass. Second, this crisis of normative evaluation frames the discussion when critics argue (as indicated above) that Dewey does not seriously entertain value pluralism and the moral conflicts that invariably emerge. We might say, then, that it is the absence of the first (that is, an evaluative compass) that leads to the conflicts expressed by the second (that is, value pluralism). Focusing on works such as *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), "Three Independent Factors in Morals" (1930), and his *Ethics* (1932), I tease out the ways in which Dewey is profoundly sensitive to moral conflict owing to his Darwinian commitments and thus provides an evaluative framework in which to locate and think about conflict.

Like Weber and contemporary moral theorists who emphasize the fact of modern pluralism, Dewey argues that conflict now arises with greater frequency because traditional attitudes, what he calls "customs," no longer de-

termine the beginning and ending of one's self-understanding. This, for him, is the determinant social horizon in which we exist; it makes central the necessity of reflection. This tilts how we should understand moral deliberation. For him, it is a process in which we both imaginatively and discursively trace out courses of action and their potential consequences for settling conflicting demands. "It is," writes Dewey, "an attempt to uncover the conflict in its full scope and bearing," to reveal the "qualitative incompatibilities" of proposed decisions in search of a more inclusive option (HNC [MW14:150]). In its ideal form, deliberation seeks to manage conflict so that the final decision is more inclusive than either competing vision. What is at stake in this process, he contends, "is not a difference of quantity, but what kind of person one is to become, what sort of self is in the making, [and] what kind of world is [in the] making" (HNC [MW14:150]).

Yet Dewey is quite clear that this reflective moment may potentially (because its outcome is uncertain) deepen our sense of conflict, implicating us in feelings of loss or regret. These two positions—*resolution as harmony* and *resolution as tragic choice*—are potentialities of deliberation. In making this claim, I disagree with Westbrook, Putnam, Caspary, and MacGilvray, who either underestimate Dewey's sensitivity to conflict or deny it all together. As Westbrook remarks, "Dewey's ethics, at its worst, suggested that one could always find a synthetic resolution that harmonized competing values."⁴⁵ But this confuses the ideal aim of deliberation with the actualities of moral life; the latter, as Dewey argues, may present us with a conflict of goods that defy harmonization.⁴⁶

But there is a more radical position here aside from his sensitivity to conflict. For Dewey, managing our moral lives and the conflicts that emerge involves a kind of responsiveness that makes us attentive to the claims of others and the larger environment in which we exist. Although he does not deny that the ethical content of our identities is bound up with specific narratives of experience, he nonetheless seeks to explain the resources within our identities that allow for moral evaluation and growth. But where, we should ask, does this responsiveness come from, in Dewey's view? His answer is that it is coextensive with our *natural* introduction into social life as such. We are moral agents just insofar as we are antecedently participants in social practices, and this implies a character to moral evaluation that makes us attentive to self, other, and the natural world, if evaluation is to make sense at all. We might say, as Dewey does, that our *first*, biological, nature is developed and enhanced by our *second*, acquired, nature (HNC [MW14:60–65]). His argument is of significant importance because he shows us that absent a sacred

horizon—*pace* Hodge, Weber, and the liberal Protestants—we can still speak intelligibly about what it means to be a moral agent. Normativity is not externally imposed on nature, but is nature's gift to us.

This form of naturalism shifts attention away from defending the proposition that the human world is *always already* a normative world to elucidating the perceptual and emotional resources that are part and parcel of the space of moral reflection. Thus, when Dewey discusses inquiry in the context of the moral life he emphasizes the way it allows us to see widely and feel deeply about the situations in which we are located. It not only involves a willingness to engage in revision, but an ability to consider the importance of normative principles and their limitation, and a kind of sympathetic outlook that feeds into the content of evaluation. Absent such features, the moral life would be unintelligible, for we would be without the basic features to render moral deliberation meaningful or explicable to ourselves and our fellows.

In chapter 5 I revisit the anti-authoritarian character of Dewey's understanding of inquiry, but now in the context of his democratic theory as articulated in *The Public and Its Problem* (1927) and his other political writings. The connection he draws between inquiry and democracy is rightfully interpreted as a theory of political justification and legitimacy. It is Dewey's appeal to inquiry as a method for justifying beliefs that feeds directly into and underwrites democratic deliberation. We find this articulated by Putnam, Caspary, Westbrook, and Ryan, yet none of these thinkers makes explicit the way Dewey's understanding of the relationship between inquiry and democracy can be recast as a preoccupation with power and domination.⁴⁷ This is made all the more striking when we concede an inequality in knowledge and epistemic skill among the citizenry on the one hand, and the complexity of modern societies on the other. As Weber, Lippmann, and Mills knew, this combination points away from expanding the domain of deliberation. If this interpretation is accurate, Dewey's emphasis on the importance of inquiry to democratic action may unintentionally point toward an epistemic guardianship that will inevitably lead to power inequity.

As I argue, Dewey's account of the relationship between inquiry and democracy is based on the claim that without having a say in decision-making, citizens leave their development or lack thereof open to arbitrary rather than directed control. Viewed from this perspective, he worries about the way power becomes domination insofar as knowledge employed for decision-making comes unhinged from broad mechanisms of accountability and inclusion. If we are to be affected by political decisions that most assuredly will involve systems of expertise in a complex democratic society, as Lippmann

rightly highlights, then for Dewey those decisions cannot be distinguished from judgments about how to direct and assess reliance on such systems. It is the desire to block power from becoming domination that partly underwrites his presumptive commitment to inclusion.

But if Dewey rejects Lippmann's democratic elitism (while accepting pieces of his and others' understanding of modern complexity), I argue that he would equally find Sheldon Wolin's defense of democratic radicalism unconvincing. For Wolin, democracy is best thought of as an anarchic impulse that displays itself against the constraining force of institutional forms. In this view, political or representative democracy is a contradiction in terms, for it implies that democracy can be embodied in institutions without sacrificing rule by the people.⁴⁸ To be fair, Dewey rejects the reduction of democracy to institutions and he encourages eternal vigilance on the part of citizens. He is attentive to the ways in which institutions may ossify to the disadvantage of democracy, and in such instances he embraces a kind of radicalism akin to Wolin. Comparing Wolin to Dewey, then, helps us see the way in which the latter's vision does contain a radical impulse. Yet Dewey is not hostile to the existence of modern representative institutions as such. Indeed, political democracy, for him, provides the structural mechanisms to manage power relations so that they do not lapse into domination.

These structural mechanisms, however, proceed from a deeper level of uncertainty, which is at the core of democracy for Dewey. Precisely because the democratic public emerges from the intimate connection between contingency and practical activity, the institutions that are expressive of that public can never finally solidify and so the "we" that constitutes the public can never be permanently settled. In fact, his account cautions against fixing the identity of the public sphere. To say, then, that the practice of giving and asking for reasons is central to how democracy legitimizes itself is to say that at the very least it provides resources for overcoming (although not permanently) its own specific limitations. This outlook allows Dewey, I argue, to defend a view of the public sphere that is internally differentiated. This differentiation accounts for the smooth substantive inclusion of the demands of specific publics into the administrative apparatus of the state, even as it defends publics that emerge in a more oppositional relationship to state power.

If the course of this study is followed from beginning to end, what emerges is an account of Dewey's philosophy that demonstrates that it circumscribes inquiry, is less dismissive of religion than normally assumed, can aid us in

understanding and seeing the immanence of normativity in our social practices, is sensitive to conflict and the inability to achieve resolution, and is concerned with defending a view of democracy that blocks power from becoming a dominating force. If this vision is sustainable, as I believe it is, we will have not only responded to Dewey's critics but discovered resources with which to critically engage the complexity of our modern lives. It is above all else this last issue with which this book and Dewey's philosophy are principally concerned.