John Dewey Wrote for You and Me

Martin Coleman

Unlike the works of other Classical American thinkers such as Josiah Royce, the neologizing Charles Sanders Peirce, and the system-building Alfred North Whitehead, the works of John Dewey (1859-1952), as well as of Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James, are marked by what John J. McDermott has called 'plainstyle' that is, the absence of technical language (McDermott 1995). According to McDermott, "You don't need a lingo to read James or Dewey" (McDermott 1998a).

Dewey does not have a technical terminology in the sense of a proprietary and exclusive vocabulary. Yet, he does use words in ways that depart somewhat from traditional usages, especially traditional philosophical usages. My claim is that this departure is not exclusionary, arbitrary, nor due to detached, abstract principles. Rather, it is inclusive of, guided by, and firmly grounded in objective human experience. I believe that Dewey's writing style is related to his view that the problems of people are more significant than the problems of philosophy for the continued vitality of philosophy (MW.10.46).[1] My aim is to examine this relation and make explicit Dewey's reasons for preferring the language of common affairs and eschewing technical terminology. I plan to show that Dewey's 'plainstyle' is the result of his profound concern with experience.

Dewey recognizes the linguistic obstacles presented to philosophy that motivate the reformation of terms and often make an abstract technical terminology attractive. Language is, by its nature, conservative and therefore sometimes inhibitive. The significations of words commonly used in philosophical discourse tend to become fixed according to some past view or other. The words become "infected by the associations of old theories" (LW.1.207) or "tinged...with significations absorbed from" (LW.15.49) old theories. This then "affects willy-nilly philosophical formulations" (LW.15.49) by limiting what one can say. This, in turn, hinders precision and advancement in philosophy by limiting thought to theories seemingly long since dead and discredited by scientific observation and experiment.

For Dewey, the actual conceptual problems to which these linguistic impediments most often contribute are destructive dualisms that block inquiry and limit action and growth. Dewey discusses specifically the dualism between body and mind. He writes that, "[o]ur language is so permeated with consequences of theories which have divided body and mind from each other,

making separate existential realms out of them, that we lack words to designate the actual existential fact" (LW.1.217). One is then forced to use circumlocutions that reproduce the rejected dualism,[2] and this is further skirted only by more elaborate arrangements.

Dewey also discusses the dualism between the natural and the supernatural as manifested in terms such as 'mind,' 'subject,' 'self,' 'person,' 'individual,' and 'value' (LW.15.49). He claims that almost every word used in psychological and social studies bears the influence of theories that divide the natural and the supernatural (LW.15.49). Because of this influence he sees "the most pressing problem and the most urgent task of naturalism" to interpret the things and events designated by the infected words in naturalistic terms (LW.15.49).

In solving the problem of language infected with old theories, Dewey does not resort to proprietary technical jargon nor try to wall off philosophical terminology from ordinary language. Dewey believes such a move creates an opportunity for the very problem he opposes, the problem of dualisms. Dewey notes that sometimes in theoretical or intellectual pursuits "pains are taken to see that the words used are not too widely understood" (MW.14.50). What often lies in back of this is an assumed separation between theory and practice and a view that thought is too dear and special to be exposed to the chance world of action. Thought is for the special class of thinkers, while the masses must rely on routine and custom or else the authority of the enlightened. These are the concrete divisions that both feed and result from dualisms of mind and body, nature and supernature, actualities and ideals.

While these problems may not be directly attributable to technical terminology, neither is it by itself a solution. Proprietary terminology alone does not help to eliminate the present dualisms that infect language, which is to say that it does not help to eliminate divisions in the wider culture of which both specialist and layperson are integral parts. Proprietary terminology may even contribute to the maintenance of divisions by limiting communication and mutual activity and thereby leaving untouched any problems in both the shunned language and its community of speakers. McDermott writes that, "[t]he use of technical terms often gains clarity but at the price of isolating the language of the discipline from that of other disciplines and from common recognition by the larger community of inquiry" (McDermott 1981, xxvi). Instituting a technical terminology may purge infected language and effectively inoculate new terms, but speakers of the new terminology may thereby isolate themselves, and the attained linguistic health then seems to be of little value especially if speakers are isolated from other inquirers. What good is a solution that merely removes one from the realm where the problem is most dire? None of this is to say that the problem inherently lies

with technical terminology. Dewey is not opposed to abstract technical terminology in itself. He lauds it as the means to some of the most important human achievements in history, that is, scientific discoveries and advances. He explicitly acknowledges the benefit of and the need for scientific language and symbols. Dewey characterizes scientific language as necessarily abstracted away from ultimate human activities and affairs. He writes that

> scientific language is a code by means of which that which happens at any specified place and time is capable of translation into what happens at other places and times. Science transcends local events and existences *as far as* it is able to treat space-time as one locale (LW.1.342).

It is generalized and leads to many different things of the same kind. It is instrumental and has only external reference as a sign standing for something.

Dewey writes, "[t]he liberation of scientific knowing has been facilitated by and deepened and broadened because of the creation of a special language, indeed, to speak more exactly, of many special languages" (LW.1.343). These special languages are meaningful not in human social terms, but rather in the systematic relation of terms that stand for non-social consequences of things (LW.1.151). Science derives its great practical power from the liberation of its symbols, its terminology, from the pressing practicality and the social consequences of the immediate situation (LW.1.343).

Abstract scientific language is fine in its realm (it can even be perfect *in its own realm*) but it cannot function in the everyday world of social meanings and human experiences as it does in the world of science. In the everyday world of concrete experience is wanted not a systematic instrumental code shorn of human meanings but rather a language that is thick with experiences and able to adapt in touch- and- go human situations calling for subtlety, poetry, humor, irony, sarcasm, euphemism, criticism, reprimand, intimation, compliment, encouragement, in short, what is wanted is a language of *expression* rather than *statement.*[3] When qualities of expression are intensified and mere statement de-emphasized, one moves away from scientific toward literary discourse.

According to Dewey, "[p]hilosophic discourse partakes both of scientific and literary discourse" (LW.1.304). Thus, an abstract terminology after the model of science is inappropriate for philosophy. Philosophy shares with literature a concern for the meanings present in human experience and for the liberation and extension of these meanings. Philosophy shares with science responsibility to the causes and consequences outside of imagination. The facts of science are the tools of philosophical criticism in its task of securing and expanding human goods.[4]

To balance its concern for immediate human goods with a removed,

critical standpoint, philosophy requires "generous and wide interactions" (LW.1.306), to avoid narrowness, superficiality, and stagnation. Philosophical criticism, as a means to securing and extending human goods, takes on the role of "a liaison officer" (LW.1.306) facilitating communcation between diverse forms of human endeavor for their mutual growth and vitality. Hence, the need for a language of *common* affairs.

A common language obviously cannot be an exclusionary, technical one. What lies in back of Dewey's preference for reforming rather than inventing terms is his belief that language is meaningful only in social interaction not exclusive isolation. Dewey writes:

> The heart of language is...communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership (LW.1.141).

Any attempt to reform language is going to involve the activities of the speakers. Any solution stands or falls as it is workable in cooperative activity; partnership is the means to and the test of any progress.

Hence, commonality of language cannot be achieved through indoctrination. To think a common language can be legislated or imposed on speakers "reverses the *theoretical* state of the case." He writes, "[g]enuine community of language or symbols can be achieved only through efforts that bring about community of activities under existing conditions" (LW.12.56). For Dewey, any attempt to reform confused philosophical terms involves wading into the already deep community of activities of the wider everyday culture. Dewey writes that in a problematic situation "departure from the old solves no problems," and his approach departs neither from the existing language nor from the existing culture (LW.13.11).

McDermott writes that Dewey cuts to the heart of philosophical problems by bridging terminological gaps and rendering the issue "in a language closer to our actual experiencing. This approach of Dewey finds him rarely introducing a technical term as a shortcut for the describing of the ongoing experience" (McDermott 1981, xxvi). Dewey seeks to resolve problems in the language and the culture, *in the ongoing experience*, in which they really are problems. Rather than abstract these problems away from the everyday world and thereby make them problems of philosophy, Dewey seeks to resolve problems of people and this, he thinks, is the task of philosophy.

Furthermore, the problem of language infected with old theories is, then, a problem only insofar as it is a problem for people as opposed to a problem for philosophy. Dewey is not interested in reforming language merely on principle.

The specific dualisms Dewey combats have real implications for real people, for the education of real people, for gender, race, and class relations between real people.

But now it may appear that Dewey's approach entraps one in a vicious circle. If language is socially conditioned, how can attention to linguistic problems solve social problems? And how can social conditions be improved without recourse language, a requirement for all thinking or communicating?

According to Dewey, language is a human behavior and as such it is an interaction between humans and their environment (social and natural) (LW.1.141, MW.14.9). Therefore, each element, the human and the environmental, is a means to overall improvement of the total interaction. Rather than being a problem that lies in one of two artificially separated domains, the problem of reform, linguistic and social, is "one of an adjustment to be intelligently attained,...an engineering issue" (MW.14.10). The means to intelligent adjustment is reflection and imagination which are possible only through language.

Put another way, language, according to Dewey, "is itself a cultural institution" (LW.12.51). And he objects to the notion that any institution is a direct reflex of social conditions because such a view ignores the fact that many of the historical factors influencing any given institution are accidental, that is, unintended, unintelligent (LW.9.50). Intelligence, made possible by language through social and natural interaction, can be a means to reforming institutions, including language itself. Improved language and thought can then be brought to bear on environmental conditions.

If one insists that language is determined by activities regardless of efforts at linguistic reconstruction, then those activities must be determined as well. In other words, if the possibility of reform be denied outright, then it seems impossible to see experience as meaningful at all, as anything more than a tale told by an idiot, unless one resorts to the supernatural. Dewey's response rings as clearly as Socrates' in the *Meno*: "The needed understanding will not develop unless we strive for it" (LW.9.51).[5]

One may wonder about the force behind Dewey's approach. Introducing a completely new term seems to have the advantage of carrying no contrary forces tugging in the direction of an old signification. But how, on Dewey's view, does a reformed term combat recidivicism and stay reformed? The reformed term stays reformed as it is really reforming, that is, it is firmly connected to a new dominant signification as it promotes the activities that give it that signification. There are no guarantees in this project. It may fail.

How is Dewey's project of reforming terms not arbitrary? It is carried out according to experience, that is, according to objective activities and culture. A reformed term must answer to the test of cooperative activity regulated by

partnership. The direction of the reconstruction is kept honest, is made true (in at least the sense of being level, square, or balanced among different participants in the community of activity) in its use among different partners in common activity.

But how is an initial direction of reformation of a term chosen? What indicates a favorable reformation? The activities, culture, and experience of the speakers are the sources of new meanings. Words of practical life are themselves experienced, and so a word, like any "experience...teems with relational leads" (McDermott 1981, xxv). Words thick with experience point off in infinite directions. The presence of innuendo, metaphors, poetry attests to this. There are common and customary usages, well-worn paths from a word to its signification, but the path can be altered to lead to new meanings and richer experiences. The infinite leadings of experience, the alternative meanings of words, these are the resources for growth, reconstruction, and reform. These resources are ties to existing institutions and conditions that anchor the reformed term and help it to take root.

Take, as an example of linguistic reform in philosophy, Dewey's use of the term 'experience.' Dewey wants to reconstruct the philosophical term in accord with common usage.[6] This does not alter what has been said about attending to problems of people rather than philosophy. While the common understanding in itself may be fine as it is, without philosophy, without wide-ranging criticism and analysis, that understanding may not attain its full influence either in philosophy or more importantly in the wider culture. By reforming the term, Dewey aims to enable philosophy to draw out the connections of the common understanding and point out implications for political and economic issues, class relations, education, and religious practices.

Dewey opposes the view that experience is an ultimately ineffective means to knowledge of a nature final and complete in itself (LW.1.11). Rather, 'experience' "designate[s] the inclusive subject-matter which characteristically 'modern' (post-medieval) philosophy breaks up into the dualisms of subject and object, mind and the world, psychological and physical" (LW.1.361-2). And it is to "designate both what is experienced and the ways of experiencing it" (LW.1.362).

In Dewey's view, the traditional philosophical interpretation of experience is too narrow and enervated. Dewey sees the reformation of the word 'experience' as a key to resolving dualisms and their concrete social implications. The traditional interpretation impedes this. An inclusive understanding of experience knits together subject and object, mind and body, theory and practice, and renders the supernatural irrelevant.

Dewey writes that the actual word 'experience' is especially fit for its reforming role because of its indefiniteness (LW.1.331). In other words, because

of its readily available alternative leadings or meanings, it is ripe for being reformed and so for reforming activities in which it is used.

From what specific activities and usages of the word 'experience' does Dewey take the favored leading on which to base his reforming effort? He writes that, "In the natural sciences there is a union of experience and nature which is not greeted as a monstrosity; on the contrary, the inquirer must use empirical method if his findings are to be treated as genuinely scientific" (LW.1.11). In the natural sciences, investigations begin and end in experience, in the experimental. Theory may intervene, as Dewey says, but it is not a realm apart; it is continuous with observation and experiment. It is here that experience is inclusive unlike traditional philosophical usages. It remains for philosophy to adopt this usage, drop problems based on the old usage, and go on to solve current problems.

As for his actual method of reforming usage of the term 'experience,' Dewey provides an explicit account at the beginning of *Experience and Nature*. He dismisses "dialectical argument" as a means of convincing others of his re-interpretation of experience because, as he acknowledges, the conflict arises "from associations with words." The source of the disagreement is beyond the domain of argument. Dewey writes:

> One can only hope in the course of the whole discussion to disclose the meanings which are attached to 'experience' and 'nature,' and thus insensibly produce, if one is fortunate, a change in the significations previously attached to them (LW.1.10).

Dewey hopes to *show* how experience should be reinterpreted by discussing the history of its usage, the implications of this usage, and the actual conditions and activities (especially in the natural sciences) which conflict with this usage. He appeals to what is going on around his readers in order to compel reconstruction of the term.

More generally, Dewey is attempting to get his colleagues to use their terms as experimental terms, that is, to see meaning as growing and changing with human experience. In a 1915 letter to Scudder Klyce,[7] Dewey writes, "I haven't tried to do this by supplying a model in any direction, but as a missionary by exhortation, mostly in the way of pointing out how they fail when they don't do it..." (Dewey 1915).

Yet, this should not be taken as suggesting that Dewey either sees or conducts himself as a religious zealot. In a letter to Joseph Ratner[8] he writes that, "I have great difficulty in seeing anything as a fight. I see things as a slow educative permeating process..." (Dewey 1931).

This approach, like any other, is not a sure thing. And McDermott notes

that Dewey was aware "of the difficulty in achieving a rapprochement between philosophic purpose and fidelity to ordinary language" (McDermott 1981, xxvi). Indeed, Dewey writes that "one can only hope" to pull off the reconstruction; one cannot be certain. As mentioned before, the project may fail; and indeed, Dewey thought it had failed regarding the term 'experience'.

In 1951 Dewey was working on an introduction for new edition of *Experience and Nature*. In it he writes that, were he writing the book anew, he would entitle it *Culture and Nature*. He writes:

> I would abandon the term 'experience' because of my growing realization that the historical obstacles which prevented understanding of my use of 'experience' are, for all practical purposes, insurmountable (LW.1.361).

He would substitute the word 'culture' because its established meanings can do the work he intended his reinterpretation of 'experience' to do.

Furthermore, he writes, in a 1951 letter to Arthur F. Bentley:[9]

> I was dumb not to have seen the need for such a shift when the old text was written. I was hopeful that the [philosophic] word 'Experience' would be redeemed by [being] returned to its idiomatic usages which was a piece of historic folly, the hope, I mean (Quoted in McDermott 1981, xxvi).

Dewey assesses the problem not as a lack of theoretical grounds for his reinterpretation, but rather as too great a gap between the reinterpretation and traditional philosophical usages. When the gap is too large, the effort fails. [10] Dewey's approach is necessarily a gradual one; it is not a great leap forward such as one makes when introducing entirely new terms.

In conclusion, Dewey is committed to making philosophy serve life and not merely its old, tired self understood as a static body of archaic theories. Philosophy begins in experience, but it proceeds in its work as it broadens, enriches, and promotes further experience through communication and cooperative activity. Ordinary human experience is for philosophy both a means, as *the* source of tools and problems, and an end, as testing ground and beneficiary. None of this is to say that Dewey proposes mere popular sentiment as the standard for philosophy. His approach is not mere "playing to the gallery"(McDermott 1998c).

McDermott makes it clear that Dewey was not ambitious; he did not write for prestige or power. He did take experience seriously. Philosophical thinking demands wide and varied experience, but no matter how widely an

individual's experience reaches, it will always be "personal, curtailed, one-sided, distorted" (LW.6.20). Dewey maintains that the remedy is not rejection of experience but rather a supplementing of its shortcomings and correction of its biases "through acquaintance with the experience of others, contemporary and as recorded in the history of the race" (LW.6.20). He writes:

> Dogmatism, adherence to a school, partisanship, class-exclusiveness, desire to show off and to impress, are all of them manifestations of disrespect for experience: for that experience which one makes one's own through sympathetic intercommunication. They are, as it were, deliberate perpetuations of the restrictions and perversions of personal experience.(LW.6.21).

To respect experience, to take experience seriously entails giving it room and giving it a means to grow and improve that is, giving it a communicating vocabulary. This is Dewey's aim, and this is why McDermott says that John Dewey "wrote for you and me" (McDermott 1998b).

NOTES

1. Standard references to John Dewey's work are to the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1991), and published as *The Early Works: 1882-1898* (EW), *The Middle Works: 1899-1924* (MW), and *The Later Works: 1925-1953* (LW). These designations are followed by volume and page number. For example, page 101 of volume 12 of the *Later Works* would be cited as "LW.12.101".

2. The rejected dualism is a natural or existential, rather than functional, split between the psychical and physical.

3. See LW.10.90-1 for the distinction between *statement* and *expression*.

4. Dewey believes this conception of philosophy is consistent with its ancient etymology: "philosophy is the love of wisdom, of wisdom which is not knowledge and which nevertheless cannot be without knowledge." (LW.1.305).

5. Socrates says, "We will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it" (*Meno*, 86b-c).

6. Dewey writes: "We must here view experience not from the side of the stammering account given of it in philosophy but must see the new faith which found expression in our common tongue, our idiomatic speech as well as in the various disjointed independent movements undertaken in pursuit of experience." (LW.1.361)

7. Scudder Klyce was a naval-engineer turned philosopher and author of *Universe* (1921), *Sins of Science* (1925), and *John Dewey's Suppressed Psychology* (1928). He initiated a correspondence with Dewey (on part of which his third book is based). Dewey wrote one

of the three introductions to Klyce's *Universe*.

[8.] Joseph Ratner was a colleague of Dewey's at Columbia University and the man whom Dewey authorized to write his biography.

[9.] Arthur F. Bentley was a long-time correspondent and philosophical collaborator of Dewey's.

[10.] Compare LW.10.20-21.

REFERENCES

Dewey, John. 1915. Letter to Scudder Klyce. 7, 8, 9 May. Klyce Papers. Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

Dewey, John. 1931. Letter to Joseph Ratner. 9 March. Ratner/Dewey Collection. Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

Dewey, John. 1969-1991. *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. 37 volumes. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

McDermott, John J. 1981. "Introduction" in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

McDermott, John J. 1995. Class lecture. "American Philosophy," Philosophy 623. Texas A&M University. College Station, Texas, 28 February.

McDermott, John J. 1998a. Comment. "Classical American Philosophy: Revisiting the Texts." Summer Institute in American Philosophy. Burlington, Vermont, 26 July.

McDermott, John J. 1998b. First Lecture on John Dewey. "Classical American Philosophy: Revisiting the Texts." Summer Institute in American Philosophy. Burlington, Vermont, 27 July.

McDermott, John J. 1998c. Second Lecture on John Dewey. "Classical American Philosophy: Revisiting the Texts." Summer Institute in American Philosophy. Burlington, Vermont, 27 July.

Plato. 1961. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairus. New York: Pantheon Books.