

On the Superstition of Learning

James M. Giarelli
Rutgers University

Necessity is a device by which we both conceal from ourselves the unreal character of what we have called real, and also get rid of the practical evil consequences of hypostatizing a fragment into an independent whole.

—John Dewey, “The Superstition of Necessity”¹

We want to say that there can't be any vagueness in logic. The idea now absorbs us, that the ideal “*must*” be found in reality. Meanwhile we do not see as yet *how* it occurs there, nor do we understand the nature of this “*must*.” We think it must be in reality; for we think we already see it there.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*²

The story is told that Katherine Royce, Josiah Royce's wife of thirty-six years, enjoyed lampooning the philosophers of Harvard's “golden years.” Metaphysics, she is claimed to have said, is like a game of hide and seek. First, you hide a doll in an old trunk in the attic in anticipation of a party. Then, when everyone is gathered, you ask, I wonder where that doll could be? The house is scoured inside and out. Finally, you say, I wonder if the doll might be in the old trunk in the attic, and to your great delight and your friends' astonishment, there you find it.

Ray McDermott's insightful essay uses the criticism of traditional logic in John Dewey's “The Superstition of Learning” to raise questions about dualistic thinking in general and theories of learning in particular. Indeed, McDermott transfers Dewey's argument about logical necessity directly into an argument about learning. As McDermott writes before quoting Dewey on judgment and necessity, “the passage announcing the superstition of necessity announces also the superstition of learning, with only two substitutions making the difference.”

We know that Dewey's criticism of logic at this time was part of a much larger project. McDermott notes this clearly when he writes of Dewey's problem with the “institutionalization of logic”; Dewey's concern was more with institutions than philosophical systems, or better, philosophical systems as institutions. At this time Dewey is telling Christian student groups at the University of Michigan that the “seek and ye shall find” of prayer is the method of scientific inquiry. His philosophical method is moving from Hegelian synthesis to naturalistic mediation. He is between his doctoral work on Immanuel Kant's psychology and the quasi-clinical phenomenology of William James. In a few years, he will write “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” still cited as one of the seminal works in the history of American psychology, which argued that the stimulus of action is discovered by the response. James, in a beautiful nugget about how pragmatism focuses on consequences rather than antecedents, writes that the barn at the end makes the trail into a cow path. For Dewey, on the cusp of an emerging metropolitan civilization, the metaphors are changing, and the cow paths have become highways of thought. James writes of streams of consciousness; Dewey of circuits of coordinated activities formed from overlapping arcs. And, most importantly, he is about to move

to Chicago, where he will direct the Laboratory School and rename philosophy as educational theory.

These leaps will require not a solution to, but transcendence of, the “problems of philosophy.” Thus, the language of superstition is precise. Dewey defines superstition early in his essay in its old etymology derived from doings, not meanings. Superstition is a “standing-still on the part of thought,” a crutch that may have at one time been useful in moving onto more solid ground, but now prevents “the full exercise of the natural means of locomotion.”²

This is the language of events, of what things do, not what they are, and of how all doings are temporal, particular, and contingent. McDermott captures this sense of Dewey expertly in many places. He writes, “Dewey’s propositions — or ‘propoundings’ — are activities,” and “he insists that we shift the object of precision from the well-formed proposition to the experience propounded by it.” To the claim that a logic of necessity and form is a requirement for rigorous judgment, McDermott argues that Dewey offers instead an empirical logic framed as a natural history of how people use their thinking to do things. Such a logic gives up the false solace of essences or extra-experiential vantage points for a continuing inquiry into what is essential in the commonplaces of associated life. McDermott writes, “Dewey was redirecting the dream of knowledge apart from life, of expertise apart from context, of certainty apart from change, to an account of what people actually do and might do better.”

For Dewey, as for Charles Peirce and James, logic without mirrors required recognition that uncertainty, as much as certainty, is the brute fact of existence. In investigating this stuff of experience, Dewey made special use of anthropological studies, especially the preeminence in premodern cultures of innumerable sayings, aphorisms, and proverbs concerned with luck. As Dewey writes in *Experience and Nature*, “man finds himself living in an aleatory world.”³ Transcending the dualism of foundational metaphysics and relativist phenomenism, Dewey offers a metaphysics of luck, an ontology of chance, a comprehensive philosophy of incompleteness, or as John McDermott puts it, “a metaphysics of transiency.” What we share, our commonplaces, technically and concretely, are what are not us, what is in-between, that is, our inter-est.

In the section of McDermott’s essay that explicates this metaphysics, the analogy is apt, the quotations are well chosen, the interpretations and commentary accurate and evocative. However, to me, a ghost haunts the essay — maybe the ghost of educational policy present. Clearly, McDermott believes the current educational situation is dire. Tests are part of this problem because they can deliver an ironic inversion: those who have learned do not know, and those who have not learned do know. More broadly, McDermott writes, “‘learning’ — a nice word now hopelessly mired in political jockeying — has become...a superstition and obstruction.” And here with the reference to politics, an even broader worry begins to form. As McDermott writes: “Genuine education focuses less on who learns how much and more on what can be learned by how many people, exercising their powers across

a community of purposes”; and “the democratic question is not who is learning, but what knowledge is made available for all to engage in various ways.”

Recall the quote that began this essay. Dewey tells us two things about the necessity of the superstition of necessity: first, it helps us to conceal the unreal character of what we have called real, and second, it gets rid of the practical evil consequences of hypostatizing a fragment into a whole. Replacing necessity with learning, I believe McDermott’s urgent worry is the practical evil consequences of contemporary ideas of learning — how they delegitimize students, disempower teachers, and destroy democracy. Of course, Dewey shared these worries. In *Democracy and Education*, he tells us that dualism in thought and in its translation into social life is the chief obstacle to democracy and education.⁴ In his essay on the reflex arc, all the significant questions about learning revolve around “when” rather than “what” questions. When is the stimulus? When is the response? When is the learning? And even then, at the height of the public school movement, Dewey knew that questions of education could not be fully addressed within the linguistic entity of the “school.” In 1933 he wrote,

The most Utopian thing in Utopia is that there are no schools at all. Education is carried out without anything of the nature of schools, or, if this idea is so extreme that we cannot conceive of it as educational at all, then we may say nothing of the sort at present we know as schools. Children, however, are gathered together in association with older and more mature people who direct their activity.⁵

McDermott takes us down the same path. He writes, “When school learning is the mechanism by which those who know are shown to not know, and those who do not know are shown to know, the system is logically, pedagogically, and politically at the service of established biases.”

Where do we go from here? The public school movement is dead. The public school system is crumbling very quickly from a combination of its own failures and an assault from capital. Still, all cultures must educate to continue. We are on the cusp of a new system or systems. Attainment is no longer a viable mission. Achievement is the only justifiable aim if there are to be schools at all. Yet, the meaning and markers of achievement have been captured by the vocabulary of learning. How can we throw off the crutch of learning and move ahead on solid ground? How do we move to a post-school configuration of educational institutions? What would achievement mean in such a system? What can we learn from the exterminators?

1. John Dewey, “The Superstition of Necessity,” in *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1899*, vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 29.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 45e.

3. *Ibid.*, 19.

4. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), 41.

5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 322.

6. John Dewey, “Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1933.