

## Toulmin, Dewey and the Modern

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Jeanne Connell's paper raises some of the compelling concerns of that loosely linked movement called "postmodernism" without the wretched excess of relativism which I find so disconcerting. She is astute in pointing to links between Dewey's rejection of foundationalism and Toulmin's claim that philosophy took a wrong turn when Descartes rejected the humanistic skepticism of the Renaissance, exemplified in Montesquieu's essays, and argued instead in favor of an "abstract, general, and eternal theory."

In *Cosmopolis*, Toulmin looks for historical events which shaped the development of philosophy and science in their own particularity.<sup>1</sup> He uses the analytic technique of supplying the context, an indispensable part of conceptual clarification, in order to explain, and to undermine, the claims for a unified science which were so much a part of his own philosophic tradition. Toulmin is remarkably good at using historical detective work to debunk commonly accepted but unexamined ideas.

For Toulmin, the assassination in 1610 of Henry of Navarre, Henry IV of France, was a central historical event. Henry virtually embodied skeptical humanistic virtues such as tolerance of ambiguity. Toulmin thinks that Henry's tolerance of religious difference might have had an enormous influence on European events had he lived to act on his beliefs. With his death and the subsequent horrors of the Thirty Years' War, so destructive of the social order, life and property, the ground was prepared for the acceptance of the Cartesian quest for certainty. Montesquieu had claimed that we can be certain about nothing, but Descartes rejected skepticism when he found absolute certainty in the cogito. A central point in Toulmin's argument is that the origins of modernism lie in the development of Renaissance humanism which preceded Descartes's plea for "decontextualized rationalism." This makes the tenets of Cartesianism a chapter in the history of modernism rather than its essence. Toulmin weakens the postmodern critique of modernism by redefining modernism itself.

In her section "Modernity and the Problem of Knowledge," Connell sets the stage for her analysis by discussing various "modernist definitions of what constitutes knowledge." Her claim that modernist theories share three Cartesian defining characteristics is one with which I disagree. For Connell those tenets are the quest for certainty, the dualism of subject and object, and the view of progress as "always forward moving toward a unified system of knowledge." These beliefs have characterized aspects of empiricism for centuries, but I have difficulty with the notion that they attain the status of defining characteristics. I believe that Toulmin's project in *Cosmopolis* is to show not only the general seductiveness of these beliefs, but their seductiveness as they unfolded in their historical context, while denying that they are a necessary part of our definition of modernism. Actually, the idea of a harmonious order between the cosmos and the polis, between nature and the social order, is both enormously appealing and pernicious. Reflected in sayings like "As above, so below," it is found in nonwestern thought and may help explain the attraction of ideas like Social Darwinism and sociobiology. The dream of either Leviathan or the peaceable kingdom becomes troubling when the idea of a fixed, discoverable nature seems to entail a knowable but immutable destiny.

Connell's discussion of dualism, of separable subject and object, includes some analyses of technical rationality, citing Schon, as an important part of the second of her three criteria. I don't think that the

phrase "technical rationality" makes the point intended, simply because I believe Schon coined the term as a shorthand expression in contrast to his central idea of reflective practice -- that is, the concept is developed and spelled out at a time when it is already under serious attack by a theoretician developing an epistemology of practice. Behind Schon's concept of technical rationality lies a historical debate starting with Plato's separation of *episteme* and *techne*, describing a hierarchy, or at least a dichotomy, with knowledge of pure theory, or the immutable, placed above building or making, that is, dealing with changeable stuff. So the elevation of theory certainly precedes the modern, however we define it, and may indicate that our philosophical quarrel over the nature of science predates modern epistemology.

Connell does not have time to develop the intriguing parallel Toulmin draws between the crisis of Europe between 1610 and 1650 and the crisis of Europe from 1914 to the 1960s, and his hints that the same sort of catastrophic violence in the 20th century prepared the ground for the seeds of logical positivism and scientific empiricism. Toulmin makes his point with a clever juxtaposition of John Donne's "'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone," and Yeats's "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." Just as Western Europe was returning at the end of the 19th century to a skeptical humanism, the military and economic catastrophes of 1914-1945 swept things away. We hope that the 20th century rebuttressing of formalism and foundationalism will not last for hundreds of years since they are being vigorously attacked on many fronts. But the issue is still contested. Within education, movements such as those for imposed national standards and for "family values" could represent a part of the reactionary wave of the future or a vigorous sally by the already defeated.

The second part of Connell's paper concerns Dewey's pragmatic epistemology and the general thrust of his philosophic world view. Dewey's hatred of dualism, his rejection of foundationalism, his refusal to look for first principles from which everything follows, are important elements in the postmodern assault on modernity. Connell does a good job here, and my comments are not meant to disagree with her argument. I do object to her criticism of Dewey for "not proposing any general criteria or overarching theory of knowledge." Dewey certainly has an epistemology which is spelled out more or less clearly in *Logic; The Theory of Inquiry*. If by "overarching" theory of knowledge she means precisely the kind of foundational metaphysics she has already rejected, she should not be looking for one. For Dewey, enquiry terminates in knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Knowledge in that sense is real. On the other hand, Dewey did refer to the "alleged discipline of epistemology" and had no patience with traditional problems of epistemology, writing critically about "the dream of a knowledge that has to do with objects having no nature save to be known."<sup>3</sup> We need to remember that Dewey's radical critique was an attack on idealist epistemology written in the first part of this century. As emerging pragmatism flexed its muscles, Dewey attacked realist epistemology as well. We, on the other hand, are looking back at the following 70 years of American philosophy when pragmatism was submerged by "scientific philosophy" and was then rediscovered or reevaluated by a generation of scholars who were influenced by a continental tradition which had been mostly ignored by mainstream American academic philosophy.

Connell also raises the question of how inquiries develop a critical stance. She writes, "Clearly from a democratic perspective the success of the process also depends upon broad participation, so that all views are represented, and the process is not articulated by Dewey." The question of broad participation is directly addressed by Dewey in *Democracy and Education* and *The Public and Its Problems*. Most of us are familiar with Dewey's statement that "democracy is primarily a mode of associated living." Elsewhere he says, "democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion." Dewey is speaking in ways that make us think of Habermas's "ideal speech community," except that Dewey would never buy into Habermas's idea of "the transcendent moment of universal validity." There is no space to develop the point here. Perhaps Connell is reacting to the general lack of programmatic specificity in Dewey's writing.

1. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
  2. Paul A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (New York, Tudor, 1939, 1951), 561.
  3. John Dewey, "Beliefs and Existences," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, Vol. 3, Jo Ann Boydston, ed. (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 85-86.
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