

ARTICLE

Dewey and Foucault: What's the Problem?

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ABSTRACT: This article explicates a valuable but under-noticed point of contact between John Dewey and Michel Foucault. Both agreed that thinking arose in the context of problems such that the work of thought for both proceeds by way of working through and working over problems. Both affirmed that thinking arose in problematic situations; that it was about clarifying those situations, and that ultimately it was directed towards achieving a degree of resolution of what was problematic in the situation. Both agreed that thinking—or inquiry—was not fundamentally about the representations of a situation; either those produced by a contemporary thinker or as an exercise directed at historical materials. Both agreed that a history of ideas as autonomous entities, distorted not only the process of thinking as a practice, but also the reasons for which it had been engaged in, often with a certain seriousness and urgency, the first place: that is to say, such approaches covered over the stakes. Both agreed that the stakes involved something experiential and entailed a form of logic (or in Foucault's later vocabulary a mode of 'veridiction'), in which the thinker could not help but be involved.

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I am puzzled by the fact that persons who are systematically engaged with inquiry into questions, into problems (as philosophers certainly are), are so incurious about the existence and nature of problems¹

By 'thinking', I mean an analysis of what one might call the intensifying venues of experience (des foyers d'expérience), where are articulated one with the others: first, forms of a possible knowledge; second, the normative matrices of comportment for individuals; and finally, third, modes of virtual existence for possible subjects²

¹ John Dewey, "Propositions, Warranted Assertibility and Truth," in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 14*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).

² Michel Foucault, *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres, Cours au Collège de France*, 1982-83, 5 January 1983, 4-5. "Et par 'pensée', je voulais dire une analyse de ce qu'on pourrait appeler des foyers d'expérience, où s'articule les uns sur les autres: premièrement, les formes d'un savoir possible; deuxièmement, les matrices normatives de comportement pour les individus; et enfin des modes d'existence virtuels pour des sujets possible."

Both John Dewey and Michel Foucault were committed to avoiding polemic exchanges as a matter of ethical self-formation, as well as the best path to consistent scientific (*Wissenschaftliche*) rigor. Both, however, were frequently attacked, and while Dewey consistently sought to be direct and respectful in his responses, when he was misunderstood repeatedly, and seemingly willfully, the edge of his irritation showed through. His evident aggravation, for example in exchanges with Bertrand Russell, was clarifying as some of his Yankee reserve was stripped away as he tried once again to make his position clear and plausible, if not to Russell at least to others.³

Michel Foucault, although operating with a radically different style of writing and genre and in a different cultural context than Dewey, nonetheless made it his practice to avoid responding directly to the frequent and pointed attacks on his work. Instead, Foucault used the interview form extensively as a venue for clarification of his own views, in part as a means of not having to engage directly with critics. On those rare occasions when Foucault did take up the criticisms leveled at him heads-on, and responded directly to those posing them, his answers proved to be illuminating.⁴ This observation is not to say that if only Dewey and Foucault had adopted a more polemic mode it would have been a good thing, but only that after enduring rebukes and distortions stoically, when they did turn their frustration directly at their critics, the pent up irritation provided a powerful and lucid articulation of their ideas.

Both Dewey and Foucault agreed that thinking arose in the context of problems. As neither thinker was ever quite satisfied with their own articulations, refinements and re-statements were frequent. Foucault, like Dewey, asserted and affirmed that thinking arose in problematic situations; that it was about clarifying those situations, and that ultimately it was directed towards achieving a degree of resolution of what was problematic in the situation. Both agreed that thinking—or inquiry—was not fundamentally about the representations of a situation; either those produced by a contemporary thinker or as an exercise directed at historical materials. Both agreed that a history of ideas as autonomous entities, distorted not only the process of thinking as a practice, but also the reasons for which it had been engaged in, often with a certain seriousness and urgency, the first place: that is to say, such approaches covered over the stakes. Both agreed that the stakes involved something experiential and entailed a form of logic (or in Foucault's later vocabulary a mode of 'veridiction'), in which the thinker could not help but be involved.

Dewey's metric of thinking was *reconstruction*: the use of intellectual instrumentalities to intervene in a discordant, indeterminate or merely deficient situation guided by the metric of *the deeply and inclusively human*. Dewey wrote a great deal in his vast corpus about what he considered key aspects of the form, as well as the parameters of the deeply and inclusively hu-

³ On this episode with Russell, see Tom Burke, *Dewey's New Logic, A Reply to Russell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴ One of the very best examples: *L'Impossible Prison*.

man might be, albeit without using this terminology. It is in that sense that his work can be considered a kind of philosophical anthropology.

Foucault worked incessantly via details of historical situations assembled and given form through genealogical operations. The point of such work was to show that thinking—and inquiry—about previous problems had yielded solutions that not only could have been otherwise, but also at least until the change in course of his later lectures, were deficient and even nefarious. As opposed to Dewey, Foucault offered only sporadic, punctual observations about the specifics of logical judgments or evaluations that so obviously permeated his work. Although frequently oblique, the critical intent of everything Foucault wrote, both in the sense of demonstrating in a unique and original manner the limitations of previous solutions and of judging them, or at least providing reasons to do so, is impossible to ignore.

For both thinkers, the attacks and responses turned on the stakes, real or imaginary, in their understandings of truth, statements, and the nature of inquiry—in modernity, however differently defined. In that light, a preliminary comparison between Dewey and Foucault on these topics might prove of interest.

Dewey: Inquiry and Experience

The word “logical”: a signification that is determined by connection with operations of inquiry which are under-taken because of the existence of a problem, and which are controlled by the conditions of that problem—since the “goal” is to resolve the problem which evokes inquiry.⁵

Dewey engaged in an extended series of unsatisfactory exchanges with Bertrand Russell over the nature of logic, following the publication of Dewey’s book, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in 1938.⁶ One of Dewey’s most pointed responses to Russell is found in his article “Propositions, Warranted Assertibility and Truth” published in the March 1941 *Journal of Philosophy*. Dewey declaims that his philosophic position turns fundamentally on understanding what he means by the inter-connected terms inquiry and experience. For Dewey, the object and occasion of thinking was an experience of problems in the world that catalyzed inquiry into those problems in order to clarify and resolve them. Such a search for clarification and resolution, of course, was not assured success. Further, for Dewey, the resolution of one problem often led to the opening of another one: such was the nature of inquiry.

[a]ll knowledge, or warranted assertion, depends upon inquiry and that inquiry is truistically connected with what is questionable (and questioned) involves a skeptical element, or what Peirce called “fallibilism.”⁷

Dewey opposes his problem-oriented, inquiry-based, fallibilistic approach to what he polemically, if accurately, refers to as Russell’s “dogmatic understanding.” Here any proposition de-

⁵ John Dewey, *Logic, a Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), 120.

⁶ See Tom Burke, *Dewey’s New Logic, A Reply to Russell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

ployed in the process of inquiry stands alone and can be taken to be self-evidently true or false before being put to use in relation to a specific problem and a particular process of inquiry. Rebutting Russell, Dewey is emphatic that propositions are neither the object of inquiry nor its elements; rather propositions function as the instruments—or equipment—of inquiry. During the course of an inquiry, propositions will be scrutinized or examined not as to their truth or falsity, but rather as to their “relevancy and efficacy of their subject-matter with respect to the problem in hand.”⁸ Everything depends on the problem, the tools, and the situation, not on a priori elements or fixed rules as components of inquiry.

As Dewey had argued at length in his *Logic*, the complementary term to propositions is judgments.

Judgment may be identified as the settled outcome of inquiry. It is concerned with the concluding objects that emerge from inquiry in their status of being conclusive. Judgment in this sense is distinguished from propositions. The content of the latter is intermediate [...]; while judgment, as finally made, has direct existential import.⁹

Propositions (understood as tools, instrumentalities, equipment) will almost inevitably have to be refined and modified as the inquiry proceeds. This modification might entail a more precise specification of a problem and/or the possible solutions available. In any case, it is the problem that is the determining factor in the form and function of a proposition. There is no a priori status of “simplicity” or “elementary-ness” that applies as the metric in all situations, as Russell argued. Inquiry into particular situations cannot know in advance what tools it requires.

For Dewey, inquiry is not a question of epistemology, but rather of the logic of pragmatic situations and interventions. Inquiry operates into and within specific conditions, not outside them. Dewey calls such conditions *existential*. It is only by engaged observation with existential conditions that a true experiment can be undertaken. When propositions are deployed, modified and reformulated in this manner they attain the status of: “warranted assertion.”¹⁰

Such a process produces objects:

The name *objects* will be reserved for subject-matter so far as it has been produced and ordered in settled form by means of inquiry; proleptically, objects are *objectives* of inquiry.¹¹

This process of constructing objects takes place in all scientific work. Knowing how to approach a problem, how to think about it, how to design and conduct an inquiry, never starts *de novo*. Rather, it builds upon while modifying prior work. When one is doing inquiry, experimental science, one is always dealing with objects; objects that were products and can then be used as tools, but not things directly encountered in the world.

⁸ Ibid., 177.

⁹ Dewey, *Logic*, 120.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 119

Finally, even once a situation becomes determinate, its significance cannot be reduced to or evaluated uniquely by formal conditions of internal coherence. It is at this point that a stepping-back, a reflective evaluation, becomes pertinent. Its evaluative pertinence, however, can only be ultimately judged by how things work once the inquirer returns to the inquiry. Since at least 1920, broadly speaking, Dewey had called this whole process *reconstruction*.

Reconstruction can be nothing less than the work of developing, of forming, of producing (in the literal sense of the word) the intellectual instrumentalities which will progressively direct inquiry into the deeply and inclusively human—that is to say, moral—facts of the present scene and situation.¹²

According to Dewey, the challenge of reconstruction—while having a certain generality—also has an urgency under conditions in which the technical accomplishments of science were expanding as well as separating from the older moral base in which it was held they used to be embedded. However questionable the last assertion may be, the diagnosis retains an actuality that would be hard to gainsay.

Foucault: Thinking and Intensifying Venues of Experience

These three elements—forms of a possible knowledge, normative matrices of comportment, modes of virtual existence for possible subjects—these are three things, or rather it is the articulation of these three things that one can call, I believe, ‘foyer d’expérience.’¹³

Throughout his career, Foucault paid keen attention to a domain, or set of domains, that straddle the arena of inquiry in which Dewey’s *propositions* and *judgments* operated. On the one hand, this claim is self-evident, although someone else will have to work out the details of how *énoncés* and *serious speech acts* might be compared with Dewey’s propositions and judgments in the period surrounding the publication of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In Foucault’s later work, especially in his lectures at the *Collège de France*, however, many of these considerations are present as well.

On the other hand, Foucault had worked through these considerations and at least temporarily settled on a different approach: one whose object was no longer pronouncedly epistemic. Rather, it was critical in the senses mentioned above but equally, and this is supported by his repeated returns to Kant in the last five years or so of his life, of a libratory dimension in that establishing critical limitations might be the first step towards an exit from minority towards maturity. That critical dimension, it seems fair to assert, turned on the identification of what Foucault called *foyers d’expérience*—intensifying, catalyzing and transformative venues—how to think about them, operate within them, and ultimately to reformulate them: perhaps

¹² John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1920, new edition 1948), xxvii.

¹³ Foucault, *Le Gouvernement*, 5. “Ces trois éléments—formes d’un savoir possible, matrices normatives de comportements, modes d’existence virtuels pour des sujets possibles—ce sont ces trois choses, ou plutôt c’est l’articulation des ces trois choses que l’on peut appeler, je crois, « foyer d’expérience. » ”

even to reconstruct them. Such work of reformulation entailed examining the previous forms that had been articulated as responses to a specific set of historical problems, thereby making them available for a different use or set of uses: as intellectual instrumentalities to illuminate contemporary problems and possible solutions.

The quotes cited above as epigrams are striking in their future orientation: possible sciences, normative fields and virtual modes of existence of possible subjects. Of course, there is an archaeological aspect to this formulation: it shows that the task is to provide historical detail of a genealogical sort about how each of these coordinates took shape and how they were combined; thereby showing in principle that each of the objects as well as their relationships could well have been different. Foucault, however, was struggling to do something he had been extremely reluctant to do previously: articulate the terms of possible solutions. Here, at least temperamentally, he differs dramatically from Dewey who ardently advocated and proposed solutions both conceptual and institutional. Dewey's undaunted American pragmatism, as it were, here contrasts with Foucault's French pathos and passionate reserve.

Although exactly what Foucault's problem (or series of problems) consisted in might seem obvious, such assurance would be mistaken. As Arpad Szakolczai demonstrated in his excellent book, *Max Weber and Michel Foucault, Parallel Life-works*, Foucault, like Weber and Nietzsche was constantly in search of exactly what he was seeking to know. That searching and re-evaluation, of course, was in each case a form of inquiry and carried with it, at least the hope of one form or another of reconstruction.¹⁴

Foucault's problem: How to invent a form of philosophy that would rebound on thinking subjects and those with whom he was working, so as to provide a missing dimension to the experience of thinking. In his last three years of lectures Foucault wrestled with the elements and objects of inquiry that he had built during the processes of previous inquiries. He experimented with a new type of genealogy of problems and solutions for ethical practice.

He identified three major forms of reflexivity and how those forms, while not being epochal, had been crafted responses to specific historical problems. By so doing, Foucault was not so far from Dewey's general formulations of the relations of problems and thinking except that Foucault was not in search of a general formulation; quite the contrary. Foucault was in search of an anthropology of sorts; one in which *anthropos* was that being, whose constant quest was to invent forms in which *logos* and *ethos* could be made to meet the demands of the day, as Max Weber put it.¹⁵ Of course, those demands varied historically as did what constituted a solution that met them. Foucault, however, was no relativist, just because a form could be identified as historical, did not mean it was either adequate or satisfactory; quite the contrary.

Foucault produced an analytic schema of three types of reflexivity: memory, meditation and method. The problem was basically: given that it was impossible and undesirable to return to previous solutions to previous problems, could one take up the elements and objects of the past in such a way that they could be used both to diagnose the current unsatisfactory

¹⁴ Arpad Szakolczai, *Max Weber and Michel Foucault, Parallel Life-works* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁵ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" in *The Vocation Lectures*, edited by David Owen and Tracy Strong (Indianapolis: Hacking, 2004).

situation and to proceed to craft a better diagnosis of contemporary problems and contemporary practices of thinking that would lead to a type of ramifications that would literally save the subject—but also philosophy.

What is philosophy?

We will call 'philosophy' the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject's access to truth.¹⁶

What is spirituality?

the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. We will call spirituality then the set of these researches, practices and experiences which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence etc., which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth.¹⁷

Since it is only through one of a number of forms of askesis that the philosophic subject can attain access to the truth, Foucault's initial task was to explore what those practices were. And how those practices articulated with what was considered to be the goal to be attained. Such practices will, by definition, change the subject. There will be:

effects which I will call a 'rebound' (*retour*), effects of the truth on the subject. [] The truth enlightens the subject.¹⁸

The present problem for Foucault is clearly and strongly diagnosed as the type of philosophy operating in modernity. The reason for this is that for Foucault it is only knowledge and knowledge alone that gives the subject access to the truth.

And the consequence is that the access to truth, whose sole condition is henceforth knowledge, will find reward and fulfillment in nothing else but the indefinite development of knowledge. The point of enlightenment and fulfillment, the moment of the subject's transfiguration by the 'rebound effect' on himself of the truth he knows, and which passes through, permeates, and transfigures his being, can no longer exist.¹⁹

Foucault's diagnosis is strikingly parallel to that of Max Weber in "Science as a vocation," where he posited the conditions of modern science to be an ever-increasing specialization of knowledge domains set within a horizon of infinite duration and no prospect of completion.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, edited by Arnold Davidson and Frédéric Gros (New York: Picador, 2005), 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

For Weber, this state of affairs was simply the condition of knowledge and knowing in modernity and it was the challenge and task of those who's calling was the pursuit of knowledge to come to terms with these conditions. Following Nietzsche, Weber told his student audience with tart contempt that it was only the "big children" in editorial offices and university chairs who believed or promised anything else.²⁰

Foucault's version is less tart and presents what amounts to a diagnosis as well as the challenge of inventing something different.

If we define spirituality as being the form of practices which postulate that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject, then we can say that the modern age of the relations between the subject and truth begin when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject.²¹

The problem, in a word, is what might come after modernity?

Conclusion

There are some striking passages in Dewey's 1948 introduction to the re-edition of his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, "Reconstruction 25 years later," that bear an eerie resonance to Foucault's claims about the problem of thinking today. Dewey takes up the theme of technology-oriented science and its relations with moral concerns and problems. To those who advocate that science needs a counter-weight and all we need do is institute ethics alongside science, Dewey is impatient. Such a position, he writes,

appears to assume that we already have in our possession, ready-made, so to say, the morals that determine the ends for which the greatly enhanced store of means should be used. The *practical* difficulty in the way of rendering radically new "means" into servants of ends framed when the means at our disposal were of a different kind is ignored. But much more important than this, with respect to theory or philosophy, is the fact that it retains intact the divorce between some things as means and mere means and other things as ends and only *ends* because of their own essence or inherent nature. Thus, in effect, though not in intent, an issue which is serious enough to be *moral* is disastrously evaded.²²

That evasion continues today — and that is a problem.

²⁰ Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, "We can no longer think that access to the truth will complete the subject. Knowledge will simply open out onto the indefinite dimension of progress, the end of which is unknown and the advantage of which will only every be realized in the course of history by the institutional accumulation of bodies of knowledge, or the psychological or social benefits to be had from having discovered the truth after having taken such pains to do so," 19.

²¹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 19.

²² John Dewey, "Reconstruction As Seen Twenty-Five Years Later," in *Reconstruction* see n. 13 above, xxxvii-xxxviii.

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