

REVIEW

David L. Hildebrand, *Dewey: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), ISBN: 978-1-851-68580-6

Offering an introductory account of John Dewey's work poses a number of challenges for the author of the introductory work. First, Dewey was a prolific author, publishing "forty books and approximately seven-hundred articles" over the course of his career.¹ Any attempt to explain Dewey's work, then, will necessarily be partial. Additionally, Dewey's work presents challenges for those who would introduce him due to the interrelated character of Dewey's thought. His epistemological, moral, educational, aesthetic, and political theories are integrated and depend upon a set of common assumptions and commitments. They are of a piece, thus separating them out along conceptual or thematic lines poses significant challenges for those representing Dewey's thought. The author must make difficult decisions about where to begin, in what order to proceed, and the best way to present Dewey's interrelated ideas without giving the impression of a systematic Deweyan philosophy. Finally, those who would introduce Dewey's thoughts have the difficult task of making Dewey's thoughts accessible without flattening them into purely academic or intellectual concepts. Dewey's appeal is not simply grounded in the uniqueness and analytical rigor of his thinking. Instead, for many, Dewey's appeal is a function of his deep concern for human flourishing and his dogged optimism in the face of serious human problems. Much of Dewey's appeal is affective. Thus, capturing the breadth, depth, and tone of Dewey's works is a significant task.

In *Dewey: A Beginner's Guide*, David L. Hildebrand sets out to provide "a detailed account of the widest possible range of Dewey's philosophical views."² He is careful at the outset to note that his account will not include much in the way of biographical information to contextualize Dewey's thoughts; nor will he attempt to situate Dewey within the history of philosophy. Instead, Hildebrand offers a broad overview of the various areas in Dewey's thought. To do this, Hildebrand presents chapters on experience, inquiry, morality, politics, education, aesthetics, and religion as Dewey reconstructs them. Hildebrand has designed the book such that the chapters may, for the most part, "stand on [their] own."³ However, readers would benefit from reading the first chapter on experience prior to any of the other chapters, since Dewey's theory of experience informs "*every other area of his philosophy*."⁴

¹ Hildebrand, *Dewey: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 2.

² *Ibid.*, x.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 (italics in original).

Hildebrand's chapter on experience is as clear and accessible an account as one could hope for in an introductory text. Drawing heavily from *Human Nature and Conduct* and *Experience and Nature*, Hildebrand's discussion of experience does an excellent job of communicating the embedded, social character of human life in Dewey's philosophy.⁵ Hildebrand contextualizes Dewey's account of experience in opposition to traditional philosophy's dualistic view of the internal versus external, or mental versus physical, aspects of experience. For Dewey, traditional philosophy rigidly, and rather arbitrarily, divides experience into discrete parts by designating some subset of actions causes or beginnings and designating others as effects or ends. Additionally, traditional philosophy presumes that external stimuli are received by an otherwise passive or inactive consciousness. Hildebrand points out that Dewey rejects these views and offers an account of experience that is compatible with the continuous development of activity and embeddedness of the individual within the environment.⁶

Hildebrand's careful reconstruction of Dewey's theory of experience emphasizes its transactional and ecological characteristics. As Hildebrand explains, human experience is, for Dewey, a process of continual and mutual adjustment of the individual and the environment.⁷ As a person engages in action, she interacts with the environment. The activity—the form and content of which is largely determined by the environment—brings about changes in the person as she adjusts her behavior to meet the demands of the environment and as she learns and grows as a result of her adjustment. Hildebrand explains, “acts take place in and because of an *environment*, which contains the problems and surprises that spur us to grow.”⁸ Additionally, the environment is changed as a result of her actions within it. In this way, experience is transactional. Furthermore, Hildebrand explains, Dewey's model is ecological, in that the interaction between persons and the environment creates, adjusts, and sustains both humans and the environment. The relation between persons and the environment, then, can be thought of as a closed circuit, in which both persons and the environment continually modify one another. Throughout the book, Hildebrand makes a point of emphasizing the transactional/ecological components in Dewey's thought in order to highlight this centrally important aspect of Dewey's thought. Much of the success of Hildebrand's introduction depends upon his ability to bring the transactional/ecological components of Dewey's thought to the fore across the range of topics he discusses.

Hildebrand's introduction to Dewey's work also benefits from his use of illustrative examples that actively engage the reader. At various points throughout the book, Hildebrand

⁵ Throughout the book, Hildebrand references *The Collected Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008). Boydston's comprehensive collection has become the standard reference for Dewey scholars. By grounding his own work in these editions, Hildebrand has made cross-referencing his own work with other contemporary research on Dewey easier for his readers. See Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 14, 1899-1924: Human Nature and Conduct, 1922*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983); Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 1, 1925-1953: Experience and Nature, 1925*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

⁶ Hildebrand, 14-23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

explains difficult concepts or arguments in Dewey's work by calling the reader's attention to their own mental activities. Take, for example, his explanation of Dewey's conception of consciousness as a meaning making process that depends upon the mind.

Try it yourself: as you read this book, meanings appear and you are immediately conscious of them; as you forge ahead, they disappear. Those ideas before you at any one instant make sense because of mind... Notice, though, that your mind does not supply sense the way a dictionary does... Much as your physical sense of balance controls walking, mind consciously adjusts and directs your interpretations of meanings before you. Your vivid consciousness of each successive idea is empowered to move smoothly ahead due to mind.

In this example, Hildebrand clearly illustrates the relation and functions of mind and consciousness by actively engaging the reader in observation of and reflection on their own mental processes. Here, Hildebrand explains a difficult passage from *Experience and Nature* in language that would be accessible to undergraduate readers encountering Dewey's ideas for the first time. Throughout the book, Hildebrand's illustrative examples provide clear and careful guidance through many of Dewey's most complicated ideas.

Where Hildebrand is less successful, in my view, is in his chapter on politics. Hildebrand plainly demonstrates the transactional/ecological elements that give shape to Deweyan politics. He spends a good portion of the chapter explaining Dewey's insistence that political theories based on abstract, ahistorical political concepts are insufficient for guiding human action as they are incapable of addressing the particular people and particular environments that determine the character of particular human problems. Instead, Hildebrand rightly points out, Dewey argues for a conception of politics that recognizes that both people and environments change over time. Thus, political concepts, institutions, and practices must be "modified or expunged to suit new times."⁹ Hildebrand is right to emphasize this aspect of Dewey's political thought. However, in my view, Dewey's affective attachments to social justice issues are neglected in Hildebrand's chapter on politics. Dewey wrote passionately about social justice issues. The force of his writing often depended upon his use of fiery language and his evident emotional response to injustice and exploitation.¹⁰ Yet, the Dewey that emerges from Hildebrand's reconstruction seems motivated in the political realm by purely philosophical, conceptual commitments, rather than out of concern for the suffering, outrage at oppression, and his determined assurance that human effort could produce the radical democratic politics he thought capable of creating a more just, equitable, and humane society. As a result, Hildebrand's presentation of Dewey's political thought evacuates much of the moral and affective appeal of Dewey's politics.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰ Hildebrand's scant attention paid to the affective elements of Dewey's writings is interesting given his recognition of the significant place of emotion within Dewey's account of experience. (*Ibid.*, 26-28) Hildebrand notes that, for Dewey, emotions are significant and valuable within human experience, with "an indispensable role to play in endeavors such as logic, ethics, art, and religion." (*Ibid.*, 26) Hildebrand's early recognition of the importance of emotion in Deweyan thought calls the reader's attention to the relatively emotionless presentation of Dewey's conceptions in later chapters.

On the whole, however, Hildebrand's book is a successful introductory account of Dewey's work. He presents a broad view of Dewey's work while offering explanations of sufficient depth to act as a useful point of access to Dewey's expansive oeuvre. Foucault scholars unfamiliar with Dewey's work may find the book useful as a concise statement of Dewey's thought in which they may identify many areas of agreement and compatibility between Dewey and Foucault. Dewey offers an alternative, yet largely compatible, account of the social construction of the subject. Both Dewey and Foucault adopt a skeptical stance vis-à-vis traditional ontological truth claims. Both, instead, call our attention to the processes that produce "truths" and treat truths as events to be accomplished. Furthermore, both agree that all human experience is mediated through language. Dewey and Foucault's divergences, most notable with regard to their views on social sciences, may also prove illuminative. Thus, reading Foucault in conversation with Dewey, may be a productive engagement for Foucault scholars.¹¹ Hildebrand's *Dewey* seems, to me, best suited as a supplementary text for undergraduate teaching. I can envision an excellent undergraduate course on theories of social construction that would compare primary texts from Dewey and Foucault, while providing Hildebrand's *Dewey* and Sara Mills' *Michel Foucault* as supplementary, secondary texts.¹² Hildebrand's clear descriptions and accessible language make *Dewey* a valuable resource for teaching at the undergraduate level.

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¹¹ For examples of such productive engagements, see the recent special issue of *Foucault Studies* on Foucault and American pragmatism, *Foucault Studies* vol. 11 (2011).

¹² See Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault* (London: Routledge, 2003).