
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Pragmatism versus Marxism: An Appraisal of John Dewey's Philosophy
by George Novack

Review by: Lee Nisbet

Source: *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter, 1977), pp. 86-90

Published by: Indiana University Press

exist in the having of experiences, yet Rosenthal does not commit Lewis to an adverbial theory of sensing in which the qualities characterize experiencings rather than hypostatized entities such as sense data. By viewing qualia as analogous to universals in a functional sense, the issue of their ontological status is obviated. Qualia are located where the percipient undergoing a particular experience is. They are intrinsically recognizable because they are related to the generality and conceptual dimension of the images resulting from the application of the schemata of sense-meaning.

With her emphasis on the pragmatic and the functional and on the basis of certain of Lewis' remarks, Rosenthal recasts traditional metaphysics' notion of objecthood in terms of mind's intersection with a continuum of the potentiality which underpins the infinite verificatory experiences one may have of an object. The suggestion is that events and processes exist but objects are only conceptual counters in our interactions with the world.

The issues discussed in this review are the most interesting and well developed themes in Rosenthal's work. She sought to unpack complex machinery deployed by Lewis, but her exposition is not entirely free from its own ambiguities. As an attempt to systematize Lewis, I recommend the book. There is an overabundance of misprints and the word divisions at the end of lines often do not conform to customary practice.

Robert I. Halpern

*Andrew Mellon Fellow, Graduate Center
of the City University of New York*

*Pragmatism versus Marxism:
An Appraisal of John Dewey's Philosophy*

George Novack

New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975, pp. 320. \$3.45.

George Novack's criticisms of John Dewey's pragmatism are of two ranks: the trivial and the serious. First and quickly I shall present the trivial criticism. The argument is deductive and familiar:

Class conflict is the major source of human progress. Denial of this premise implies support of capitalism. Dewey denies that class conflict is the major source of human progress. Therefore Dewey's pragmatism is the ideological tool of the capitalist class used to dampen the revolutionary ardor of America's proletariat.

In Novack's words: "Dewey finds as repugnant . . . the more general thesis that the class struggle was the prime mover of historical development in the past The empirical habits of behavior and the pragmatic modes of thought which have found justification in Deweyism continually sprout from the soil of capitalism Pragmatism is the conciliatory philosophical instrument of the middle classes on the downgrade, trying to clutch at any means for salvation." (p. 210, 280, 278)

To deny that class conflict is the main source of progress is to deny that revolution is necessary for progress and by Novack's logic 'proves' that pragmatism is the philosophy of capitalism. Dewey's many attacks on capitalism only constitute 'proof' that Dewey supports capitalism because he disagrees with Novack's formulation of and solution for the problem. Since Novack formulates the issue in a way that logically renders any critic of his position a knave or a fool he presents here a merely trivial syllogism.

The philosophical critique underlying Novack's 'proof' of pragmatism's supposed political culpability is, however, sophisticated and well worth considering. He argues that Dewey's denial of the truth of the class conflict thesis develops out a failure to comprehend the necessary character of scientific laws: "Dewey's philosophy accords no place to coercive necessities, whether in nature, society, history, or the processes of thought that elucidate their events." (p. 102)

Novack wants to prove that Dewey's understanding of experience and nature is unscientific. He believes Dewey's analysis of causation when critiqued demonstrates the unscientific nature of Dewey's pragmatic program. Novack explains: "Dewey unjustifiably claimed that his subjectivist theory of causation as a means of instituting order is consonant with the procedure of science. Scientific practice, however, proceeds from the premise that causation is not only an idea in the mind, an expedient guide to action, but corresponds to a fundamental relation in the external world The objective reality of causality is proved by practice. If one thing is produced by or through another, if one change brings

about another change, then these events or phenomena are causally connected. This gives proof of the reality and efficacy of causality." (p. 96, 97)

The problem with Novack's criticism is that Dewey's instrumentalist conception of causality and scientific law is neither 'subjectivistic' nor does it make causation 'unreal.' Dewey as Novack indicates, maintains that the "category of causation is logical . . . not ontological . . . a functional means of regulating existential inquiry." (Dewey, *Logic*, p. 462) Pragmatically, causal laws are concepts which formulate ways of transacting with materials to produce specified results. Causal laws are abstract and general and hence applicable to diverse instances of individual events. Analysis of causal sequences has therefore as its object or content the logic not of nature as nature but rather the nontemporal logical sequence itself. Specifically, in Dewey's view, nature as nature consists of connected processes with no beginnings or endings. Existentially there are no separated events — one the cause of another. For purposes of analysis and control however this existential continuum is broken into if-then sequences. Causal analysis is logical, non-temporal and aims at defining what operations will produce what consequences. Pragmatically, laws are *means of production* of predictable consequences. In Dewey's words: "The conception of effect is essentially teleological, the effect is the end to be reached — the means to be used are its cause when they are selected and brought into interaction with one another". (Dewey, *Logic*, p. 460) Novack correctly describes Dewey's approach, but as noted dismisses it as 'subjectivistic.' Novack misses the pragmatic point.

As Hume observed each existential event is unique. If events as events are unique there is no repetition or 'constant conjunction' of existential relations between events. Hume concluded that the 'constant conjunction' of events must exist only in the mind. Causality is subjective and scientific knowledge is impossible. Hume, of course, rightly concluded that there is no evidence that causal connections exist between events (not only because events are unique but because, contrary to Hume, they are not separated in the first place) but wrong to claim that causality is merely subjective. As Dewey indicates, although causal analysis is logical and abstract it is used to direct operations aimed at achieving specified testable consequences. Successful inquiry requires transformation of its subject matter according to the conditions stipulated by logical rules of hypothesis construction and verification. Causal analysis is a rule-

guided procedure for testing hypotheses and hence is hardly subjective or unreal.

Novack's charge that Dewey's conception of causality is 'subjectivist' therefore clearly misses the point. Novack, of course, must miss the point. His type of Marxism requires that laws be ontological and necessary for then they have maximum ideological impact. To disagree with Novack is to deny laws *in nature*, laws *in history and society*, a device which renders one a buffoon or knave. Causal analysis and politics are inextricably mixed for this Marxist.

Common-sensically however, isn't Novack correct? He provides an example that seemingly poses an insoluble problem for Dewey's approach. In medicine there is a class of degenerative processes called diseases. These processes are always thought to have causes — pathogens. "If the presence of the pathogen is accompanied by the characteristic symptoms and development of the disease, if this happens consistently, if these precise effects are not produced by other agents, if it proves possible to prevent the development of the disease by virus-killing agents or by removing the virus, this range of tests proves the objective reality of the causal relation." (p. 99) Pathogens such as viruses are shown to be causes of diseases, hence causes are ontological not merely logical. **This argument is not convincing, I believe, for the following reasons.**

Pragmatically speaking, in nature there is no such thing as a 'disease.' *We* classify certain processes that are destructive of health as 'diseases.' It makes no difference in nature whether we *claim* a virus or an evil spirit is the culprit. Nature as nature contains no 'culprits' or 'pathogens' and a 'disease' requires a culprit. Disease is a value-laden classificatory term.

Secondly, Novack's analysis simply outlines the logical procedures or principles of diagnosis and treatment. The procedures outline *ways* of acting and certainly have nothing in common with a *unique* existential process. To repeat, such *procedures* or principles do not describe, mirror or reproduce a *unique* existential process but describe the logically ordered steps necessary to bring that process to a desired issue. Such a criticism, I believe, is consistent with Dewey's interpretation of causal analysis.

Dewey suggests that the successful direction of natural processes to ends adjudged as good necessitates the development of effective procedures of transforming problematic subject matter. Necessity resides then in formulation of ways of operating and hence is testable and revisable in terms of actual consequences produced. If ironclad necessity

90 BOOK REVIEWS

exists only in conceptional relationships and not in nature, society or history, Dewey's claim that revolution is not always necessary to eliminate class oppression hardly, in any necessary sense, renders him a capitalist ideologue.

In summary, although some of Novack's criticisms of Dewey's theory of inquiry, metaphysics and political theory are interesting, they do not raise difficulties which are insoluble. Novack's polemical ambitions too often blind him to the rather obvious rebuttals contained in the very pragmatic arguments he attacks.

Lee Nisbet

Erie Community College