

Zeitschrift: Zeitschrift für pädagogische Historiographie
Herausgeber: Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich
Band: 7 (2001)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Why Dewey now?
Autor: Biesta, Gert J.J.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-901878>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Why Dewey now?

(Red.) In den nächsten zwei Jahren erscheint im Pestalozzianum Verlag Zürich eine vierbändige deutschsprachige Ausgabe pädagogisch relevanter Texte von John Dewey. Diese Veröffentlichung entspricht insofern einem Desiderat, als sich sowohl Philosophie wie auch Pädagogik im internationalen Diskurs der letzten Jahre wieder vermehrt mit Deweys Leben und Werk auseinandersetzen. Gert J.J. Biesta reflektiert im Folgenden über die mögliche Bedeutung dieser ausgewählten pädagogischen Schriften für das deutschsprachige Publikum.

■ Gert J.J. Biesta

Over the past two decades there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in the work of John Dewey, both in philosophy and in education. The 1977-edition of the 'Checklist of Writings about John Dewey' already contained an impressive list of articles and books on his work (Boydston/Poulos 1977). Since the early eighties this list has grown exponentially (see Levine 1996; see also <http://www.siu.edu/~deweyctr>). The publication of four volumes of translations of Dewey's writings in German is a firm indication that the revival of interest in Dewey is also gaining foothold in continental traditions of philosophy and education (see also Lehmann-Rommel 2000). But why Dewey? And why Dewey now? Why are philosophers and educators (re)turning to Dewey? And why would it make sense to do so? In this essay I want to present some reflections on these questions and suggest an interpretation of Dewey which could serve as a background for reading the texts that will soon become available in German.

Rediscovering Dewey

There is, of course, no simple explanation for the renewed interest in Dewey. People are (re)turning to Dewey for many different reasons and in many different contexts. In philosophy

one could, for example, try to explain the interest in Dewey in relation to the transformation of analytic philosophy into 'post-analytic' philosophy (Rajchman/West 1985). Since the late fifties analytic philosophers such as Quine, Davidson and Putnam have gradually moved towards pragmatism as their work on knowledge, language and reality urged them to abandon some of the basic assumptions of the analytic tradition. In this process they (re)discovered Dewey who, from the very start of his career, had questioned many of the distinctions and dualisms upon which analytic philosophy has been erected (see Borradori 1994).

But the internal transformation of analytic philosophy is only one part of the picture. Another influential player is Richard Rorty who, in his critique of the epistemological foundations of Western philosophy, also found Deweyan pragmatism on his side. In 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' he therefore presented Dewey as one of the three most important philosophers of the twentieth century – the other two being Heidegger and Wittgenstein (see Rorty 1980, p. 5).

Although these developments may help us to understand why philosophers have turned to Dewey, the actual picture is, of course, far more complex, not in the least because the interest in Dewey's work covers such a broad philosophical spectrum, including such different areas as political philosophy, aesthetics and philosophy of religion (see e.g., Westbrook 1991; Campbell 1992; Festenstein 1997; Shusterman 1992; Rockefeller 1991).

In education it is perhaps even more difficult to explain why people are (re)turning to Dewey. One reason for this is that education is far more bound up with national and local histories than philosophy is. There is, for example, a substantial difference between the current interest in Dewey in the Chinese context (see Xu 2001) and the ways in which his work is being discussed in European countries such as England, Sweden and the Netherlands (see for example, Carr/Hartnett 1996; Ljunggren 1996; Berding 1999). Different countries have different needs and hence produce different readings of Dewey. All here depends on the interaction between the existing educational context and Dewey's ideas (see Biesta/Miedema 2000).

The situation in education is further complicated by the fact that Dewey has already earned his place in the history of education, most notably as one of the key figures in progressive education. This makes it especially difficult to see to what extent the current work on Dewey is more than a repetition of what already has been¹.

A modern critique of modernity

Although, then, there is no single answer to the question why people are (re)turning to Dewey, I want to argue that we can at least understand part of the interest in his work if, that is, we consider it against the background of the critique of modernity that has become prominent in Western thought in the last decades of the twentieth century.

In order to make this connection we must first of all acknowledge that Dewey is *not* – or not in any straightforward sense – an advocate of modern science and the scientific worldview but that his work is informed by a profound *critique* of certain aspects of modernity. If we read Dewey in this way – and I will say a bit more about this below – we can see why people are (re)turning to Dewey in a time in which there is a more general questioning of the achievements of modernity and the modern worldview.

Reading Dewey in this way may also give us a clue as to what we might be able to get from his writings and, more importantly, what not. Although Dewey is highly critical of certain aspects of modernity and the modern worldview, he is not leading us into a postmodern world 'beyond' modernity, nor to a pre-modern world 'before' modernity. Dewey argues that the resources for a solution to the problems he envisages can be found in what I would like to call a more consistent modernity, i.e., a modernity which takes itself seriously in its own terms. In this respect we could say that Dewey provides us with a *modern* critique of modernity. This gives Dewey a special place in the current discussion about the virtues of modernity. Yet it is also what makes his contribution problematic. Let me briefly explain what I have in mind.

The crisis in culture

One of the most central themes in Dewey's writings is the impact of modern science on everyday life. Modern science has radically altered our understanding of the world we live in. It has given us a view of reality as a mechanism, as "a science of indifferent physical particulars acting according to mathematical laws" (1929, LW4, p. 33)². In doing so, modern science has "stripped the world of the qualities which made it beautiful and congenial to men" (ibid.). This, so Dewey argues, has led to a *disintegration* of the world of everyday life (see e.g.

1948, MW12, p. 265; also 1929, LW4, p. 32f.). The world of everyday life has become "a house divided against itself" (1938, LW12, p. 84). According to Dewey this is "the outstanding problem of our civilization" (ibid.).

While the omnipresence of science in everyday life has caused and continues to cause many practical problems, Dewey argues that the disintegrative effect it has had on our everyday lives is primarily due to the way in which the mechanistic worldview has been interpreted, namely as a depiction of what reality really is. Because it is assumed that only the mechanistic world of natural science is really real, all those aspects of our lives that cannot be reduced to the workings of this mechanism have ceased to be real. They have become subjective, matters of taste, etcetera. While we have "won" the world of modern science, we have at the very same time "lost" the world of our everyday experience.

The problem is not only that we have lost the *reality* of that world. Dewey argues that at the very same time we have lost the *rationality* of that world. He writes:

The net practical effect is the creation of the belief that science exists only in the things which are most remote from any significant human concern, so that as we approach social and moral questions and interests we must either surrender hope of the guidance of genuine knowledge or else purchase scientific title and authority at the expense of all that is distinctly human (1939, LW14, p. 51).

The predicament of modern life, in other words, is that we are faced with two equally unattractive options: the "inhuman rationality" of modern science and the "human irrationality" of "all that is distinctly human". This is the predicament which lies at the heart of what Dewey refers to as the crisis in modern culture.

The fact that Dewey connects the crisis in culture to a specific *interpretation* of the scientific worldview should not be read as the claim that this crisis is merely of a theoretical or philosophical nature and that it has nothing to do with many of the urgent problems of contemporary life. Dewey's point rather is that the hegemony of the 'inhuman' rationality of modern science has produced a situation in which a rational approach to the problems we are faced with is restricted to the domain of facts and means, while values and ends are by definition excluded from rational deliberation. The crisis in culture is, in other words, a *crisis of rationality*. And Dewey's "project" is nothing less than to overcome this crisis (see Biesta 1992).

The quest for human rationality

But what did go wrong? How have we ended up in the situation we are in? And is there a way out? The basic problem, according to Dewey, is that we have interpreted the findings of mo-

modern science by means of a philosophical framework that was developed long before modern science emerged. The hegemony of scientific rationality is the result of the application of a realistic epistemology in which it is assumed that it is the office of knowledge "to uncover the antecedently real" (1929, LW4, p. 14), and a metaphysics in which it is assumed that only what is fixed and immutable can be really really real. This has resulted in a separation between theory and practice, between knowing the world and acting in and with the world, because according to this epistemology and metaphysics we can only get true knowledge when the act of knowing does not influence the object of our knowledge. On this account knowing is like seeing. For this reason Dewey refers to this approach as the "spectator theory of knowledge" (1929, LW4, p. 19). And it is this theory which has ruled philosophy "ever since the time of the Greeks" (1929, LW4, p. 14).

Is there any reason to question the validity of this philosophical framework? One could of course say that this is something for philosophers to decide. But the point Dewey makes, is that the assumptions underlying this philosophical framework have been refuted by modern science itself. In modern science, knowing is not a process of seeing how the world really is. The acquisition of knowledge is an experimental intervention in reality. It is, as Dewey puts it, "a certain kind of intelligently conducted *doing*" (1920, MW12, p. 149; *emph. added*). And while for a long time modern science has worked on the assumption of "underlying fixities" – such as space, time and immutable atoms – "there recently entered the discovery that natural science is forced by its own development to abandon the assumption of fixity and to recognize that what for it is actually 'universal' is *process*" (1948, MW12, p. 260). Rather than letting philosophy dictate how we should interpret the findings of modern science, Dewey therefore suggests that we should take the findings of modern science – both in its content and method – to develop our understanding of knowledge and reality.

One could of course argue that this strategy leads directly to the scientism, to the hegemony of the scientific worldview and scientific rationality that Dewey wants to overcome³. But if one reads Dewey carefully one will see that if we take our cues from what modern science actually *does* instead of what pre-scientific philosophy tells us is the case, we end up with anything but scientism.

Dewey shows us that if we follow modern science – or, to be more precise, if we take modern science seriously in its own terms – we enter a world in which we are no longer spectators to a finished universe but are participants in an unfinished, ever-evolving universe. We enter a world in which we are in a constant transaction with our environment, natural and social. In this world we use knowledge as a means to direct and redirect our actions. We con-

struct models of reality in order to guide our actions. These models are not the ultimate truths to which we should subject ourselves, but instruments that we use to find our way around. As long as these instruments serve their purpose we keep them; otherwise we revise them. We enter a world, therefore, in which cognition is no longer the measure of reality but only one of the possible modes of our transaction with our environment, one of the modes of what Dewey calls "experience". There are many other modes of experience: the aesthetic, the moral, the political, and even the religious. Since they are all modes of the transaction with the (natural and social) environment, they are all evenly real. Yet the different modes serve different purposes and hence have their own, domain-specific rationalities. We furthermore enter a world of human co-ordination, co-operation and communication, a world that we build together, a world that we literally make in common through our ongoing attempts to co-ordinate our activities. We enter a world, then, in which education is the very process of building and re-building, of constructing and reconstructing our common world. We enter a world in which democracy becomes the measure for the quality of our co-operation and communication. We enter a world, in sum, where we are no longer a "ghost in a machine", but where we can be at home. It is not, however, a world where we can simply "sit back and relax". The world which Dewey reveals to us is a world where there is work to do. Dewey is well aware that we will never be in total control of this world. But its future will definitely depend on the ways in which we will respond – individually and collectively – and will take responsibility.

This, so I want to argue, is the very point of Dewey's philosophy. It is to show that the content and method of modern science only lead us to scientism, to the hegemony of the inhuman scientific rationality of facts and means, if we interpret the findings of modern science with outdated philosophical categories that are foreign to what the experimental approach of science is actually about. If, on the other hand, we do not stick to philosophical categories that emerged in a context completely different from the one we are living in now but update and reconstruct our philosophy – which is what Dewey's work is all about – it implies the end of the "quest for certainty" that has for such a long time captured Western culture. Dewey reveals that this quest is an illusion because science will never be able to provide us with absolute certainty. He also shows that this quest is problematic and even dangerous because it ultimately deprives us of a rational way to address the problems that really matter to us, the problems of politics, the problems of education, the problems of "all that is distinctly human". In this respect we could say that Dewey's philosophical – but also his political and educational – "project" is motivated by a quest for *human* rationality.

Reading Dewey

The foregoing remarks are offered as a possible way for reading Dewey and more specifically for reading the texts that have now become available in German translation. Perhaps the best way to approach this collection is to start with Volume 4, which contains the translation of Dewey's 'Human Nature and Conduct' (1929). This book provides an excellent introduction to Dewey's naturalistic philosophy. Starting from the central claim that "all conduct is interaction between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social", 'Human Nature and Conduct' contains a detailed discussion of the implications of this point of view for our understanding of human action, the role of thinking, knowledge and intelligence in action, the role of aims and principles, the nature of morals and morality, and the question of human freedom. The book shows, in other words, that to think of man as part of an ever-evolving universe does not make him into a machine subjected to the laws of nature, but opens up the field of human action, human creativity and human responsibility.

A crucial step in all this is the transformation of action into what Dewey calls "intelligent" action. Dewey presents man as a creature of habit. Yet again and again he stresses the importance of the habits of thought and reflection in making our action more thoughtful and more intelligent. Volume 2 contains a translation of the 1910-edition of Dewey's 'How We Think'. This book provides a detailed account of the process of reflection and how it acts upon human action in order to make action more reflective or intelligent. The book is not only important for understanding Dewey's ideas about the role of reflection in action. Since it was explicitly written for teachers, it also provides an insight in the ways in which Dewey thought that "the training of thought" (part III of the book) should take place. 'How We Think' can also be read as a statement of Dewey's understanding of the scientific method. From reading the book it will become clear that what Dewey refers to as the "scientific method" is far from a recipe that simply will generate "the truth". Dewey shows that the scientific method is a process of experimentation, deliberation, judgement and interpretation which will generate warranted, though always fallible conclusions. Although already early in his career Dewey pleaded for a "scientific treatment of morality" (1903; MW3, p. 3-39) it is more accurate to say that Dewey wanted to think of the scientific method in terms of moral deliberation than the other way around.

'Freedom and Culture' (1939) which appears in Volume 3 of this set of translations, provides a very readable insight into Dewey as a political and social philosopher, a philosopher of democracy, intelligence and freedom. Dewey discusses the problem of human freedom against the background of the

rapid development of totalitarian states and a growth of insecurity in democracies just before the outbreak of the Second World War. One of the main messages of the book is that the way forward is not to be one in which we develop different, more sophisticated means to achieve pre-existing ends. The crucial task lies in the intelligent, experimental reconstruction of the whole range of human values, the area to which Dewey refers in this book as "culture". "Democracy" is the name for precisely this process. Although Dewey is critical of the different forms of totalitarianism around the world, he is evenly critical of the state of democracy in America itself.

Volume 1 contains translations of several of Dewey's educational writings, spanning a period from 1899 when Dewey was actively involved in the 'Laboratory School' at the University of Chicago until 1945 when Dewey was still actively engaged in discussions about education and its future. Dewey's educational texts address a wide variety of topics and issues. Yet amongst them the general themes of intelligence, co-operation, communication, democracy and the role of experimental inquiry can easily be found. Together they present a picture of education as a field of human co-operation and communication, rather than an institution in which children are being prepared for the future by transmitting the truths of the past to them.

Volume 1 also contains a translation of Dewey's 'A Common Faith' (1934). This text shows Dewey's attempt to integrate the domain of religious experience into his overall naturalistic framework. The book is interesting because it shows Dewey's sincere attempts to substantiate his claim that his naturalistic philosophy of experience is able to restore reality to all dimensions of human life. Of course one may not be convinced by this attempt, but the book at least reveals that Dewey was serious about his "project" in every detail and every direction.

Conclusion: The limits of pragmatism

In this essay I have presented some reflections on the recent resurgence of interest in Dewey's writings. I have suggested that it makes sense for people to (re)turn to Dewey in the context of a more general questioning of the virtues of modernity because Dewey's work is itself informed by a profound critique of modernity, more specifically a critique of the hegemony of the instrumental rationality of modern science. What is most interesting about Dewey's critique of scientism is that it doesn't result in a wholesale rejection of science. Dewey shows that if we examine the implications of the content and method of modern science we end up with anything but scientism, but rather with a world that is full of possibilities. In a world obsessed with the narrow rationality of science it seems to me that Dewey still provides a most effective antidote, a most effective way to reclaim "all that is

distinctly human". In this respect I think that Dewey still has a lot to say to the world of the 21st century.

This is not to suggest, of course, that Dewey will be able to provide the solution for all our problems. There are also serious limits to Dewey's pragmatism and we should not make the mistake of using his ideas to jump any further than what they are good for. One problem I want to point to has to do with the totalising character of Dewey's naturalistic philosophy. Dewey shows us that the natural world, the world of modern science, is a world of human possibilities rather than a world of inhuman restrictions. In doing so, he is able to show that "all that is distinctly human" can have a place in such a world. But there is a price to be paid for this achievement as well, because the only way in which "all that is distinctly human" can be restored is by redefining it in naturalistic terms. This is presumably most visible in Dewey's attempts to integrate religious experience into his naturalistic framework. While a naturalised religiosity might fit those who feel at home in a naturalistic universe, it is much more problematic for those who would argue that religion is by definition transcendent of nature and not immanent. Although, then, Dewey has some very important things to say to the naturalists, I doubt whether he has much to say to those who do not think of themselves, their fellow human beings and the world more generally in naturalistic terms.

Here we touch upon a limit of Dewey's pragmatism, a limit that might be especially problematic in a world that is becoming increasingly more plural, more multi-cultural, multi-religious, more multi-ethnic, etcetera. We might even say that this limit reveals a contradiction in a philosophy that is so explicitly committed to communication and democracy. The solution for this is, however, not to stick to Dewey's ideas as such and try to retain them. After all, Dewey would be the first to tell us that if our philosophical tools no longer serve their purpose, we should reconstruct them.

- 1 For new scholarship on Dewey in education see Garrison 1995; Lehmann-Rommel 2000.
- 2 All references to Dewey's writings are to the *Collected Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, published by Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, USA. The collected works comprise of three series: the *Early Works*, the *Middle Works*, and the *Later Works*, hereafter referred to as *EW*, *MW* and *LW*, preceded by the year of the original publication of Dewey's text and followed by the volume number and page number.
- 3 This is, for example, the gist of Horkheimers critique of Dewey; see Horkheimer 1947.

Literature

- Berding, Joop W.A.: *De participatiepedagogiek van John Dewey*. Leiden 1999
- Biesta, Gert J.J.: *John Dewey. Theorie and praktijk*. Delft 1992
- Biesta, Gert J.J./Miedema, Siebren: Context and interaction. How to assess Dewey's influence on educational reform in Europe? In: *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 19 (2000), p. 21-37
- Boydston, Jo Ann/Poulos, Kathleen (eds): *Checklist of writings about John Dewey. 1889-1977. Second edition, enlarged*. Southern Illinois University Press 1977
- Borradori, Giovanna: *The American philosopher*. The University of Chicago Press 1994
- Campbell, James: *The community reconstructs. The meaning of pragmatic social thought*. University of Illinois Press 1992
- Carr, Wilfred/Hartnett, Anthony: *Education and the Struggle for Democracy*. Open University Press 1996
- Dewey, John: *Logical conditions of a scientific treatment of morality* (1903). In: *MW3*, p. 3-39
- Dewey, John: *Reconstruction in philosophy* (1920). In: *MW12*, p. 77-201
- Dewey, John: *The quest for certainty* (1929). In: *LW4*
- Dewey, John: *Introduction: Reconstruction as seen twenty-five years later* (1948). In: *MW12*, p. 256-277
- Dewey, John: *Logic: The theory of inquiry* (1938). In: *LW12*
- Dewey, John: *Experience, knowledge and value: A rejoinder* (1939). In: *LW14*, p. 3-90
- Festenstein, Matthew: *Pragmatism and political theory. From Dewey to Rorty*. The University of Chicago Press 1997
- Garrison, Jim (ed.): *The new scholarship on John Dewey*. Dordrecht/Boston/London 1995
- Horkheimer, Max: *Eclipse of reason*. Oxford University Press 1947
- Lehmann-Rommel, Roswitha: *Renewal of Dewey. Trends in the nineties*. In: *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 19(2000), p. 187-218
- Levine, Barbara: *Works about John Dewey, 1886-1995*. Southern Illinois University Press 1996
- Ljunggren, Carsten: *Medborgarpubliken och det offentliga rummet. Om utbildning, medier och demokrati*. Uppsala 1996
- Rajchman, John/West, Cornel (eds): *Post-analytic philosophy*. Columbia University Press 1985
- Rockefeller, Steven C.: *John Dewey. Religious faith and democratic humanism*. Columbia University Press 1991
- Rorty, Richard: *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Blackwell 1980
- Shusterman, Richard: *Pragmatist aesthetics. Living beauty, rethinking art*. Blackwell 1992
- Westbrook, Robert B.: *John Dewey and American democracy*. Cornell University Press 1991
- Xu, Di: *Dewey in China: 1919-2001*. Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001

**Die vierbändige Dewey-Ausgabe
erscheint ab 2002
im Verlag Pestalozzianum**