

DEWEY'S AND RORTY'S THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION

Radim Šíp

Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

E-mail: sip@ped.muni.cz

1. Heretic assertions

Let me start with two – perhaps heretic – assertions. Firstly, there are a few like Dewey, in whose texts' we can find a similar disproportion between the great originality of their thinking and the boring style they produce. Secondly, in Rorty's case we can find another disproportion, the one between great style producing inspiring, influential thoughts and the depth of blunder of his thought system. For I devoted a whole book to the second assertion – named *Richard Rorty: Pragmatism between Experience and Language* (Šíp, 2008) – today I want to apply readers' attention to Dewey first of all and at the end of my lecture I attempt to compare Dewey's and Rorty's thoughts that might have implications for education.

However, it would be useful to repeat some conclusions of my book so that readers understand the background of my opinion. Of course, I could not present them here in the form of lengthy arguments as I did in the book so I will do it in a way of other assertions.

The book said:

- though Rorty was one of the best authors that have turned the attention of people to pragmatism (especially in Europe), Rorty was not a pragmatist;
- he was not a pragmatist, he was an inspiring mixture of a post-analytic philosopher and a hermeneutist;

- he was not a pragmatist because he transformed the central term of pragmatism "experience" into mere "language"; he did it because he thought "experience is opaque and [therefore unusable term" as Sellars, Davidson, Brandom and others did;
- "experience" is an opaque term indeed, nonetheless, it is very useful;
- for if we narrow the term "experience" into mere "language" we separate what could be expressed from its motivating background; it means actions from compulsions, reasons from causes, thinking from conditions etc.;
- if we do it we deprive – as Rorty did – our understanding of what pragmatists call "troubles (or problematic) situation" and thus deprive intelligent power needed for its solution;
- this shift had its roots in a wide tradition that we can trace back to the 19th century and which found its great expression in the strong philosophical schools of the 20th century – in the analytic school as well as in phenomenology and hermeneutics;
- in the book, I try to support it with evidence by close analysis of the cash value of Rorty's thoughts;
- by the analysis, in the last chapter of the book I show that strict distinction between the public and the private sphere is based on the invalid understanding of experience and I also show that it causes more trouble than it solves – in other words, I show that Rorty's thoughts in their whole are un-pragmatic.

2. The separate things versus transactions

The base of Dewey's system has received many different versions in accordance with the problems that were cardinal for Dewey at a given time. However, the differences we found in texts from *Democracy and Education* (cf.

mw.9)¹, through *Experience and Nature* (cf. lw.1), to *Art as Experience* (cf. lw.10), to *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (cf. lw.12) were slight and unimportant. The core was steady.

Dewey structured the base of the works around two "substances" – organism and environment. According to him, only because of a peculiar reason can we differentiate that we need clearer understanding of situations in which we occur to be. In fact, there is no organism beyond or out of environment and environment can be understood only as the aggregate of things (organisms as well as their relations and conditions that they create). Actually, we could not call them "substances" (Which I did above, but with quotation marks being in lack of more appropriated term). Perhaps we could use the term "aspects" – so the structure is organized around two aspects. However, this would not be useful unless we changed the traditional basic picture that structures the conception of our world.

In the 2007 Szeged lecture, later published under name *John Dewey's Tentative Metaphysics* (see Šíp, 2007); I called the pictures structuring our world "myth". At that time, employing the word aroused displeasure in the audience. The reason might be that my critics protected the word for meanings that insinuate stepping over limits of the rational discourse. However, there is still a strong link between non-rational and rational and thus using the term we could stay in the area of philosophy. A picture (a myth) influences our grasp of the world and thus determines what we understand to be basic principles of the true knowledge and the true or valid ways of acquirement of the knowledge.

¹ Hereafter I refer to Dewey's *The Collected Works* in the standardized way without mentioning Dewey's name, because the way of reference (for example: lw.3.134) signalizes the reference to *The Collected Works of John Dewey*.

If we see the world through the picture typical of our Occidental tradition², we live in the world where everything is intrinsically separated from other things – chairs from tables and people and rooms and plates and books, reasons from causes, conditions, predispositions, volition etc. Relations between the separated things (hereafter I call them "the separates") are actualizations of possibilities that are coded in the core of the separates in its substance. Substance is stable and given by purpose of its final cause. That means the separates create relations only because of prescriptions that characterized them in advance – i. e. before the things are, in an out-of-time state. Here I use the vocabulary of Aristotle for it is popular and well known, but I could use the vocabularies of atomists as well as of Plato or of Hobbes and of others. In this sense, the majority of our tradition – in spite of its deep differences – share the picture of the separate things, the separate substances. We find exceptions only among those that view the world as a hierarchical organized manifestation of one thing – for example, Leibniz or Jonathan Edwards or Hegel. Of course, we could also interpret the works of Plato, Aristotle, or Aquinas in this way. Still, the reception of their works has its own history, the history of the picture structuring our grasp of the world as an assemblage of the separate things.

If we see the world through the picture of Hegelianism naturalized by Darwinian evolutionism that is the starting point for the fledged Dewey, we see relations and aspects of continual process of transactions everywhere in which we can stabilize any "substance" only by accent on some of the transactions at the expense of others. We would be in the permanent deficiency of appropriate terms because we would have internalized propensity to see the words of language as a system of signs that primarily denote the separates. Therefore, we are often seen as mentally weakened, because our words attempt to denote relations,

² Hereafter I call it "the first picture" and the pragmatic view "the second picture".

transactions, continuities and thus they lose their stability and identity that the people obsessed by the above mentioned picture expect. Moreover, from their point of view, we are not only mentally weakened, but also completely irrational since we are urged to challenge "fundamental logical laws" – the law of identity, the law of non-contradiction, or the law of excluded middle. We challenge them for they are based on the picture of easy separability of things. On the contrary, we attempt to define something which, in his 2008 Brno lecture, Scott L. Pratt called – examining the social dimensions of Peirce's logic – "boundary identities". Of course, we use the laws of logic; nonetheless, we refuse to see means for determining fixed reality in them. We use them as the useful instruments for distinguishing aspects of continuities that we need in order to behave intelligently, which means in Deweyan terms the wording to solve problems. For people of the first picture we are therefore irrational and they label us by the mocking tag "post-thinkers".

If we want to understand Dewey, his philosophy of education, or the general pragmatist's position appropriately, we should employ our imagination and do our best to fancy the second picture and the life that we could behold if we could see the world from the second picture's point of view.

3. The unifying effort of the 1890s

Dewey's transition from the University of Michigan to the University of Chicago intensifies his effort of finding the way out of Hegelian idealism. He wanted to preserve the Hegelian accent on the unity of the whole existence and at the same time, to clear away the dichotomy between the absolute and the partial consciousness or – in Dewey's vocabulary from his Hegelian phase – between the universal and the individual self (for this see for example ew.1.142). Up to that time, his effort had been uncertain; however, from 1894 further he wrote and published the series of articles in which he found his voice. As Jay Martin notices

in *The Education of John Dewey*, a thread that keeps the articles together was “a concept of logic as a theory of inquiry” (Martin, 187).

The psychological article, *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (ew.5.97–110), published in 1896, outlined the new unifying conception of the mind. In the article *Interest in Relation to Training of the Will* (1896) (ew.5.114–151), he offered the same unifying principle for education. This hunger for a complete picture is what we should esteem for most of all, since the result of the hunger shed light on our reality in the way, which is appropriate to the time of “reflexive modernity” being depicted by contemporary sociologists like Ulrich Beck, Roland Robertson and others. The instrument Dewey gave us to our disposal for an analytical grasp of our world has great paradoxical potency. On the one side, his depiction of experience – or precisely the net of relations or of transactions – we can and should see as total unity. On the other side, the whole paradoxically enables us to see unlimited variabilities.

In the first of the mentioned articles, Dewey tries to set the classical dualisms of sensations and ideas or of “peripheral and central structures and functions” or “stimulus and response” aside and tries to replace them with the picture of “psychical unity” of the mind that emerges in the *logical consequence of actions*. In this picture the mind is a “circuit of conjoint activities” (as he called it later in his *Democracy and Education* – see mw.9.334) that has its meaning in it’s unity. He calls the circuit “the reflex arc” or “the adjustive arc” and in this circuit, he sees the process of interchanges between organism and environment that later he will term transactions (see first of all lw.12.370–372). Thanks to these transactions, an individual can not only start to act and think, but can find the appropriate answer or intelligent behavior. To say in other words, Dewey tried to see the human being and its surroundings as two aspects of one “reality” and thus to see our traditional effort dividing what affects us and what we do with these affections as a completely false approach.

He proceeds in the second article with the same surprising manner. In the theories of education of that time, he finds emphasis either on interests or on attention, in another version – either on emotional or on intellectual life. He sees this as a serious misunderstanding of the child’s nature. Again, interests are closely related with emotions, those with attention that are closely related to intellectual powers – everything is only an aspect that create a unified organic choice of a whole organism, and thus this organism is tightly in contact with its environment because the environment is the source of emerging interests, emotions, and needs to focus attention and to think. What is important in fact is the growth of an organism. If we transpose this post-Darwinian picture into education, we can understand Dewey much more easily when he asserts that a child has an inner need to develop, to realize its intrinsic potential in an extrinsic arena of the classroom (cf. ew.5145). Again, the need does not lead a child to wholly individualistic goals because developments are to be finished just in society. To put it in a slogan, Dewey was not *child*-centered, but *society*-centered. (Martin, 199)

To trace this fierce urge for finding unity back to its roots, we should look back as far as 1894. Starting this year, Dewey was a frequent guest of Jane Addams’ and Ellen Gates Starr’s Hull House (see for example Addams, 139) – the well-known settlement house where both of the founders tried to create a new transnational space. Here, people could develop, transform and reconstruct their identities to be able to live in a multinational, fast city as Chicago was at that time. Dewey gave many of his lectures there (as well as Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, by the way). In one of his personal discourses with Jane Addams taking place in the first year of their acquaintance, he found a new way to reconstruct his overly theoretical and – maybe overly rationalistic – Hegelian background. Speaking about antagonism, Miss Addams said: “*Antagonism never lies in the objective differences, which they grow into unity if left alone, but arise when a person mixes into reality his own personal reactions...*” After a short exchange, in which

Dewey defended the classical Hegelian belief that conflicts are a necessary stage that should be reconciled into unity, he said: “*But tension itself is central in life: it exists in all natural forces and growth.*” Addams reacted: “*Of course, there is stress in action, but mere choosing is an entirely different thing from the unity of reality.*”

According to his own words, preserved in his letter to his wife Alice, he was perplexed. However, the next day he in another letter to Alice, he wrote: “*I have seen that I have always been interpreting the... dialectic wrong end up – the unity as the reconciliation of opposites, instead of the opposites as the unity in its growth, and thus translated physical tensions into a moral thing.*” (Cited according to Marin, 164–166) That day he wrote to Addams: “*I wish to take back what I said the other night. Not only is actual antagonizing bad, but the assumption that there is or may be antagonism is bad... I am glad that I found this out before I began start to talk on social psychology.*” (Cited according to Menand, 314)

This might be the moment when Dewey crossed the Hegelian boundaries to experimentalism and thus reached what his inestimable contribution to pragmatism is. There is a great possible unity of transactions that creates the individual and his / her / its environment. Obstacles, antagonisms, pains etc. are something what we should remove by intelligent behavior coming from a natural inclination to grow. Of course, this is a nice picture. It could be another myth. However, I have not found a better one yet. This myth is not pastel kitsch. Nobody who lives from this picture thinks that everything turns out well. As Dewey during all his live, we have to fight for a better future, clear away the obstacles and make room for our growth and the growth of others.

This picture is much more promising for me than the picture of Richard Rorty. Of course, Rorty's picture shares many features with Dewey's, though in Rorty case social hope is built on the utopians' idea of existence. Literate people could suggest a better future because they have read many interesting book and

spoken with many different people (cf. Rorty, 1999). In this aspect also, Rorty relies on language and linguistic communication too strongly. On the contrary, Dewey's hope lies much deeper, already in a biological (or pseudo-biological) level – in the level of instincts, predispositions and reactions. Linguistic communication, writing and reading are only the peak of the process by which an organism changes itself or its environment in order to grow. In Dewey's hope, small babies as well as mentally weakened people could be part of this democratic process of growth. In a similar manner, a laborer that has read only one book in his life and has been working in a factory during all his adult days could inspire me if he does an unexpected move in a certain situation and this move could then be transformed into an intelligent behavior that will clear away some obstacles. Many theorists underestimate this basis and unconsciously created what I call the "democracy of intellectuals". The (pseudo-)biological level of hope found its strong articulation in Dewey's theory of education.

4. Dewey's educational theory

In his *Democracy and Education*, Dewey wrote:

"If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-man, philosophy could be defined as the general theory of education..."
(MW:9.58)

In the first chapter of the book, Dewey defines education as the whole life-span process that grows up from instincts and continues into complex strategy by the help of which an organism adjusts itself to the biological and the social environment thanks to the techniques of transformation of itself or of the surroundings. The chapter bears the impressive title "Education as Necessity of Life". After centuries, Dewey returned philosophy into the center of events in this

manner. Philosophy is, in his mind, not the Queen that looks down at sciences and controls their researches and their products. On the contrary, it penetrates the whole life – as it had done from time immemorial until its transformation into a specialized discipline without its own professional field. Philosophy as education is not a technical discipline that will die because of its distance from real life. It is an inseparable aspect of life (cf. mw: 9.4–7).

What is important in the education of youth is important for adults on the one hand and for all lower organisms on the other. In this respect, there is the philogenetic as well as the ontogenetic continuity there. The development does not take place by the direct conveyance of beliefs, emotions, and knowledge, but indirectly through the intermediary of the environment. (Cf. mw: 9.26) This means that besides the fact that education needs respect for surroundings, the organism can not be separate from its environment without stopping prosperity or dying. Not words, not instructions, not language games without the form of life, but transactions with the environment can force us to learn something, to fix what is useful and lead us to our goals, and to avoid things and habits that multiply problems and obstacles in the way of growth.

Transactions between the organism and its environment are motors of its growth and thus are the base not only for this theory of education, but also for all of Dewey's philosophy in general. Transactions precede the differentiation of the organism and the environment. Again, we could see that there are relations but there are not separate things. We could note at this moment that communication is a nice example of relationality. I would gladly agree with the person if he or she does not only do linguistic communication in the mind. Identifying communication as linguistic communication might be the reason why Dewey used the term "interchange" instead of the term "communication" and from *Expereince and Nature* on the term "transactions". If we put too much emphasis on linguistic communication, we separate the mute from the speaking, the unconscious from what is imbued by awareness, instincts and habits from intelligence. Thus, we

would separate what Dewey – being inspired by the best of Darwin – links together.

Dewey's originality lies just in his effort to see the continuity of all. In educational theory, his fundamental rule expresses this effort when Dewey says: educators have to exercise an influence on their pupils or students through arranging the environment. In this relation, James Garrison wrote:

"Many 'progressive' educators have erroneously claimed that Dewey demanded a 'student-centered' education. In his view, however, the act of teaching must coordinate teacher, student and subject matter."

(Garrison, 69)

And Dewey says directly in his *Democracy and Education*:

"Method means that arrangement of subject matter which makes it most effective in use. Never is method something outside of the material... Method is the effective direction of subject matter to desired results..."

(mw: 9.172)

I will not continue in this educationalist direction. What I want to show here by these citations is Dewey's persistent effort to hold together what our tradition sees as separated in principle. Humans, bodies, things, environment, subject matter, growth, educators and students are not separated things. Dewey's message is: there is one thing and it has thousands and millions aspects, features. It is not easy to adopt this picture and alter the traditional one by it. I could document it by the misunderstandings of Dewey in my country. In the first third of the 20th century, some Czech translations of Dewey's books on education appeared because John Dewey was the favorite among Czech educational theorists. Unfortunately, not among Czech philosophers – with the rare exception of Karel Čapek whose

dissertation theses about pragmatism is one of the best introductions to pragmatic thinking that I have ever read. Nonetheless, Čapek became writer and his philosophical knowledge influenced the Czechs only minimally. That might be the reason why no one of Czech educators who were interested in Dewey's theory understood his philosophy of education well, and Dewey's educational theory therefore became later the synonym of a one-sided child-centered approach and thus was abandoned as being too idealistic and inapplicable in the real life.

I understand that it might be hard to adopt this picture because it sounds as a new type of mysticism. It is mysticism, in a sense, but if we take it pragmatically we can see how practical this mysticism is and how many useful applications it could bring.

5. Rorty on Education

In some parts of his work, Rorty wrote on education. For example, the last book of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty, 1980) is devoted to this subject. Here, Rorty expressed his notion of edifying philosophy. He meant education that philosophy could provide us after purifying itself from a foolish dream about its role as the Queen of sciences. This is the nice part and I regret that Rorty did not develop this conception in length throughout his further books. On the other hand, it is another level – more specific – than which Dewey had in mind in the passages we cited above.

The process of self-creation that began to be his central idea from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Rorty, 1989) could be interpreted also as an educational theme. Nonetheless, I do not see the same unifying aspiration as in Dewey's effort. Moreover, in this idea I see a manifestation of Rorty's un-pragmatic position. In Rorty's system, we should think about self-creation only in the background of the private sphere. Since self-creation could be harmful for other fellow-citizens, we should practice it only in the private sphere. I read the relation between self-creation and the private sphere as a display of Rorty's self-

despair. It looks like as if he told us: this is the only way to grow and not to hurt others – the strict separation of our lives between the two almost impermeable spheres. Not only that this move negates some of our relations to others and to the environment, it splits our selves as well. We can speak in this way about the public Rorty and the private Rorty, the public Šíp and the private Šíp. Dewey's conception of community and its growth as a growth of all its parts is imbued by the Rortyan positive utopia much more than Rorty's thoughts themselves. (For this see James Campbell's condense but highly informative text: *Dewey's Conception of Community* – Campbell, 23–42.)

Still, I have found the article on education in Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope*. It bears the title *Education as Socialization and as Individualization* (Rorty, 1999, 114–126). It has the characteristical features of Rorty's texts. At first glance, it seems to be written in an easy manner, but in fact the impressive and tricky style through which Rorty can express complicated reality in perfect, understandable order is there, operating.

I will attempt to outline the argumentative skeleton of the text now. It starts with the depiction of debates on education that took place a short time before in American journals and some then-recent books. Rorty transposes the debates in a more simple frame when he portrays the quarrel as the quarrel between the American left and the American right. The left sees the problem of national education in the fact that it does not provide American students with the sufficient room to pursue their true selves. The right thinks that the problem lays in the fact that education does not follow the truth (the true meanings, the true values, and the true beauty). Rorty then summarizes it by saying that there is a problem in these two points of view. Both are wrong because they operate on the truth–freedom scale. The right believes that we need to reach the truth and then we get to the true freedom, the left believes that we need more freedom to reach the truth, in this case the true self. But, according to Rorty, there are no true selves as well as there is no truth independent of communication among humans.

This figure that simplifies complex reality into a line where the extremes represent the bad beliefs and the middle represent the right, Rorty's position is not surprising in his text. He uses it many times in that period. (Rorty wrote this educational text in 1989.) In *Trotsky and Wild Orchids* he uses the same division between the rightist and leftist critics of his views (see Rorty 1999, 3–7). In *Contingency*, he uses the line in a way which says that Foucault represents the ironist, who did not want to be liberal enough, and on the contrary, Habermas represents the liberal that is not able to be ironic, and Rorty represents the right middle (cf. Rorty 1989, 63–68).

Rorty constructs this similar middle position in the educational text. He argues that both did not catch the apparent fact that education covers two processes – socialization and individualization. We need both, he says. The right could have its share of truth when it asserts that we must instruct our students, but only in elementary and high schools. And the left could have its share of truth when it asserts that education should set students free in their thinking, but before that the students should be socialized and that is the reason why individualization should begin in colleges and not in elementary and high schools.

6. Putting Dewey first

Through the whole text, Rorty calls for Dewey's thoughts. In the part where he paradoxically defended "the pilling up of information", Rorty writes the next lines that moved me:

"But I doubt that it ever occurred to Dewey that a day would come when students could graduate from an American high school not knowing who came first, Plato or Shakespeare, Napoleon or Lincoln, Frederick Douglas or Martin Luther King, Jr."

(Rorty, 1999, 121)

The lines move me because I am a former high school teacher and I often suffered from a deep mental pain when “A” levels students of my colleagues did not know anything about Plato, or about the beginning of WWI, or about the transition from traditional to modern society. I suffered much more when I moved on to teach at university and I realized that some of university students did not know what came first, Antiquity or the Middle Ages, the Bronze Age or the Early Modern Period. With this bitter memory, I started again to put Rorty first before Dewey.

In the end, I realized that I had started to think in the way of people obsessed by the picture of the separate things. I am afraid that we can not divorce socialization from individualization according to division into lower and higher education so easily and then mechanically pile up youngsters by information. The right Deweyan answer is:

- during all his or her life, everybody passes through the continual process of becoming a full-fledged human being, which's aspects are, among others, socialization and individualization;
- emphasis on socialization or on individualization are moveable according to the situation;
- movable both in axis, in the individual life and in the period; sometimes deep individualization arrives before entering the college because the young person meets something for which society did not prepare him or her, sometimes adults have to pass through hard re-socialization because the world suddenly and completely changes.

To sum up, we can say that just because we are in a constant process of socialization (as well as our students) we should change our approaches when our familiar world is changing rapidly. Our task is not the question of how to pile up the young by information and in what age we should do it, but to think how we could change the environment of our students in a way so they are able to see

importance in things, names, and events as we do. If we will not be able to find this track our students will become estranged from us as well as the generation of Sixties became estranged with the generation of their parents.

In relations to this possibility, I am afraid that the distance would be much more enormous because we are starting to pass through a deep global change of the world. Our world is changing from the world of modern national state to the world of risky society with a small room for national feelings and traditional identities. In this context, Dewey's unifying model fills us with a more hopeful vision than Rorty's.

References:

- Addams, J. *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- Campbell, J. Dewey's Conception of Community. In: Hickman, L. A. *Reading Dewey: Interpretation for Postmodern Generation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998, pp. 23–42.
- Dewey, J. *The Collective Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, The Electronic Edition. Hickman, L. A. (ed.). Charlottesville, Virginia: Intelelex Corp. 1996.
- Garrison, J. W. John Dewey's Philosophy as Education. In: Hickman, L. A. *Reading Dewey: Interpretation for Postmodern Generation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998, pp. 62–81.
- Hickman, L. A. *Reading Dewey: Interpretation for Postmodern Generation*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Martin, J. *The Education of John Dewey*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

- Menand, L. *The Metaphysical Club, A story of Ideas in America*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- Rorty, R. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Rorty, R. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Rorty, R. *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Šíp, R. The John Dewey's Tentative Metaphysics – The Occidental Underground. In: AMERICANA, vol. III, no. 2, Fall 2007 [on-line] [cited 2010 03 19]: <http://americanajournal.hu/vol3no2/sip>
- Šíp, R. Richard Rorty: Pragmatismus mezi jazykem a zkušeností [Pragmatism between Experience and Language]. Brno: Paido, 2008.