

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Principles of Instrumental Logic: John Dewey's Lectures in Ethics and Political Ethics, 1895-1896 by Donald F. Koch

Review by: Jennifer Welchman

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*Principles of Instrumental Logic: John Dewey's Lectures
in Ethics and Political Ethics, 1895-1896*

Donald F. Koch, editor

Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998

192 pp. + xv.

In this latest collection of John Dewey's lectures, Koch continues his valuable work of making Dewey's early writings more widely available to students and scholars interested in tracing Dewey's progress from his early idealist philosophy through to the pragmatic instrumentalism for which he is best known. This audience should beware, however, that the title almost certainly promises more than the volume actually offers.

In the mid-1890's, Dewey apparently agreed to produce a logic text, *Principles of Instrumental Logic*, for the Library of Philosophy series under the general editorship of fellow idealist, J.H. Muirhead. This book was never published, nor it seems was a manuscript of the work ever completed. What the book might have looked like has remained a mystery — one which Koch suggests may be solved by these lectures. Because the content of these lectures, composed around the time Dewey should have been working on *Principles of Instrumental Logic*, seems usually philosophically dense, Koch speculates that:

One possibility regarding the Logic of Ethics lectures (and perhaps the lectures on Political Ethics as well) is that Dewey was reading from or paraphrasing another of his works in the logic of inquiry. Perhaps he was reading to the class in order to provide subject matter for discussion ...[*Principles of Instrumental Logic*] was never published, and the title has been assigned to these lectures. (p. x)

Do these lectures contain some or all of whatever Dewey had prepared for the unfinished *Principles of Instrumental Logic*? It is difficult to say since we know so little about the Jane. Jane Dewey's biography mentions the text briefly only to report that

Perhaps an echo of the idea is found in Dewey's later "instrumentalism," but at the time the title was submitted it meant a theory of thought viewed as the means or instrumentality of *attaining* knowledge, as distinguished from the theory of truths about the structure of the universe of which reason was in possession, or "real" logic.¹

That is, Dewey proposed to write an idealist logic explaining how human

thought constructs human knowledge of the human world, rather than a logic explaining how the absolute mind's constitutive thought constructs reality and which human thought must reproduce or agree to count as 'knowledge'. Thus the text would have been the fourth product of Dewey's personal project to provide the public with up-to-date idealist alternatives to the empiricist and intuitionist texts books then on the market, a project which had already resulted in publication of *Psychology*, and *Outlines of a Theory of Ethics* (subsequently revised by *The Study of Ethics: a Syllabus*).

If this is correct the volume would have covered the same sorts of topics other introductory logic texts covered: including discussion of basic issues in epistemology, together with some discussion of deductive and inductive logic. Yet we find little of this sort of material in Dewey's Lectures on the Logic of Ethics and none at all in his Lectures on Political Ethics.

According to the first of Dewey's 1895 lectures,

The logic of ethics is an examination of the method and not of the methods of ethics. Instead of asking what an ethical ideal is, we ask what an ideal itself is. This is a logical and not an ethical inquiry. The same is true of the concept of god; also with the idea of law. Back of the ethical inquiry is the inquiry into the nature of judgment. (p. 31)

In contemporary terms, what Dewey was telling his students was that the course would focus on problems of meta-ethics, rather than problems in normative ethical theory — a course Dewey might in earlier years have called a course in the metaphysics of ethics, following Kant and other idealist moralists who held that critical methods required were those of metaphysics and not the inductive natural sciences. But in 1889, Dewey rejected this characterization of philosophical criticism, arguing that as the subject matter was human mental activity, philosophical critique was better conceived as a sort of critical psychology. Since he proposed to focus on the categories and concepts that determined moral judgment, and not the full range of normative experience, "logic" was an appropriate Deweyan label for the course.

Still the lectures provide some clues to Dewey's thinking about judgment in this period — clues which may help to explain why his projected *Logic* never got off the ground. Contra Koch, a notable feature of these lectures is that they do *not* define judgment in terms of a theory of inquiry as Dewey's later works might have led us to expect. Judgment is a process, Dewey tells his audience, in which "fact or existence is the subject of the judgment and the idea or meaning is the predicate of the judgment. Or psychologically, presentation or percept is the subject and concept or idea is the predicate or the judgment"(p. 38). The copula, Dewey says, "asserts the objective unity of these two factors while the two factors

themselves seem to be mutually exclusive”(p. 43). The process ends with realization: “the realization is the copula which has absorbed into itself both subject and predicate (p. 45). That is, judgment is the process of responding to a Hegelian contradiction between antithetical ideas which results in the realization of an underlying unity.

Dewey’s Lectures on Political Ethics appear to confirm that in his lectures at least, Dewey continued to see the world in predominantly neo-Hegelian terms. Dewey argues that the individual is the “organ” of society, which he describes as a “higher organism than the individual,” possessing “a moral definite value”(p. 143). Society has its own social consciousness and “social sensorium” by which it reacts to stimuli and integrates the activities of its “organs.” Thus, for example, the determination of supply and demand is not to be seen as resulting from competition between independent individuals but rather “because of the social sensorium ... the individual controls his manufacture through feeling the demand of the community” (p. 168). Sovereignty means “the value of an individual does not attach to it as an individual but because of its interpretation in the social organism”(p. 154). And since the individual is an organ of society, the social organism, conflicts between individual and group interests are impossible. Thus phenomena such as crime are not simply to be interpreted as assertions of individual against group interests, but rather “crime means a return to a previous order of society unmediated with present conditions”(p. 159).

To what extent these 1896 lectures reflect Dewey’s actual views is however unclear. The lectures offer a running critique of duelling theories, especially those of Spenser and Green. It is often unclear whether criticisms discussed are meant to be attributed to these opponents or are offered as Dewey’s own. But the overall idealist tenor of these and the preceding lectures suggest that Dewey was still trying to reform idealist philosophy rather than replace it with anything markedly different. As we now know Dewey was soon to decide that idealism was too deeply flawed to be worth saving; thus his failure to complete what in 1896 must still have been an essentially idealist text is readily comprehensible.

Thus taken all in all, these lectures raise more questions than they answer about what Dewey’s *Principles of Instrumental Logic* might have looked like. But Koch is to be commended for making it possible for us to ask them.

University of Alberta

Jennifer Welchman

NOTES

1. Jane Dewey, “Biography of John Dewey,” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1939) 18.