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Kinds of Pragmatism

Albert Borgmann

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It is hard to appreciate now what a liberating and invigorating force John Dewey's philosophy must have been. He did away with imperious dichotomies and absolutes, reconnected philosophy with the sciences, confronted technological revolutions, attended to the perils and hopes of ordinary people, and pioneered methods that were dedicated to openness, concreteness, and flexibility.

Larry Hickman, in *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture* (2001) and elsewhere, has vigorously and untiringly brought Dewey's achievements to his readers' attention, and he has made a persuasive case for the claim that Dewey is the great predecessor of the kind of work that is grouped around the Society for Philosophy and Technology. Hickman, moreover, has in his own work exhibited many of the Deweyan virtues and has articulated sharply a philosophy of technology that in Dewey's work is distributed among the numerous concerns Dewey had. Hickman in fact has argued plausibly that the core and coherence of Dewey's writings can be spelled out as a philosophy of technology.

Dewey has had no direct influence on my thinking about technology, and yet I too would acknowledge him as a forerunner. In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1988 [1922], pp. 86-87, 185-188), his brilliant sketches of how industrial technology has blighted work and the relation of production to consumption have captured much of what has distressed me about technology. His unflagging attention to technology in *The Public and Its Problems* (1954 [1927], pp. 30, 44, 98, 108, 114, 116, 129, 141, 144, 165, 217) prefigures my conviction that modern technology is the paradigmatic force in contemporary society and culture. Just as important, Dewey's vision of the illuminating and centering force of the arts in *Human Nature* (1988, pp. 110-113) and in the last chapter of *Art and Experience* (1958 [1934], pp. 326-349) reveal some of the focal points for what I take to be a constructive reform of technology.

Finally those of us who have learned from Martin Heidegger and are sometimes tagged with his name should confess to guru envy. Dewey was a thoroughly fair and decent man who on almost any issue said the reasonable and honorable thing. He never put on airs and conducted himself with exemplary good judgment in his public and political engagements. Heidegger, to the contrary, though he had his genuinely convivial and congenial sides, failed in the most distressing ways the moral tests that destiny sent his way, and he had an overweening notion of the office of philosophy and of himself as a thinker. His writings are fertile hunting grounds for those who are looking for wrong-headed and indefensible dicta.

Why then is it that Heidegger has left so much stronger an impression on philosophers than Dewey has? If you consult the Internet by way of a general search engine, you find, as you would expect, that Dewey is much more prominent than Heidegger in the public awareness of this country. But, if you checked the *Philosopher's Index* on 22 July 2002 about the last thirty years (1972-2001), you found 1,321 references to Dewey and 4,457 for Heidegger.

How is this to be explained? There might well be dubious reasons why philosophers are drawn to Heidegger. His difficult and his obscure writings enable lesser minds to claim membership in an elite that is elevated above the rationalism and logic chopping of mainstream philosophers. But this cannot be the whole explanation. Jacques Derrida obliges obscurantism even more than Heidegger, and there are only about as many references to him (1,451) as to Dewey. There must be a difference more important than that between Dewey's clarity and benevolence and Heidegger's difficulty and imperiousness.

My knowledge of Dewey is very limited, but let me venture this conjecture. Though striking parallels can be found between Dewey's and Heidegger's views of technology and art, Dewey's important insights are submerged in a wealth of observations that are interesting in their own right but tend to blur the contours of his critique of modern technology. Dewey's flexible and variable discourse further disguises the identity and character of the phenomena that concern him. Heidegger throughout his career was famously concerned to center his thinking in memorable sentences and words. Anyone familiar with Heidegger can tell you on the spot that his discussion of technology pivots on the notion of the *Gestell*-the framework of technology, and that his vision of a better world revolves about the *Geviert*-the fourfold world of centering things. The Deweyan counterparts to these points would have to be made much more discursively and with many qualifications.

But again, more than a difference of discourse is at issue here. Though Dewey's critique of philosophies is memorably pointed and to the point, his critique of modern culture is much less so, and it is often hard to distinguish from mainstream liberal thinking-in part, perhaps, because liberals have learned from Dewey. He is hardly more impressive when he talks about what centers life and makes it worth living. Sometimes he (1958, p. 326) employs the entirely apt term "consummation" to locate the *telos* of the good life. But he uses it in passing, and more often he (1988, pp. 19, 112, 145, 146, 147, 155, 183) vaguely gestures at the ends of life via the cautious notion of "meaning."

I say all this knowing well that I have read but a small fraction of Dewey's writings. Whatever the shortcomings of the preceding remarks, they can serve as a point of departure for further reflections on Hickman's book. Hickman clearly improves on Dewey when it comes to terminological clarity and precision. He makes an interesting and original distinction between technique and technology and never lets you forget what exactly he means by technology. In addition he ties the various strands of Dewey's parlances tightly to his own terminology.

Clarity and precision, however, come at the price of flattening Dewey's discussion of technology. I do not dispute Hickman's formal definition (first presented on p. 12), nor would I deny that the definition captures Dewey's basic sense of how we often do and always should appropriate the world about us. What gets effaced, however, in this wide conception of technology, is Dewey's more specific use of "technology" and "technological" when he employs these vocables to capture and criticize a cultural force-an approach that is much closer to, say, [Langdon Winner's \(1977, 1986\)](#) conception of technology as a form of life than to Hickman's formal definition.

Hickman seems to endorse Winner's vision of technology in his introduction where he speaks of "technology as our culture" (p. 3). Yet his formal definition implies at best a wide and uncritical outline of our culture. To be sure, determinism and essentialism sometimes bedevil attempts at painting a vivid and critical picture of contemporary society. But [Andrew Feenberg \(1991\)](#) has shown how we can have the best of two worlds-strong criticism and empirical adequacy.

Has Hickman unwittingly become hostage to his broad, if precisely worded, definition of technology? He is too vigorous and trenchant a thinker to let that happen. The negative answer forces me, however, to acknowledge and explain the one shortcoming I see in Hickman's position. He has refined and fortified his view of pragmatism to the point where he not only makes it look impenetrable to criticism and unsurpassable to competing views, but where it also is in danger of losing its purchase on the problems and possible improvements of the technological culture.

Not that Hickman is entirely uncritical of contemporary society. He rightly criticizes "straight-line instrumentalism" for its heedlessness, and he joins in the standard liberal criticisms of the capitalist establishment (e.g., on pp. 33 and 159). But he pays little attention to the particular cultural conditions of today and dismisses criticisms that do so. Thus he rejects the thesis that the decline of traditional literacy and live performances and the rise of television and recorded music present a cultural and broadly moral problem. He then considers a concession to the critics who subscribe to that thesis (I am one of them):

It might be objected that I have been unfair. Perhaps the view I am opposing asserts no more than that people spend too much time going to the movies, watching television, listening to recorded music, and playing video games-and not enough time reading books, writing essays, and making their own music (p. 120).

Television watching is of course the outstanding issue here, and its primary social consequence is in fact what may be called its "displacement effect" ([Borgmann, 1984](#), p. 141). It is a widely discussed and crucial issue of contemporary culture (see [Putnam, 2000](#); [Kubey and Csikszentmihaly, 2002](#); and [Winn, 2002](#).) But rather than joining the debate, Hickman redirects the argument:

But the relative amount of time spent doing these things is not the central concern of the text-type determinists. What alarms them is that people go to films or watch television or listen to recorded music *at all* (p. 120).

Even if someone were silly enough to hold this view, the way people spend their time is one of the telling phenomena of

contemporary culture (see [Robinson and Godbey, 1997](#)). Hickman instead proposes an experimental approach to the uses of media. I entirely agree on the need for exploration and experiments. But should we not first consider the results of the experiment our society has conducted with television for half a century now?

Redirection from important issues is a move Hickman makes more than once. Consider his line of argument in the following:

That there is much that is dreary on television and on film and on audio recordings is beyond dispute. There is also much that is dreary in print. That commercial television is used by some as a refuge from thought, only a fool would wish to deny. But it is also beyond denial that there are books—even some written by philosophers—that function in the same way (p. 122).

It is undeniable, to be sure. But bringing up this undeniable fact deflects us from the more interesting and troubling fact that on average people in the United States spend about sixteen times as much time on watching television as they spend on reading books ([Robinson and Godbey, 1997](#), p. 323).

Hickman's pragmatic definition of technology is weak not only when it comes to the critique of contemporary culture, but also as regards norms for reform. Max Horkheimer criticized Dewey on the latter point by accusing him, as Hickman puts it, "of preoccupation with means at the expense of ends" ([Hickman, 2001](#), p. 72). Here again Hickman redirects the argument about the status of ends in social theory to the rejection of ends as metaphysical essences. Even if Horkheimer thought of ends or norms in this way, the question whether social science can afford to neglect norms is still with us.

Hickman is concerned to establish the superiority of his pragmatic version of technology by showing that no one can possibly have what he does not have—strong criticisms or strong norms. The rejection of firm norms, it must be stressed, is more than an ad hoc move designed to make productive pragmatism triumph. It is an essential part of Hickman's version of pragmatism. For Hickman "[n]either ends nor means are privileged" (p. 66). Our ideals or values call for continual "testing" and "evaluation," they need to be "modified to accommodate the situation" that presents itself (p. 145). Here too, it seems to me, Hickman has rendered Dewey's view more precise and narrower as well. Be that as it may, Hickman's position cannot be right. If ends are as variable and adaptable as means, then the critics whom Hickman cites as complaining that productive pragmatism "is too weak to provide adequate guidance for difficult decisions" are right (p. 47). In fact, absent firm values or norms, there is no guidance at all.

To put the point differently, if values are testable, then there must be strategic or higher-order values that are firm and tell us whether our tactical or first-order values that are being tested at the moment will serve as effective means for the strategic ends. (This is an unresolved and longstanding issue between Hickman and me; see my [1992](#), pp. 345-347.) As an example of a proper pragmatist, Hickman presents the social activist Randy Shaw who:

encouraged his clients to experiment with their cherished value of maintaining the status quo, namely, preventing the hotel development that threatened their neighborhood. In other words, he encouraged his clients to treat their goals as ends-in-view instead of intractable ideals (p. 145).

But surely he so encouraged them because greater flexibility would serve a higher goal—"to include a fragile segment of the citizenry in the political process," as Hickman himself puts it (p. 144). Is this overarching goal also testable for Shaw? Well, he might ask himself, Does that goal help me to make a name for myself? But then prestige or reputation is the still higher strategic goal.

To be fair to Hickman, there is good sense in Dewey's notions of ends-in-view, in thinking of a goal as a hypothesis, and in the recommendation to begin with the situation one is in and to adjust one's goal to the circumstances. But while Dewey's flexibility and, perhaps, imprecision seem reasonable or at least acceptable, Hickman's radicalization of the issue achieves clarity at the cost of normative aimlessness.

Invariably, Hickman finds at the core of strong criticisms or proposals the ghosts of metaphysical essences. In the presently popular philosophical discourse, essentialism is meant to be the oppressive imposition of a particular view on the diversity of the real world. "Metaphysical" essentialism makes the oppression worse by claiming timeless, universal, and necessary status for the reigning view. Obviously the strict alternative to this position is the radically open and experimental attitude Hickman has so vigorously championed. There is, however, a reasonable third possibility, one that has been impressively set out by Charles Taylor (1992a, 1992b, 1994). He thinks that norms grow out of particular historical situations and yet have a rightful claim on our allegiance.

The determinism Hickman so often detects in alleged essentialism or, more broadly, in strong criticisms of technological phenomena is unobjectionable and empirically evident if we take a more subtle view of how people conduct and determine their lives. There is in fact a kind of determinism when someone comes home from work, drained and tired, and drifts from refrigerator via the microwave to the couch and the remote control and thus fails to cook a dinner, gather the family around the table, and have the evening end with readings on all sides, interspersed with substantial conversation. The fulcrum of freedom does not lie on the threshold of one's home, but rather in all the fundamental decisions we have made individually and

collectively when we gave our world the shape it now has. What determinism there is at the surface is soft and defeasible as exceptions to the typical behavior show. The issue is complex, to be sure, but it is not featureless. It exhibits historically evolved patterns that are subject to moral analysis. Such historical and normative sensitivity is needed for a fruitful conversation with Dewey. In a memorable passage, Hickman shows that the technological revolutions Dewey experienced as a youth and a young man were so radical that subsequent technological developments look like mere refinements (pp. 44-45). A new world took shape and was sorely tested by economic, social, and military crises. Dewey responded admirably as far as my limited knowledge goes.

As Feenberg (see [Feenberg, 1991](#)) has pointed out, however, our situation is not Dewey's. It seems fashionable at the moment to liken our time to the gilded age ([Putnam, 2000](#), pp. 367-401; contrast with [Hickman, 2001](#), pp. 83-84). But today the democratic and technological establishment is so much more solid, entrenched, and of demonstrable adaptability and resilience. The problems of the technological society are more subtle and concealed today, setting aside the widely acknowledged and discussed issues of justice and the environment.

There appears to be little historical sensitivity in Hickman's pragmatism. His definition of technology—the invention, development, and cognitive deployment of tools and other artifacts, brought to bear on raw materials and intermediate stock parts, with a view to the resolution of perceived problems—betrays no particular attunement to the specific ailments and possibilities of today's technology. The universal tenor of the definition is given an air of necessity and supremacy most emphatically in sections III-V of chapter nine where Hickman has the major twentieth century and contemporary philosophies pass review only to find that none is equal to pragmatism. Feenberg is praised for coming closer to the pragmatic ideal, but Feenberg's pleasure, understandably, is not entirely unalloyed. Walter Benjamin's "brilliant analyses" are acknowledged, yet "his thesis remains thin, with little to say about the broader themes of reforming technological culture" (p. 167). Horkheimer is pessimistic, Marcuse is utopian, there are "unresolved splits" in Habermas's thinking, Winner's approach is confined to "small-scale Jeffersonian-type efforts" (pp. 168 and 170). Even [Feenberg \(1991\)](#) finally falls short. His proposals:

are also planks in the Deweyan platform for the reconstruction of technological culture, but of course Dewey succeeded in nailing them down long before the emergence of the critical theorists, to say nothing of Feenberg's "updating" or reform of their positions (p. 178).

Having raised the stakes for a successful reform of technology throughout chapter nine by dispatching one competitor after another, Hickman in chapter ten proposes to show how pragmatism will deal with "The Next Technological Revolution." I think it is fair to say that the result is disappointing. We are once more told how not to proceed; we are given very broad instrumental and procedural instructions; and we are reminded that the task is hard.

It is common among philosophers to bring one's position into relief against the supposed deficiencies of rival views. I have certainly engaged in that practice. Hickman is more zealous than most in this regard though his fervor is largely redeemed by his devotion to a great American thinker. Still a little more pragmatism is perhaps called for, the kind of pragmatism [Andrew Light and Eric Katz \(1996\)](#), especially pp. 1-18) have proposed as an antidote to the internecine squabbles in environmental ethics. Such pragmatism would recognize that there has been something like specialization and a division of labor among the philosophers who have met and worked with one another under the aegis of the Society for Philosophy and Technology.

To illustrate the point, selectively and summarily, Hubert Dreyfus is the great critic of artificial intelligence and the most important thinker on the place of practice in philosophy and culture. Paul Durbin (along with Carl Mitcham) has provided the social and scholarly basis for much of our work, and he has been foremost in exemplifying and calling for the kind of philosophy that is pragmatically and practically engaged in promoting social justice. Andrew Feenberg has inherited the Frankfurt School's keen sense for the connection between culture and politics, and he has employed it in his original description of secondary instrumentation. Larry Hickman, of course, has given our work an impressive and indigenous backdrop in Dewey's pragmatism. Don Ihde has done of postmodern diversity. Carl Mitcham, the cofounder and preeminent historian of the field, has more than anyone ventured into the area of technology and religion and technology and ethics. Langdon Winner, finally, is perhaps the most elegant and lucid critic and writer on "technology as a form of life," and he is certainly the most widely known and influential philosopher among us. A new generation of scholars is coming up as I write.

Given such wide accomplishments, why has there not been a reform of technology? One of the great virtues of Hickman's book is its persistent sense of urgency, well captured in the concluding words, "...talking about revolution is easy, but making one is probably the most difficult and necessary task before us" (p. 184). What can the philosophers of technology contribute to that task?

What Light and Katz have said about environmental ethics applies to our group of friends and colleagues too. Agreement on a common definition, basic criticisms, and crucial reforms of technology would certainly strengthen the credibility of what philosophers have to say about technology, and for better or worse ours is still the only coherent, if little-known and frequently struggling, organization in this area.

But is it realistic at all to hope for a reform given the sometimes inertial and at other times irrational behavior of society?

Have there been *any* social reforms apart from those that were driven by economics or politics? There have been two in the latter half of the twentieth century—environmentalism and feminism. Neither was instigated by professional philosophers, but both are often thought to have been launched by the critical and best-selling books of two thoughtful women—Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

None of us has written or is likely to write such a signal book. Sometimes our group or one of us briefly rises to the surface of publicity only to sink to all appearances without a trace. At other times the public mood is momentarily captured by a movement such as technorealism, a take on technology that did not come from within our Society but did convey many of our concerns. There are more distantly connected currents like Amitai Etzioni's communitarianism or Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's concern with the quality of life. But unlike the wildfires of the west, these smoldering concerns never break into flame; far less do they grow and connect.

To be sure, we have done our writing and taught our students, and all that work has subtly and imperceptibly bled into the culture at large. More important, we have thought through some of the difficult problems of technology. The fruits of our labors are there to be used by anyone who is confused or troubled by the dark sides of technology or despairing and dispirited about the prospects of contemporary culture. All that work can proceed more confidently thanks to Hickman's demonstration that Dewey has broken a trail for us.

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