

AN INTERVIEW WITH LARRY A. HICKMAN

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Larry A. Hickman is Emeritus Professor of philosophy at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where he was the director of the Center for Dewey Studies from 1993 until his retirement in 2016. His monographs include: *Modern Theories of Higher Level Predicates* (1980); *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (1990); *Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture* (2001); and *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism* (2007). His edited volumes include *Technology and Human Affairs* (1981); *Reading Dewey* (1998); *The Essential Dewey* (with Thomas Alexander) (1998); and *The Correspondence of John Dewey* (1999, 2001, 2005). He has also authored many articles on technology, environmental philosophy, critical theory, pragmatism, education, film studies, and philosophy of religion.

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Q: How did you first come to philosophy as a vocation, and what drew you to it?

Undergraduate philosophy courses whetted my curiosity about big ideas. In graduate school, I found a copious banquet at which I could savor the many delights of a large, pluralistic department. I couldn't, and can't, imagine a better profession than one that involves reading, writing, teaching, and assessing the works of writers whose ideas have changed the world.

Q: What was your first encounter with Dewey? Were you immediately drawn to Dewey's thought?

My study of C. S. Peirce led me to James and Dewey. My appreciation of Dewey's work, and pragmatism more generally, deepened when John J. McDermott became my colleague at Texas A&M in the mid-1970s. It became even more profound when I began to understand Dewey's account of technology as an overlooked key to his work.

Q: Do you have a favorite Dewey text?

There are so many. I carry several with me in my Evernote app. Probably the one I quote most often is from his 1939 lecture "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," where he says that "democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness. Every other form of moral and social faith rests upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control; to some 'authority' alleged to exist outside the processes of experience." I also like his remark that "Art is the sole alternative to luck."

Q: How has philosophy as a discipline changed since you first started?

When I began, analytic philosophy was dominant and the APA was organizationally monolithic. There were almost no women or people of color in the profession. Since then the APA has become more pluralistic and opportunities for communication across professional interests and national boundaries are increasing. The profession still has a poor record when it comes to people of color and women (and, sadly, there continue to be reports of philosophers at major universities who have been charged with sexual harassment), but there has been some progress in those areas.

Q: How has Dewey (or pragmatist) scholarship changed since you first started? Is there a relationship between changes in pragmatist scholarship and changes within philosophy generally?

When I began teaching, pragmatism was marginalized. There was, however, a small but energetic group of people who were editing critical editions and publishing first rate scholarship. Their efforts eventually paid off in terms of a revival of interest in Peirce, James, and Dewey, to be sure, but also figures such as Jane Addams and others. And there was Richard Rorty's famous plea at his 1979 Eastern APA presidential address that philosophers should pay more attention to the pragmatists. Now, it seems, everyone wants to be a "pragmatist" of some sort or other.

Q: What is your proudest accomplishment as a philosopher, thus far?

I would point to my collaboration with the editorial staff of the Center for Dewey Studies that led to the publication of electronic editions of Dewey's *Collected Works* and his *Correspondence*. There was also collaboration with Donald Koch and the Dewey Center staff that led to the publication of Dewey's *Class Lectures*. Under this heading I also want to say that I am proud of the accomplishments of some of my former students.

Q: Is there anything about your career thus far that you regret or would change if you could?

Yes. Life without regrets is a life unlived. I wish I had had the time to take on the considerable task of writing a book on Dewey's 1938 *Logic*.

Q: Do you have a project that you are working on or plans for the near future?

I am currently working with a lay Buddhist organization, Soka Gakkai, on educational issues and I am on the board of Soka University of America. I am writing, lecturing, and preparing a new book.

Q: Is there a certain direction that you think Dewey (or pragmatist) scholarship is headed? Are you excited by this trend, or worried by it?

In one sense I am encouraged by how Dewey's insights are being applied to what he called "the problems of men [and women]." That would include issues in environmental philosophy, philosophy of technology, social and political philosophy, problems of economic and racial justice, and the various arts, including architecture. On the other hand, I see a gradual drift away from careful reading of his texts and appreciation of the historical and cultural contexts in which he and the other pragmatists worked.

Q: If you could correct one misconception that people have about Dewey or pragmatism, what would it be?

Probably one of the most persistent of the false ideas about the pragmatic theory of truth is that its sole or primary test involves personal satisfaction. Even some well-known philosophers have gotten that wrong.

Q: Are there any “non-pragmatist” philosophers whose work you find compatible with or parallel to Dewey’s?

That is difficult question, since it is difficult to say who is a “non-pragmatist” philosopher in this age of syncretism. Nevertheless, Bruno Latour comes to mind. He is not known as a pragmatist, but Andrew Feenberg tells me that he read a lot of Dewey. I’ll also mention Steven Shapin, Juergen Habermas, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Bernard Williams, to name a few. If I may stretch the disciplinary boundaries somewhat, the list should include Amartya Sen.

Q: If you had to pick one philosopher who embodied everything Dewey stood against (an Anti-Dewey, so to speak) who would it be?

“Everything” is a big word. Nevertheless, I’ll mention three. House Speaker Paul Ryan’s favorite philosopher Ayn Rand represents the opposite of Dewey’s political philosophy. The late Derek Parfit’s non-naturalism sets him in opposition to Dewey’s ethics. Probably the champion “anti-Dewey” of all time was Mortimer Adler, whose views on metaphysics and education Dewey held in very low regard.

Q: Do you have a favorite anecdote or bit of trivia about Dewey (or another pragmatist)?

In 1943 the FBI investigated Dewey. The agent reported that “Subject. . . apparently does nothing but write.” He also reported that “Subject’s writings are numerous, involved and complicated. Reading him is a task. . .” Some of my students have said something similar.