

# PRAGMATISM AND THE CRITICAL ETHOS: RECONSTRUCTING THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF ARTFUL CRITICISM

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Drawing upon the thought of John Dewey, this article elucidates a notion of criticism that does justice to both the concern of critical theory for emancipation from structures of power in social settings, and the contingent individual's freedom in making sense of and with the world around them. It argues that the task of reasoned reflection on artistic and societal habits is not simply to unearth and extirpate a determinate set of oppressive ideologies, but also to engage in pragmatic and pluralistic acts of reconstruction; that is, agents critique objects and practices in a range of ways to recreate their own selves and the selves around them.



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Many appropriations and employments of critical theory turn largely upon the promise of reason to emancipate us from systems of power that constrain subject activity and possibility. Let us call this orientation or spirit that animates many cultural, rhetorical, or ideological theorists and critics the *critical ethos*. In modern societies, achieving democracy's true potential for such individuals is a vital theme of this way of instantiating critical inquiry. Yet democracy, at least in its current form, offers another challenge—that of pluralism. Modern democracies are remarkable arenas of a range of ways to think, talk, believe, live, and argue. Many of these perspectives criticize opposing viewpoints as being indicative of illusioned ways of thinking, as oppressive mindsets, or as shallow ideology that we ought to be free from in our reasoned moments. Thus, we see a clash of emancipation and a pluralistic respect for contradictory ways of living emerge in contemporary communicative situations. How can critical approaches honor a respect for different ways of thinking through the real *and* seek the goal of emancipating human potential?

What I am interested in exploring are the domains where critical theory—and the critical ethos that many extract from it— influences a certain everyday notion and practice of criticism. Perhaps a more concrete way of approaching the dilemma here is as follows. Take a concrete artifact, say, a popular wrestling program filled with male and female characters. Surely, audiences who watch this program will divide in how they react to and read such a text. Some will enjoy the hyper-masculinized characters, whereas others will react adversely to the stereotypical or derogative gender roles they see portrayed. Perhaps they will flesh out their reaction in theoretical garb, employing such terms as ideology or patriarchy. Their worry may reduce to the reading that this wrestling show relies upon and continues centuries of male traits being valued, and females being undervalued or outright oppressed. Yet the other person laughs at the outlandish characters on the wrestling show, and remarks that it's just campy fun—and that no one is getting hurt.

There are countless other examples, such as the divergent reactions to television programs such as *The Cosby Show* and *Will &*

*Grace*. As Edward Schiappa notes, some claim that these are essentially oppressive or that they continue harmful racial or gender stereotypes, whereas others mark them as liberatory in their transgressions.<sup>1</sup> Others may simply enjoy these shows without bringing in high theory and the discourses of emancipation and oppression. How do we settle such debates between what amounts to two opposed *critical* reactions to a communicative text? Is one critical, and the other not critical? What tells us this difference—the presence of terms standard to ideology critique? Another way to put this dilemma is: how do we proceed in democratic situations of everyday discourse and deliberation when something that person x takes seriously or truly becomes certified in the critical utterance of person y as a bearer of ideology or power? The urge to say that the wrestling event or sitcom is sexist, racist, etc., seems to undercut the view that it is just fun (or even more: the reaction that it illustrates a good reason to be manly, etc., in that fashion).

This article will approach this tension through the concept of *criticism*, especially as has emerged in the fields of communication and rhetorical studies. No article of this length can discuss a critical ethos of a field without risking charges of reductionism. Despite this inevitable risk, I want to proceed—even if I do not give critical theory and one form of its entailed critical practice as detailed a hearing as its advocates may want—because doing so is the only way to explore a difference in attitude toward everyday democracy and criticism resident in Deweyan pragmatism.

I'm sure others will sing the praises of critical theory, but not enough sing the praises of pragmatism in the applied areas of criticism that I frequent in communication and rhetorical studies. Drawing upon the thought of John Dewey, this project seeks to elucidate a notion of criticism that does justice to the concern of critical theory and related critical orientations for emancipation from structures of power in social settings and the contingent individual's freedom in making sense of and with the world around them. I will argue that the task of reasoned reflection on artistic and societal habits is not simply

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Schiappa, *Beyond Representational Correctness: Rethinking Criticism of Popular Media*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

to unearth and extirpate a determinate set of oppressive ideologies. Instead, criticism represents a pragmatic and pluralistic act of reconstruction—one critiques objects and practices in a range of ways to recreate their self and the selves around them. If we take Dewey's lead that art ultimately denotes a fine-tuned engagement with the challenges of our environment, we can see this reconstructive endeavor, in its best form, as *artful criticism*.

Building on the lead offered by Richard Shusterman, Richard Rorty, and other previous work on pragmatist aesthetics, I will enunciate a notion of artful criticism as a form of reconstruction, both in terms of resisting false consciousness and pernicious ideologies *and* in enabling cases of creative and imaginative self-fashioning.<sup>2</sup> I want to limit this inquiry's main point to the arena of criticism—the use of communicative means to label other statements, texts, and communicative artifacts as bearers of certain ideologies that are unknown to their users. Thus, the pragmatic form of criticism explored in the general—and most likely, insufficient—form in this article will do justice to critical theory's concerns with democratic emancipation and the Deweyan pragmatist's pluralistic respect in situations of discursive disagreement. Pragmatic criticism then becomes a personal *or* social process of reconstruction of what and how we value, and not merely a tool for only one specific project of ideological emancipation.

### **The Orientation to Perpetual Critique in Critical Endeavors**

Let us keep in mind, but not fully elucidate, the tradition of critical theory spawned by the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as the work of Marcuse. Others, such as Frega, have done an admirable job talking about the forms of “totalizing critique” resident in Adorno and Horkheimer (but perhaps not in the form proffered by Habermas),

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Richard Shusterman, *Surface & Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Scott R. Stroud, “John Dewey and the Question of Artful Criticism,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 44 (2011): 27-51.

and their relation to American pragmatism.<sup>3</sup> Beyond these issues, however, let us emphasize a certain *spirit* or *orientation*, common to many “critical” authors in a range of fields. The common orientation is that the enlightenment project, as played out in historical settings of power and domination, has not led to the freedom promised by the idealistic defenders of “reason.” Instead, we get more technology and mechanized systems that grind the promised freedom into a contained dust. The role of critical theory is to use science and social theory against this oppression of modernity, in at least many important settings. The general practice here is to *negate* the real in search of an ideal that would minimize oppression and maximize actual human freedom. Thus, authors like Horkheimer and Adorno spare nothing in their criticism of the “culture industry,” asserting that “the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry.”<sup>4</sup> This filter, of course, is not a neutral one—it is valenced, and tilted in favor of preserving existing systems of value. One does not get the truths they think they get from imbibing popular culture. Instead, their experience is created and harmfully imbued with ideological traces that the critic is attuned to reveal. True criticism would unseat or upend this structure, the orientation I’m sketching would claim, and would supposedly leave freedom revealed in its absence. Criticism becomes a form of power to unseat harmful forms of power and force.

Let us move beyond critical theory’s residence in philosophy proper, as I am more concerned with enunciating an imaginatively new reading of pragmatism as a *critical* orientation. One can find a similar *ethos* to that of those philosophers who proffer totalizing critique in the versions and visions of feminist, post-colonial, or ideological criticism sensitive to racial, sexualized, or gendered oppression in the fields of rhetoric and communication studies. Many, if not most, of these approaches will place on criticism a great burden—it will diagnose wholesale problems with the status quo, and unseat it in a revolutionary fashion through the act of criticism. Whole institutions and practices must be thrown out, for to fall for

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<sup>3</sup> Roberto Frega, “Pragmatizing Critical Theory’s Province,” *Dewey Studies*, 1 (2): 4-47.

<sup>4</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 126.

the “real as the rational” is to fall for the illusions proffered by power. In rhetorical studies, the criticism of communicative practices and artifacts is often encouraged as a way to unearth pernicious ideologies and power structures, an orientation codified in approaches that associate themselves with the critique of ideology. Confining the rest of my critique to these areas, let us survey a few representative approaches to the use of criticism as a tool to undermine existing power structures and the functioning of pernicious ideologies. This will in turn help us to see the unique role that pragmatist criticism will play, if we but give it a chance.

We shall look at some of the engagements of *rhetorical criticism* with sources and orientations endemic to critical theory. “Rhetorical criticism” is the critical analysis of communicative practices, texts, utterances, or artifacts. Many of these texts are speeches, but one can also practice such criticism on literary narratives or popular films. The key question is: does the act of criticism of a specific, concrete communicative artifact, unearth or reveal something of importance that was not noticed before, or that was not noticed by those valuing that act of communication? Typically, acts of criticism are not valued—or published—if they state the obvious. They must bring theories of power, meaning, and more to bear on the messy but concrete texts and utterances that fill our everyday worlds. One imaginative and important critic—and theorist of criticism—was Edwin Black. He was responsible for one of the first influential adaptations of the critical spirit to rhetorical criticism in his notion of the “second persona.” Instead of older ways of looking at a speech in terms of its effectiveness in achieving a speaker’s goals, Black places *ideology* at the center of many interactions among an author, an artifact or text, and an audience.<sup>5</sup> Intention is not eliminated, but instead it’s filtered through ideology.

Texts are created by authors for a certain purpose, and the tailings of this purpose are resident within the text’s public structure. What do texts assume about their audience, and those who would accept them as persuasive artifacts? What values do they enshrine, and what values do they allocate to various social constituencies? These

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin Black, “The Second Persona,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56 (1970): 109-119.

are questions of the “second persona,” or the audience that is implied by a discourse or text. The first persona is the author or rhetor—the person behind this persuasive text. The second persona is the audience that’s assumed or created by the text. The text serves as a value-laden mediating force between actual rhetor and audience, thus Black thinks of the second persona assumed by the text to be ideological in Karl Marx’s sense of involving “the network of interconnected convictions that functions in a man epistemically and that shapes his identity by determining how he views the world.”<sup>6</sup> Discourses enshrine an ideology, or a certain way of being and valuing. If we nod our heads at such a text, we are enabling the ideology of what kind of auditor accepts this sort of text. Also, we run the risk of further habituating that image of agency within ourselves, Black warns. Criticism is called for in an attempt to undermine the functioning of texts, to question the ideological forces they marshal that attempt to “move [their auditor], unless he rejects it, to structure his experience on many subjects.”<sup>7</sup> On this approach, we cannot trust texts as they are, since they come with an ideological bias that threatens to recreate us in their image unless we use critical insight as a way to thwart this process. Of course, the assumption is that ideological shaping, putatively an unthinking process, is not truly beneficial. Approaches such as Black’s share the critical theorist’s concern with being emancipated from sources of limitation and arbitrary coercion. Criticism as rejection of the type of person the text wants us to become and the values it wants us to hold represents true freedom on such an account.

Others in communication and rhetorical studies continue to employ a similar critical spirit animated by concerns of ideology. A recent extension of Black’s notion of ideological critique in the area of rhetorical criticism is represented in the work of Philip Wander.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Black’s notion of the second persona focuses on the ideological subject of a discourse, Wander’s notion of the “third persona” extends ideological criticism to a critique of who is left out of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Wander, “The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory.” *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984): 204.

or disempowered by certain discourses. The second persona accounts for one function of ideology hidden in a text: what that text pushes an accepting auditor to become or to value. Wander describes this functioning as “an invitation” which “describes the being in the world it commends.”<sup>9</sup> Texts seduce us with an image of the sort of powerful agent we ought to be, if we but listen to that text and its ways of valuing things and people. But this formation of a subject through a text’s ideology does not exhaust the overall capacity for ideological effects, Wander argues. The postulation of a preferred, desired, and valued acceptor of a message also entails agents who are not present: “What is negated through the Second Persona forms the silhouette of a Third Persona—the ‘it’ that is not present, that is objectified in a way that ‘you’ and ‘I’ are not.”<sup>10</sup> The notion of the “third persona” allows a critic to highlight who is left out of a discourse. Presence and agency go hand in hand, so what Wander is focused on here is a matter of who is valued by a text, and who is rendered as an object to be used or simply ignored. Thus, he asserts that “The objectification of certain individuals and groups discloses itself through what is and is not said about them and through actual conditions affecting their ability to speak for themselves.”<sup>11</sup> The critic can notice such a lack, and he or she can give voice to people or groups oppressed by the ideological functioning of a given text. Wander describes this as the method of “rhetorical contextualization” or

a systematic reflection on: (a) the ‘I’ of the author and the not ‘I’ or who the author is not; (b) what the text did and did not say; (c) what audiences were and were not addressed or explicitly run down; (d) what problems were defined and/or ignored; and (e) what solutions were or were not offered and for whom.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>12</sup> Philip C. Wander, “On Ideology: Second Thoughts,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75 (2011): 422.

All of this concerns the value structures of social texts, and is based upon the assumption that “The meaning of what is said, in rhetorical theory, includes what is and what is not said.”<sup>13</sup> The rhetorical critic, in the act of criticism, interrogates social texts in an attempt to see who is being valued, and how they are valued. Wander’s emphasis adds to this a sensitivity to who is de-valued through exclusion. If ways of talking are ways of valuing, the critic asks—how does this text encourage its audiences to value or de-value others? For Wander, texts are objective things. They are “out there” in the world, affecting those who attend to them, and they should display determinant ideologies upon critical investigation. A certain text, say a wrestling program employing gender stereotypes, *is* sexist or patriarchal, and the ideological critic notes this by observing what it says about males and females, and how it functions to devalue females or other genders through exclusion.

Another influential approach from rhetorical studies and communication can further highlight the orientation toward criticism that I want to resist with pragmatist resources. Ideology critique can focus on who is shaped by a discourse, and how discourses value or devalue others through what they focus on in their details. Yet such texts are part of larger systems, all of which are also of ideological import. Recent attempts to enunciate criticism as emancipatory have not failed to examine the systematic matrix in which texts and discourses find themselves. Raymie McKerrow’s “critical rhetoric” is one such permutation of ideology critique in contemporary rhetorical studies. In his account, the ideal seems composed of individuals constantly questioning accepted systems and practices that purport to enable freedom; they seek to find real freedom by tearing down these existent forms of domination. While this approach may differ from other critical approaches that postulate an external ideal of democratic community, it concurs insofar as the real is almost totally to be rejected. It is critical in the deepest sense of that term.

McKerrow’s account foregrounds *orientation*, and postulates critique as a possible orientation behind criticism that “examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 422.

relativized world” and that seeks “to unmask or demystify the discourse of power.”<sup>14</sup> McKerrow’s form of critique devalues the native impulse in certain practices of discourse, and instead searches for pernicious ideological forces at work. As he explains, in critical rhetoric “the emphasis has shifted from the question ‘is this discourse true or false?’ to ‘how the discourse is *mobilized to legitimate the section interests of hegemonic groups*.”<sup>15</sup> The critical rhetorician exhumes ethically problematic views—ideologies, effectively—in the discourse so valued by others for its supposed truth value: “The critique is directed to an analysis of discourse as it contributes to the interests of the ruling class, and as it empowers the ruled to present their interests in a forceful and compelling manner.”<sup>16</sup> Criticism of “the discourse of power which creates and sustains the social practices which control the dominated” is called by McKerrow “a critique of ideologies.”<sup>17</sup> The critical rhetorician must always search for sources of domination operating on and through discourse, as well as discursive practices that promise freedom but that enable constraint. We need not get into the *critiques of domination* or of *freedom*, but it is enough to say that both seek to de-value what the text—and its accepting audiences—want to value.<sup>18</sup> This diligent scanning for ideological influence and domination does not reach an end, however. On McKerrow’s account of critique, “the telos that marks the project is one of never ending skepticism, hence permanent criticism.”<sup>19</sup>

Similar to the previous two enunciations of a critical approach to ideology in the fields of rhetorical studies and communication,

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<sup>14</sup> Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>18</sup> For more on McKerrow’s position and its weaknesses, consult Maurice Charland, “Finding a Horizon and Telos: The Challenge to Critical Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 71–74; Robert Hariman, “Critical Rhetoric and Postmodern Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991): 67–70; and Scott R. Stroud, “John Dewey and the Question of Artful Criticism,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44 (2011): 27–51

<sup>19</sup> Raymie E. McKerrow, “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis.” 96.

McKerrow's orientation sees ideologies in ways that "non-critical" receivers of a given message would miss. Critical rhetoric gives us a way to characterize the sense of *critical* in these approaches—the critic, extending the impulses resident in philosophical critical theory, seeks emancipation for self and others by identifying what is really at work in a specific text. An individual may enjoy a crude joke, say, but the critic is the one with the insight to identify the racist elements that go into that joke's inner logic; if individuals would listen to the critic in this situation, they would cease to value the joke and its oppressive logic, and hence be that much more free of its ideological constraints.

The critic, on all of these approaches, reflects on the utterances of others in an attempt to be free of ideology. To do this, two principles must be followed. First, the critic must see texts and utterances, to use McKerrow's way of putting it, as *bearers of power* instead of as *bearers of truth*. While one partisan sees the worth and value of Woodrow Wilson's contributions to the U.S. and the world community, an ideological critic might note that such extollation only serves the ideological function contained in his pernicious views of race. A fan of a presidential candidate may take his immigration policies as the panacea to our nation's economic woes, but the critic seems able to pronounce these policies as "dog whistle" politics that traffic in the ideologies of racism and anti-immigrant sentiments. What one audience member takes as a truth-claim, the critic sees as a token of ideological power that helps some and hurts or excludes others. Second, the critic is committed to a view that ideologies have strong *causal powers*. This underlies the critical theories of Black, Wander, and McKerrow, and underwrites their demand that critics exhume ideologies from texts; if we do not counter these ways of valuing and devaluing persons and groups, these theorists imply, they will shape us and those who attend to those texts.

The critic, in this tradition of critical theories of emancipation from ideology, holds a special charge in creating the better democracies and free communities we all supposedly desire. They do this by upending texts, turning upside down and destroying ordinary practices and readings that are valued by deluded—and ultimately unfree—individuals. This is all well and good, of course. Who does not

desire to be free? The problematic aspect to these ways of critically re-valuing texts and practices, however, becomes obvious in situations of *critical pluralism*. These situations are ones that evince a diversity of readings of the truth value or usefulness of some text or utterance. Take the instance of a person who believes that candidate x's immigration policy is the best, most effective, most ethical way to protect citizens. Assume a critic objects not on grounds of truth or value claims (viz., disputing the policy's efficacy, or the value of protecting citizens above others), but instead on the grounds that this policy and the text that advocates for it are animated by the ideology of racism. What are the disputants to do? How are they to talk to each other? The critic has rendered the discourse about the policy in question a causal object, subject to cold considerations of causes and effects. What the former individual took as a collection of truth-claims, the ideological critic re-evaluates as a malady, a pernicious pattern of influence that should be rejected wholesale. The critic's reading of a text and its value trumps other views, and acts to destroy any real pluralism of views that hold differing truth values. In the radically diverse communities of belief that scholars such as Wayne Booth and Michael Krausz examine when looking at criticism, ideology critique would militate toward a *critical monism*—the view that there is one right reading or interpretation, especially in regard to the texts that the ideological critic wants to render as power-bearing causal artifacts in their discussions with disagreeing others.<sup>20</sup> Yet this is the entailment of the orientation taken by those influenced by the critical theory tradition.

Is there a different critical orientation that can be taken that is more useful given the radically diverse communities of valuing audiences we see and desire in democracies?

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the debate between critical monism and pluralism, see Wayne Booth, *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Michael Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons: Interpretation in Cultural Practices* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Scott R. Stroud, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and World Hypotheses: Stephen Pepper and the Metaphysics of Criticism." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 48 (2015): 266-291.

### John Dewey and the Orientation of Synthetic Criticism

Instead of such a wholesale, revolutionary reading of critical acts, big or small, I want to flesh out a notion of pragmatist criticism as an orientation. The orientation behind most theories counted as “critical” hold up the present situation, practice, or artifact—be it a film, an industry, or a political system—and finds that it fails the ideal standard that normative aspects of theory provide us as a measure of judgment. The real is lacking in some way, or pernicious in its ideological content, so it would be better if it were to be changed in that dimension. Most of the time, these changes are very radical—the *whole* system must be changed to become acceptable to a reasonable critic. At other times, the whole discourse or text is thrown out—that joke *is* sexist, that statue *is* racist. This attitude evinces a profound disenchantment with the present setup of life or a communicative artifact, or at least the aspect at which the critic takes aim. One must sense that pragmatism will be different from this orientation, but how will it vary exactly?

One place to start will be an often-overlooked passage in Dewey’s 1934 *Art as Experience*. This book has spawned modern theories of pragmatist aesthetics, as well as my own ruminations on pragmatist rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> Others, such as Frega, have done an admirable job exploring the relationship of pragmatist views on political matters to critical theory, but Dewey’s aesthetics represents relatively unexplored ground for such a critical inquiry.<sup>22</sup>

There is more to be mined there, however. Early in the course of explaining his idea of aesthetic experience as wider than the practices of fine art in museum contexts, Dewey broaches the famous lines of “Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all/Ye know on earth,

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Scott R. Stroud, “John Dewey and the Question of Artful Communication,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 41 (2008): 153-183.

<sup>22</sup> Roberto Frega, “Pragmatizing Critical Theory’s Province,” 4-47.

and all ye need to know.”<sup>23</sup> Dewey enters into the dispute over what Keats meant by this, equating “truth” to a sense of “wisdom” in living. Such wisdom also held a certain orientation toward the world, one in which good seemed rare and evil seemed common: Keats was said to have focused in his work on “the question of justifying good and trusting to it in spite of the evil and destruction that abound.”<sup>24</sup> Philosophy, in Dewey’s estimation, becomes “the attempt to answer this question rationally.”<sup>25</sup> Philosophy, however rational it pretends to be, must acknowledge that “Man lives in a world of surmise, of mystery, of uncertainties. ‘Reasoning’ must fail man—this of course is a doctrine long taught by those who have held to the necessity of a divine revelation.”<sup>26</sup> Instead of divine revelation, Dewey applauds Keats’ substitute for the shortcomings of reason: imagination. Our imaginative capacities, best revealed in art and aesthetic activity, are what allows our arguments to grasp onto the tenuous, ever-changing world. This is part of what Keats calls “negative capability,” or the capacity “of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”<sup>27</sup> Dewey approves of this stance because it makes room for a couple of important insights. First, it acknowledges the presence in the world of “half knowledge,” or things believed that fall short of certainty but allow and facilitate action nonetheless. Second, it allows for a role for immediacy and intuition on the part of thinkers, further connecting them to the immediate sort of experience that all natural organisms outside of humans also instantiate. As Dewey puts the point,

Even “the greatest philosopher” exercises an animal-like preference to guide his thinking to its conclusions. He selects and puts aside as his imaginative sentiments move. “Reason” at its height cannot attain complete grasp and a self-contained

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<sup>23</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 10. Ed. Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1934/1989): 40.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

assurance. It must fall back upon imagination—upon the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense.<sup>28</sup>

Our abilities to theorize and reason about problems—reflective thinking for Dewey—are vitally important, but they do not start and end the game of life. Experience is much richer than these activities, and the span of purposes enshrined in these activities is also myriad. Complexity and uncertainty is the character of life, and one with a high negative capability revels in those features.

It is the nature of our experiential context—the precarious world—that forces Dewey to highlight Keats' final phrase: "The critical words are 'on earth'—that is amid a scene in which 'irritable reaching after fact and reason' confuses and distorts instead of bringing us to the light. It was in moments of most intense esthetic perception that Keats found his utmost solace and his deepest convictions."<sup>29</sup> The correct estimation of reason vis-à-vis the best reading of our experiential setting is what Dewey is after here, and he makes this point in dualistic form to clarify its dimensions:

Ultimately there are but two philosophies. One of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art. This is the philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats.<sup>30</sup>

What Dewey is highlighting here is that philosophical accounts are useful, but maximally so when they are animated by the right orientation or "philosophy" in a general sense. Unstated is what the other philosophy is, but it can be guessed. It is that approach that looks for a clean answer in a determinate world, along with its easily solvable problems. Instead of such a tight system of parts and relationships, Dewey revels in the messiness and uncertainty of the world. This will be the target and method of his aesthetic theory, long

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 41.

chided for being too flexible and vague. But it can also be the starting point for his critical orientation rooted in pragmatism.

The orientation enshrined in most “critical” approaches to the world go against the sort of negative capability that is emphasized by the pragmatist orientation toward criticism. Instead of seeing the world as intrinsically and irremediably complex, some critical theorists sensitive to ideology see the world—both natural and social—as allowing of clear and determinate answers; this is what enables their unearthing of certain problematic ideologies (and that disallows claims that such ideologies are *not* present). Imagination is used in such orientations, but only insofar as it can envision *the* ideal and then negate *the* real to some degree. Both, however, are singular and “captured” by descriptive and normative theories. What the pragmatic orientation would criticize is just this inflexibility, especially in matters of critical predication. One can take the case of a modern action film. Critics may cry out that it reifies existing gender norms, fails to criticize patriarchal ways of dividing up activities, and so forth. In other words, the film has *one* reading, or *one* pernicious ideology that it pushes onto passive viewers. Edward Schiappa has decried a similar tendency among those critiquing representations of gender, sexual orientation, and race in popular artifacts such as films.<sup>31</sup> For the Deweyan position I’m developing here, such an approach is problematic insofar as it concretizes the real into one determinate shape through its critical predications. This clearly leads to conflict in situations of critical pluralism. What does the critic do when faced with another who judges differently? Perhaps another critic or lay person sees the film as having the opposite implications or messages concerning gendered roles—what move do critical theorist have left? Obviously, they must maintain that this opposing person misses something vital. Perhaps they can be re-educated, or told to read more of the appropriate theorists in order to see the oppressive tendencies that the critical theorist sees.

The Deweyan approach would emphasize criticism based on negative capability much more. Giving a critical account of some text

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<sup>31</sup> Edward Schiappa, *Beyond Representational Correctness: Rethinking Criticism of Popular Media* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008).

or practice might be useful in light of a problematic situation, but we should never fall prey to the illusion that we've decisively captured *the* reading of some present situation in one theory-laden argument. We must always maintain the imaginative freshness to see that the real could be described differently from how we describe it, and to imagine that others who disagree with us have decent reasons for their view that should be respected at some level. Even if we do not find such reasoning decisive or finally acceptable, the pragmatist critic at least does not *start* from the position that their theory guides them to the ultimate nature of social reality, and the implicit or explicit theorizing of others is a mere false consciousness. The critical theorist will too often see those that take the status quo seriously or as desirable as myth-makers or myth-believers, but in any case at a lower level of rational or "critical thought" than the critical theorist and her refusal to be content with any aspect of the status quo. Of course, the pragmatist critic would not shy away from making judgments or acknowledging the influence of specific contexts on an artifact's or practice's functioning. What would be different would be the fallibilism that flows from basing an idea of criticism on negative capability and imagination directed at the beliefs of others *and* of one's own self.

An example from Dewey's own history will illustrate some of these lessons. In 1926, Lewis Mumford published his book, *The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture*. Acting as a literary critic, part of Mumford's study focused rather harshly on William James' contribution to American thought. Mumford judged that James reflected the pioneer spirit of his times, and that this infected the spirit of his pragmatism. James' philosophy, however, did not do much with the "pluralism and free-mindedness" he appropriated from his cultural milieu.<sup>32</sup> He is accused of merely echoing his status quo, with its values and ideals intact. Instead of this transmission, Mumford argued that "a valuable philosophy must take into account a greater range of experiences than the dominating ones of a single generation; it is good to include these, but if it includes only these, it is still in a state of

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<sup>32</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture*, (New York: Horace Liveright): 187.

cultural adolescence. It is the remote and the missing that the philosopher must be ready to supply.”<sup>33</sup> James simply regurgitated the spirit of his time, or as Mumford puts it, “James’s thought was permeated with the smell of the Gilded Age: one feels in it the compromises, the evasions, the desire for a comfortable resting place.”<sup>34</sup> James did not intend to do this echoing, nor did he intend to perpetuate a status quo ideology of capitalism and greed: “Getting on was certainly never in James’s mind, and cash values did not engross even his passing attention; but, given his milieu, they were what his words re-enforced in the habits of the people who gave themselves over to his philosophy.”<sup>35</sup> In the words of a modern critical theorist, James did not challenge the real, he extended it and its domination. If he was truly to be “critical,” he should have challenged the system in all of its imperfections.

Dewey was a named party in Mumford’s challenging of the philosophical status quo, but he got off with a lighter critique than James. Nevertheless, Dewey felt motivated enough to respond to Mumford’s attack on pragmatism in an article in the *New Republic* in 1927 entitled “The Pragmatic Acquiescence.”<sup>36</sup> His response can be illustrative to our central issue here—how a pragmatist approaches the interface between the real and the ideal, and the present state of society and how theories of criticism envision it should be. Dewey focuses on the reading of Mumford that would most appeal to a critical theorist—that of James’ pragmatism being a philosophy of “acquiescence,” presumably for the status quo. Dewey extracts from this accusation the larger issues: “What is the relation of criticism to the social life criticized? What, more particularly, is the relation of philosophy to its social medium and generation?”<sup>37</sup> He doubts that any philosophy is a *complete* restatement of “what is,” but the real issue lies in the same direction that those animated by the critical ethos want to push things.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>36</sup> John Dewey, “The Pragmatic Acquiescence,” in Jo Ann Boydston (ed.), *The Later Works*, Volume 3, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1927/1984).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 147.

Can and should critique be separable from and refusing of what exists in society? Can our accounts of oppression and domination only succeed by revolutionary rejection of the existing power structures?

Dewey makes his pragmatist point very clearly: no instance of criticism breaks free from the surrounding systems and cultures. Philosophies, as he puts it, are always a reflection of something in the status quo:

Yet what makes it a work of reflection and criticism is that the elements and values selected are set in opposition to other factors, and those perhaps the ones most in evidence, the most clamorous, the most insistent: which is to say that all serious thinking combines in some proportion and perspective the actual and the possible, where actuality supplies contact and solidity while possibility furnishes the ideal upon which criticism rests and from which creative effort springs. The question whether the possibility appealed to is a possibility of the actual, or is externally imported and applied, is crucial.<sup>38</sup>

What Dewey is arguing for is the point that critique reflects the status quo to some extent, whether it acknowledges this or not. Thus, all thought is an acquiescence to some extent to some values in the status quo. The real question is whether the theorizing and reflective activity inherent in some act of philosophizing or critique is closely connected to the actual, or is in some sense seen to be transcendental.

Using our modern terms, Dewey is distinguishing between *immanent* critique and *transcendental* critique as early as 1927. As a pragmatist who values negative capability as defining the locus of imagination in reflective engagement with a precarious world, Dewey clearly pushes for the former. Honest criticism will acknowledge that it is immanent and situationally-based. Our values and ideals must come from some aspect of the status quo, a point he makes with extreme clarity in the 1930s. There, his 1934 book *A Common Faith* postulates that our ideals of God come from successful virtues and relationships we see in actual communities; in his 1930 essay, "Three

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 147.

Independent Factors in Morality,” he postulates that elaborate moral theories all stem from something traceable to common experience.<sup>39</sup> We mislead ourselves when we start talking of the transcendental, either in terms of beings or in terms of moral laws or rules. Our imagination must be tied to the world, and that world is complex and messy.

What does this mean for acts of social and artistic criticism? It militates against holding the sort of rigid, predetermined orientation that many critical theorists bring to reading *the* world. As Dewey puts it in opposing Mumford’s reading of what James means:

The office of the literary and social critic in dealing with the broader human relationship of specialized philosophical thinking is, accordingly, to be cherished. But the office is a difficult one to perform, more difficult to do well than that of technical philosophizing itself, just as any truly liberal human work is harder to achieve than is a technical task. Preconceptions, fixed patterns, too urgent desire to point a moral, are almost fatal. A pattern is implied in such critical interpretation, but it must be tridimensional and flowing, not linear and tight.<sup>40</sup>

The critical theorist sees one pattern in the image of the real that they face; they see these institutions *as* oppressive, *as* an implement of some specific power. They see one reading as the extent of the imaginative overlay that can be set on top of the real. The pragmatist critic desires a plurality of synthetic readings of the real—imagination is not restricted to one cold ideal and its predictable application. Instead, one strives to give a “flowing” criticism, one that acknowledges the actuality of other readings and approaches to artifacts and practices.

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<sup>39</sup> John Dewey, “A Common Faith.” In *The Later Works of John Dewey*. Vol. 9. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston, 1-58. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1934/1989; “Three Independent Factors in Morals.” In *The Later Works of John Dewey*. Vol. 5. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984.

<sup>40</sup> John Dewey, “The Pragmatic Acquiescence,” 148.

### **Pragmatism on Criticism, Openness, and Assertion**

The pragmatist sense of *artful criticism* that I have enunciated here opposes the overly critical impulse to throw out whole texts, practices, or utterances as pernicious bearers of power. It refuses to do this given the reality of pluralism in communities of arguers—many would simply disagree with the critic's move, and the sense of Deweyan-Jamesian pragmatism that I am building on here would not push the elite view that a critic's academic habits of reading and vocabulary give them real access to the world. The most useful orientation to criticism will be one that works in situations of strenuous disagreement; it ought to be an orientation that embraces possibility in meaning making and valuing such that it encourages harmony and relationship building, even in matters of temporary disagreement. Ideology critique and the ethos of most approaches to critical theory, on my reading, will ultimately leave large groups of individuals out in the cold, so to speak, in the search for social emancipation. They will be labeled as fools duped by ideology at best, or worse, active conspirators in extending a certain power-saturated system further into a democratic community. Either way, these attitudes on behalf of the critic do not help to create relationships attuned to solving social problems now or in the future. They tend to put forth a partisan or partial reading of the causes of social discontent and an evaluation of who is at fault, and then follow these moves with vigorous argumentation calculated to shut down opposition. The Deweyan approach to criticism enunciated here seeks to embrace the possibilities represented by disagreeing factions in society, and to find a way to bridge what gaps it can.

The artful criticism that we can extract from Dewey will have three important features. First, it will be *melioristic*. This term is difficult to grasp in all of its particularities, but it seems to denote an orientation that falls between optimism and pessimism. Dewey tries to clarify it in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

Meliorism is the belief that the specific conditions which exist

at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered. It encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good and the obstructions to their realization, and to put forth endeavor for the improvement of conditions.<sup>41</sup>

Various studies have unpacked this term, but here we can emphasize its divergence from the orientation of critical theory and ideology critique.<sup>42</sup> As Dewey puts it, it seems to emphasize that the present situation is not always good or bad; our values relate to this situation, and our ideals stem from some aspect of it. Bad community is conceptually related to good community, and the dysfunctional present situation contains the standards and seeds for the ideal that we want to achieve. Not every relationship in a dysfunctional community is worthless or valueless—we simply fixate so much on one imperfect aspect that we follow the critical theorist and demand it all be radically changed. The Deweyan ethos is more realistic than this, and forces us to be open to what can be saved, meliorated, or optimized in our present situations. Meliorism therefore continues the sort of past-present optimizing that Dewey speaks of in his “Pragmatic Acquiescence” essay. Such melioration does not end today, of course, just as pursuing such goals as social justice do not reach a point of cessation. New injustices may be purposefully or inadvertently created. What is needed is a flexible, possibility-valuing orientation toward critical engagement with problems of social groups. Dewey’s form of criticism, building on the past to reform the present, is just such an orientation.

Second, artful criticism holds a strong sense of *fallibilism*

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<sup>41</sup> Dewey, John. (1920/1982). “Reconstruction in philosophy.” In *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 12. Ed. Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 181-182.

<sup>42</sup> See Tadd L. Ruetenik, “Social meliorism in the religious pragmatism of William James,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 19 (2005): 238-249; Tadd L. Ruetenik, “Meliorism,” In John Lachs & Robert Talisse (eds). *Encyclopedia of American Philosophy*. (New York: Routledge Press, 2009), 498-501; Scott R. Stroud, “What does Pragmatic Meliorism mean for Rhetoric?” *Western Journal of Communication*, 74 (2010): 43-60.

stemming from its valuing of diversity among critics and agents. Pragmatism, especially in the form that Dewey gives it, recognizes that inquiry and problem solving goes on within a social environment. This environment is composed of other people, functionally equivalent to the critic herself. These people have desires, projects, and needs just as the critic does. The success and flourishing of such communities depends on the relationships between and among all agents. Critics flushing out the pernicious effects on relations that occur because of ideology may simply create new enemies and new problems by destroying existing relationships. Artful criticism will be aware that other arguers, critics, and agents have diverse views; rendering some of these views or people as causal objects—influenced by racism, say—differentiates the critic from these parts of the social environment. The critic's utterances are truth-bearing, but the utterances of those that she examines are power-bearing and harmfully illusory. Such a disparate valuing of agency and utterance does nothing to build relationships; instead, it most likely serves to alienate the object of criticism (a certain agent or utterance that agents take seriously) from the critic and her "group." Yet the critic is of the same human stock as the others, and surely the critic is not grasping some foundational truth of the situation that the others continually miss. Reality is rarely that simple, nor do we have any assurances that our rarified vocabulary of critical discourse truly gives us such an advantage in diagnosing social ills to the detriment of large swaths of those we must live with. Critics must see their own pronouncements as limited and often in need of correction.

Third, such a nuanced and open orientation toward criticism will acknowledge the human or social aspects of criticism, and commit one to the stance that the other arguers are often correct or right in their views. After all of the arguments are accounted for, one must still live with those who agree and disagree with one's own views. Complementing the fallibilistic sense of self-limitation noted previously, artful criticism will also be *charitable* to disagreeing others in a deep sense. One is counseled not merely to "tolerate" others as misguided fellow citizens, but instead, to respect their ability to form their opinions based on a reasoned foundation.

This is charity in the deepest sense—attempting to find or reconstruct an account of what someone else takes to be truth that could also seem appealing to you. Most of the instincts of the critical theorist point toward a shallow, objectivating reconstruction of those who we disagree with in social settings. They are motivated by racism and so forth, a critic may explain. The critic is not tempted to adopt these “racist” positions, however, as they are the result of a pernicious and blind *cause*; they do not approach the level of reasons for belief that the critic builds into her own critical theories and their applications. Misguided others are caused to be that way; the critic freely evaluates claims and reasons, facts and evidence in agentially forming their own pronouncements. Thus, pragmatist criticism would be suspect of such an elitism in critical orientation, and seek to resist it through a notion of charity that builds up those whom we disagree with.

Going forward from here is difficult, of course, since the allure of partisan reasoning always seeks to truncate true openness to the radical other and place our own cherished positions as the result of new inquiries.<sup>43</sup> Yet we cannot expect others to think well of us in the future if we diagnose them as “infected” by ideology in moments where they believe that they are engaged in a reasoned process of valuing certain things and experiences in certain ways. Artful criticism seeks to engage a problematic present, a target that so often involves other agents and reasoners as part of the equation. Coming to terms with other reasoners is, pragmatists like Dewey submit, part of what we mean when we say that reflective thinking has brought us into equilibrium with the environment. Finding a way to see others as reasoned and reasoning in those situations where we are inclined to immediately judge them as irrational or ideology-influenced is the communicative or rhetorical sense of negative capacity that Dewey refers to in his aesthetic theory. The artful critic has better odds of getting along with fellow citizens because they are good at resisting their own partisan habits and reactions, even to those “on the other side.” Imagination and charity are merged in artful criticism, and are

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<sup>43</sup> Scott R. Stroud, “The Challenge of Speaking with Others: A Pragmatist Account of Democratic Rhetoric,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 29 (2015): 91-106.

specifically focused on the social aspects to inquiry and critical disagreement.

### **The Challenge of Artful Criticism**

Of course, there are still those that will claim that my project does not adequately characterize “critical theory,” or go into enough detail in disagreeing with its authors. Such criticisms may win that battle, but lose the war. It is clear to me, given my experience in fields of applied criticism (e.g., the areas of rhetorical studies and communication and their senses of ideology critique), that the spirit of critical endeavors animated by concepts such as power, ideology, and critique fail to foreground openness, at least toward artifacts, practices, and persons that the critic diagnoses as oppressive or ideological. This seems to me to be a fact—for instance, what critic argues that a certain political message is “racist, but just to me?” They instead claim that this person or utterance *is* racist, or a bearer of structural forces that inevitably work to oppress some individuals and not affect the opposite outcome. If one sees the person or message as liberatory, the critic has no room to explain this deviance; for instance, they see professional wrestling as a bearer of patriarchal toxic masculinity, and you err when you see it as campy fun. It is one thing, and that thing is pernicious, regardless of certain subjects’ self-understandings of it. Pragmatism rebels against this orientation to root out *the* ideological content of an artifact, and in doing so, to allow for a pluralism of readings. The hope is grand: perhaps one can claim the television program in question is sexist, and another claim it’s not sexist, all without the urge or requirement to sort out which reaction is more truthful or accurate.

What does this account of artful criticism as *melioristic*, *fallible*, and *charitable* mean in practice? This is an on-going question, and one that we can explore more and more now that a firm foundation of work in rhetoric and pragmatism has been established.<sup>44</sup> Pragmatist

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<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Nathan Crick, *Democracy and Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010); Robert Danisch, *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South

criticism will be critical in that it can engage the real and attempt to meliorate it toward some idea of the good. But it will always acknowledge that this ideal is drawn from existing values, and that it may itself change over the course of future experience. Pragmatist criticism will also recognize that relational harmony is also a desired outcome of criticism. How our act of criticism treats the views of others is a vital effect of our critical orientation. We live in relational contexts, and our solutions to one social problem should ideally not create additional social problems. The use of self-focused or occluded theoretical concepts to denigrate one view will surely not enliven those who take that view to further cooperation. As Dewey puts it, criticism is instrumental and has effects. We must further categorize these effects as relating to *tasks* we wish to accomplish in our acts of critique, and those relating to *relationships* among our fellow community members. These other individuals might be members of groups we view with solidarity, or they might be our “enemies” that function as part of an oppressive system. Nonetheless, if democracy is the internal, force-free functioning of some group of individuals, then critics ought to evince some respect even for those they see as their greatest enemies. For solving a problem now through force and zero-sum rhetoric will surely not encourage the opposing individuals to assist one in the next problematic situation. The critic simply creates more human obstacles and problems in the form of further retrenched individuals who support “oppressive” systems of the status quo. The artful critic that emerges from this Deweyan account seeks to engage the present, and reconstruct it in light of the resources bequeathed by

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Carolina Press, 2007); Robert Danisch, *Building a Social Democracy The Promise of Rhetorical Pragmatism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015); Paul Stob, *William James and the Art of Popular Statement* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013); Scott R. Stroud, *John Dewey and the Artful Life: Pragmatism, Aesthetics, and Morality* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2011).

tradition and past institutions; it also seeks to improve what is desirable about social arrangements, while leaving room for disagreements in judgments of fact and value among social participants. In this way, it seeks to solve present challenges without creating more formidable future obstacles to community building.