

CREATIVE DEMOCRACY AS THE AESTHETIC SOLUTION TO NIHILISM

JIM GARRISON

Virginia Tech & Uppsala University



When Fredrich Nietzsche famously pronounced “God is dead” he was referring to the death of the western metaphysics of substance, or what Jacques Derrida called “the metaphysics of presence” and Martin Heidegger ontotheology. While less percussive in expression, Dewey’s rejection of metaphysics amounts to the same thing. One result of the demise of western metaphysics is the specter of nihilism. Nietzsche proposed an artistic-aesthetic solution to nihilism that posited what I call a selfish self-creating übermensch whose descendants include Michel Foucault’s Baudelairian inspired dandy and Richard Rorty’s ironist that is obsessed with self-creation. Dewey too has an artistic-aesthetic solution; it is superior because it emphasizes social self-creation in community with others.

Keywords: creative democracy, metaphysics, nihilism, the Other, self-creation.



Volume 5 · Number 1 · Spring 2021 · Pages 10-25

Whatever one may think of John Dewey's metaphysics of the generic traits of existence, Dewey entirely rejects the metaphysics of substance or what Jacques Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence (Garrison, 1999). Let us consider the interconnected concepts comprising such a metaphysics. In "The Influence of Darwinism On Philosophy" Dewey affirms: "Philosophy forswears inquiry after absolute origins and absolute finalities" (MW 4: 12). This sentence simultaneously sweeps away the *arche* as ultimate origins, foundations, or first principles, as well as "a true final term, a *telos*, a completed, perfected end," which classical Greek metaphysics called the *entelecheia* (5). Darwinism has no ultimate end or purpose; there are no cosmic purposes fulfilling themselves in history. In classical metaphysics *entelecheia* is associated with *energeia* as full and complete actualization. The fully actualized perfect *telos* or *entelecheia* promotes the actualization of latent potential (*dynamis*) as the capacity or force to achieve perfect self-actualization. Dewey retains the notion of potentiality, but not of latent potentiality.

Dewey mentions that to the principle of metaphysically fixed and final form, property, or essence, "Aristotle gave the name, *eidōs*. This term the scholastics translated as *species*" (5). He reminds us that "the classical notion of species carried with it the idea of a purpose" (8). Dewey does for all forms and essences what Darwin does for animal species. *Ousia* refers to ultimate entity, subject, or, substance; it is often identified with the *eidōs* as *entelecheia*, the complete actualization of dynamic processes. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey's most metaphysical work, substances are replaced by events, which "being events and not rigid and lumpy substances, are ongoing and hence as such unfinished, incomplete, indeterminate" (LW 1: 126-127).

The collapse of the metaphysics of substance is not especially distressing to the Confucian, the Taoist, or the Buddhist followers of

Nagarjuna *Madhyamaka*, which centers on rejection of the metaphysics of substance *svabhava*.¹ However, in Western context, the overthrow of classical metaphysics has resulted in a catastrophic crisis perhaps best articulated by Friedrich Nietzsche: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (GS, Bk. 3, sec. 125). How did humankind kill God? Simple, “he” was an anthropomorphic creation that served human, all too human, purposes. Of course, having slain God, we may have also slain “Man” his creator along with such metaphysical essences as “rational animal,” forty-six chromosomes, and the like. There simply are no eternal immutable essences providing metaphysical comfort as the *entelecheia* of the quest for certainty regarding human meaning, knowledge, or value.

“Nihilism” is the word Nietzsche uses to identify the despair arising from the inability to believe in antecedent foundations, ultimate substances, eternal and immutable identities, or cosmic purposes. For Nietzsche, nihilism means “*the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer” (WP, sec. 2). Of course, when any cultural or personal highest values devalue themselves, the world loses all meaning; the result is nihilism. Moreover, much global conflict involves one culture’s *summum bonum* colliding with that of another.

Nietzsche identifies four psychological states of nihilism wherein the first three are passive and the fourth is active (WP, sect 12). The first involves finding no cosmic purposes operating in the universe to join forces with, so one becomes a nihilist by becoming discouraged, pessimistic and giving up on life. The second state arises for those that once assumed “unity, some form of ‘monism,’” demanding the “devotion of the individual,” but no longer find such

¹ Westerhoff (2009) shows that Nagarjuna separated epistemological “essence-*svabhava*” from metaphysical “substance-*svabhava*” only condemning the latter. Like Dewey, Nagarjuna retains the logical functions while rejecting ontological substance.

unity (WP, sect. 12). Third, after having reached the postmetaphysical point “one grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities—but *cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it*” (WP, sect. 12). While passive nihilism is life denying and destructive, the fourth stage, or active nihilism, indicates a sense of power that devalues timeless, unalterable ends, harmony, and true Being while starting to appreciate the power of human creative potential.

Active nihilists pass out of nihilism once they take upon themselves the creative capacities previous assigned to their Gods within what Heidegger calls “ontotheology.” This yields an artistic-aesthetic solution to nihilism. This state of being does not seek otherworldly immortality; rather, one participates enthusiastically in the power and joy of continuous creation. Nietzsche concretizes this ideal in the image of the *übermensch* as a ecstatic, life-affirming, assertive, playful constant creator of values obsessed with expressing his will to power. Just as the *übermensch* is captivated by self-creation, so are his descendants including Michel Foucault’s Baudelairian inspired dandy and Richard Rorty’s ironist. There are less self-assertive companions such as Heidegger’s Kierkegaardian-inspired authentic man, who is existentially thrown into the world that recognizes he has no possibilities beyond those culture provides and yet does not passively accept safe cultural preinterpretation of their identity. Instead, by resolutely affirming their thrownness, they locate their best possibilities within a given social order. Unlike the *übermensch*, authentic selves are more receptive than willful.

Here, I concentrate on Foucault who agrees Heidegger devastated the idea any social practice, including the social sciences, can determine the truth of humankind. There is no *arche* upon which one may ground their existence. Nonetheless, he rejected Heideggerian authenticity as passively accepting cultural possibilities

even as it actively chooses among them. As Dreyfus (1996) observes, “Heidegger stresses that we can only preserve endangered practices by being open to the gathering power of things, while Foucault insists on the willful and active resistance involved in transforming oneself into a work of art” (1). Indeed, Foucault (1983) implicitly contrasts his Nietzschean stance with that of Heidegger and Sartre when he says, “From the idea that the self is not given to us I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (237). I agree with Foucault about the superiority of creating new possibilities; however, one can immediately see there is a problem with postmetaphysical self-creation. There is no center of the self to serve as a fulcrum for creatively lifting oneself up. I prefer the notion of creating new possibilities out in the world as well as within ourselves. Accordingly, I also prefer the notion of creatively lifting each other up in community since we cannot go it alone anyway.

Foucault often acknowledges Nietzsche’s influence. For instance, in an interview Foucault (1988) insists, “Nietzsche was a revelation to me” (12). Foucault (1970) declares, “Nietzsche rediscovered the point at which man and God belong to one another, at which the death of the second is synonymous with the disappearance of the first” (343). Affirming the death of “God” and “Man,” Foucault commends celebrating self-creation at the funeral.

Besides rejecting the metaphysics of substance, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Dewey share a robust empiricism, emphasis on embodiment, naturalism, a reliance on genetic method, and surprisingly to some, the artistic-aesthetic solution to nihilism. However, Dewey’s understanding of self-creation diverges dramatically. I characterize Nietzsche and Foucault as offering an ideal of selfish self-creation that remains entangled with classical metaphysics and is antidemocratic in the case of Nietzsche and incompatible with robust democracy in the case of Foucault. I

contrast their selfish self-creation with Dewey's pluralistic, communicative, and democratic ideal of social self-creation.

Foucault's (1984) thinking about self-creation is ensconced within his post-Nietzschean, post-metaphysical understanding of late modernity:

I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by "attitude," I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. (39)

A "voluntary choice"? One finds odd traces of voluntarism and free will throughout Foucault—as well as Nietzsche's will to power—involving a foundationalism hard to reconcile with their rejection of classical metaphysics.

More than a relationship with the present, Foucault (1984) thought modernity a mode of "relationship that has to be established with oneself . . . an indispensable asceticism" (41). One's relation to oneself so absorbs Foucault that it becomes the chief focus for all three volumes of his final work, *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault (1983) carried out a series of interviews not long before his death (June, 1984) titled, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress." The work in progress was the third volume "History." Foucault remarked that "sex is boring" and that what he is really interested in is "problems about techniques of the self" (229). It is peculiar and constricting to make one's relation to the self central to a genealogy of ethics. Most people think our moral relations to others is as important as the "techniques of the self." I find Foucault's ascetic understanding of the modern relation to one's self narcissistic.

To elaborate his sense of modernity as an ascetic attitude emphasizing a special relation to the self, Foucault (1984) turns to Baudelaire:

[M]odernity for Baudelaire is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself [T]he asceticism of the dandy who makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art. Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not "liberate man in his own being." (41)

Foucault is right that the deep dark postmetaphysical secret of the self is that there is no deep dark essence at all. However, there is a serious problem with how he understands self-invention.

One might first strive to establish relationships with others wherein the partners transactionally co-create each other. One might also join with others to invent the world they share, and, thereby transactionally invent their selves. This is social self-creation. Foucault (1984) stridently rejects it:

[T]his transfiguring play of freedom with reality, this ascetic elaboration of the self—Baudelaire does not imagine that these have any place in society itself, or in the body politic. They can only be produced in another, a different place, which Baudelaire calls the arts. (42)

Meanwhile, Dewey finds the primary task of his philosophy of art to be that of "recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living" (LW 10: 160). For him, all social

practices are creative arts. For instance, “science itself is but a central art auxiliary to the generation and utilization of other arts” (33). Any artful social practice requires relatively stable warranted assertions. Indeed, when the art of statecraft is well informed by warranted assertions it can contribute immensely to social self-creation.

Foucault (1983) wishes to confine aesthetic experience to a putatively private domain:

For centuries we have been convinced that between . . . our personal ethics . . . and the great political and social and economic structures there were analytical relations, and that we couldn't change anything, for instance, . . . our family life, without ruining our economy, our democracy, and so on, I think we have to get rid of this idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures. (236)

This is insightful passage, but any Deweyan pragmatist will recognize the false self versus society dualism. Foucault shares this catastrophic error with not only Nietzsche, but also with Rorty, who writes in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*:

This book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable. It sketches a figure whom I call the “liberal ironist.” (xv)²

² Later, Rorty (1989) remarks, “Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics” (83). I do not agree, but a Deweyan pragmatist could reconstruct them. Anyway, Rorty is surely right about the role of

Surely there are individual acts that are truly private, although, as Dewey points out in the *Public and its Problems*, even the most private of acts potentially have public consequences. Contrary to devotees of selfish self-creation, a life of ordered richness, the fullness of one's freedom, and the aesthetic quality of one's self-creation depends on one's family and one's community locally, nationally, and globally.

When asked with whom subjects struggle for identity, Foucault (1980) answered, "I would say it's all against all. There aren't immediately given subjects of the struggle . . . Who fights against whom? We all fight each other. And there is always within each of us something that fights something else" (208). Foucault is alluding to Nietzsche's war of all against all. Narcissistic selfish-creation can readily instigate social conflict.

Early in his career Dewey articulated what he called "The Ethical Postulate" to which he remained committed:

IN THE REALIZATION OF INDIVIDUALITY THERE IS FOUND ALSO THE NEEDED REALIZATION OF SOME COMMUNITY OF PERSONS OF WHICH THE INDIVIDUAL IS A MEMBER; AND, CONVERSELY, THE AGENT WHO DULY SATISFIES THE COMMUNITY IN WHICH HE SHARES, BY THAT SAME CONDUCT SATISFIES HIMSELF. (EW 3: 323)

Unlike Foucault, Dewey finds a necessary link between ethics and social structures. The result is social self-creation:

The kind of self which is formed [created] through action which is faithful to relations with others will be a fuller and

democratic solidarity.

broader self than one which is cultivated in isolation from or in opposition to the purposes and needs of others. (LW 7: 302)

Dewey's postulate and his stance on social self-formation arises from his insight into the social nature of the self. Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty recognize the social self, yet they still seek an inner sanctum as separate as possible from social influence.

Foucault (1970) understands "knowledge has anatomico-physiological conditions" as well as "historical, social, or economic conditions" (319). These correspond nicely to the biological and cultural matrices of Dewey *Logic* (LW 12: chapters 2 and 3). There are anatomico-physiological and historical conditions of self-creation. Dewey recognizes what we would now call species-typical traits and behaviors (LW 10: 250). However, he also recognizes unique potential.

Biologically, there is the uniqueness of our genetic endowment found in fingerprints and the like in the biological matrix of self-creation. Besides first nature, the biological matrix includes second nature, "Habit is second nature" and "under ordinary circumstances as potent and urgent as first nature" (LW 13: 108). We acquire our habits from our habitat, which includes our social habitat, the social matrix.

In regard to social habits, prelinguistic responses to others condition habits of conduct. However, linguistic habits are especially important. For Dewey, "Mind is seen to be a function of social interactions" and "meanings forms the solid content of mind" (LW 1: 6 and 7). We acquire meaning by coming to agreement in social practices (see LW 1: Chap. 5). Dewey concludes: "Customs persist because individuals form their personal habits under conditions set by prior customs. An individual usually acquires the morality as he inherits the speech of his social group" (MW 14: 43). The social

environment cannot seize any two individuals in identical ways. Self-creation involves breaking old habits and acquiring new ones.

An environment is what enters our functioning; the rest is merely surroundings. The contingencies of being differentially distributed temporally and spatially alone are enough to assure that not even identical twins have an identical physical, biological, and social environment. Besides, not even identical twins have identical fingerprints. Of course, the distinction between organism and environment is only functional since, "The processes of living are enacted by the environment as truly as by the organism; for they *are* an integration" (LW 12: 32). Transactionally, if someone can recognize the physical, biological, and cultural environmental contingencies that condition their habitual conduct, they can re-create their selves indirectly by re-creating their habitat. Often the most important parts of the social habitat are people different from ourselves since they disrupt our habits and patterns of meaning making and thereby require us to form new ones.

There are three things I want to call attention to in the following statement of social self-creation taken from *Art as Experience*:

Individuality itself is originally a potentiality and is realized only in interaction with surrounding conditions. In this process of intercourse, native capacities, which contain an element of uniqueness, are transformed and become a self. Moreover, through resistances encountered, the nature of the self is discovered. The self is both formed and brought to consciousness through interaction with environment [T]he self is created in the creation of objects, a creation that demands active adaptation to external materials, including a modification of the self so as to utilize and thereby overcome external necessities by incorporating them in an individual

vision and expression. (LW 10: 86-87)

First, notice that the self is created in the “creation of objects” wherein the individual finds self-expression by overcoming “external necessities” and “incorporating them into an individual vision” while selfish self-creation emphasizes establishing an internal relation with oneself in “an indispensable asceticism” (*op. cit.*). Social self-creation requires establishing relations with other things and people. I want to concentrate on democratic social relations, which as in all relations, are transactional and reciprocally trans-forming.

Second, Dewey proclaims that “potentiality is a category of existence” (LW 14: 109). However, he reconstructs the classical notion of latent potential (*dynamais*) by eliminating the *entelecheia* since “these powers are not unfolded from within but are called out through interactions with other things” (109). In *Democracy and Education* Dewey proclaims: “Power to grow depends upon need for others and plasticity” (MW 9: 57). I am especially interested in pluralistic social interactions involving dialogues across difference, which include cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender differences to name only a few.

Third, notice that every individual has “an element of uniqueness.” This unique potential provides “anatomy-physiological conditions” for self-creation actualized (*energeia*) through interactions with the physical, biological, and socio-cultural environment. However, because potentialities are only actualized as consequences of interactions, “potentialities cannot be *known* till *after* the interactions have occurred.” (MW 14: 109). Dewey draws the obvious conclusion, “There are at a given time unactualized potentialities in an individual because and in as far as there are in existence other things with which it has not as yet interacted” (109). For human beings the most interesting “things” are usually other individual humans.

Dewey's two criteria for evaluating any society are: "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?" (MW 9: 89). The criteria call for pluralism within and without a given form of life. Both point toward creative democracy. "Only a philosophy of pluralism, of genuine indetermination, and of change which is real and intrinsic," Dewey declares, "gives significance to individuality. It alone justifies struggle in creative activity and gives opportunity for the emergency of the genuinely new" (LW 14: 101). However, because "Custom is Nomos, lord and king of all, of emotions, beliefs, opinions, thoughts as well as deeds," creative activity often requires shaking loose from cultural convention (164). Such loosening is important since, "Every invention . . . has its genesis in the observation and ingenuity of a particular innovator" (164). Foucault's "man" who strives to invent himself is valuable to democracy (*op. cit.*).

Dewey famously declares, "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (MW 9). Pluralistic communicative democracy becomes most creative in dialogues across difference. In Dewey's essay, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" human otherness and difference meets social self-creation in ways bound up with his democratic ideals:

To cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life. (LW 14: 229)

In "Time and Individuality," Dewey writes, "The ground of democratic ideas and practices is faith in the potentialities of

individuals . . . if proper conditions are provided” (LW 14: 113). Recall, “There are at a given time unactualized potentialities in an individual because and in as far as there are in existence other things with which it has not as yet interacted” (*op. cit.*). Self-creation is always social simply because we need others to actualize our unique potential, and especially others different from ourselves.

I agree with Hans Joas (2000) when he claims Dewey has a distinctive understanding of altruism as “the radical readiness to let oneself be shaken by the Other in order thereby to realize oneself with and through other people: as shattering intersubjectivity” (116). Narcissistic selfish self-creators present themselves as strong and independent of others precisely because they fear what the self-transcending, empathetic, altruistic democrat has the courage to embrace: the “shattering intersubjectivity” of co-creative democratic dialogues across differences.

Bibliography

Dreyfus, Hubert L. (1996). Being and power: Heidegger and Foucault. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*. Vol. 4 , Is. 1, 1-16.

Foucault, Michel (1970). *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage Books.

———. (1983). On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress. In: Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Rabinow, Paul. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

———. (1984) *The Foucault Reader*, P. Rabinow (Ed.) New York, Pantheon Books.

———. (1988) Truth, power, self: an interview with Michal Foucault, October 25, 1982. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, and P. H. Hutton (Eds.). *Technologies of the Self*. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press.

Garrison, Jim (1998). Dewey, Foucault, and Self-Creation. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 30, no 2, 1-134.

———. (1999). John Dewey, Jacques Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Presence. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. XXXV, No. 2, 346-372.

Joas, Hans (2000). Shattering Intersubjectivity. In *The Genesis of Values*. Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 103-123.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1882/1974). *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.). New York, Vintage Books. GS in the text.

———. (1901/1967). *Will To Power*. New York: Vintage Books. WP in the text.

Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Westerhoff, Jan (2009). *Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.