

PLAYING PHILOSOPHER
KING:
A DEWEYAN
(RE)CONSOLATION OF
PHILOSOPHY FOR
PANDEMIC TIMES
(AND THE TIMES TO
COME)

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He had a special term for this responsible preoccupation with his thoughts as he sat at his picturesque, secluded spot: he called it “playing king”—a childish term taken from the games of his boyhood, and by it he meant that this was a kind of entertainment that he loved, although with it came fear, dizziness, and all sorts of heart palpitations that made his face flush even hotter. And he found it not unfitting that the strain of all this required him to prop his chin—and the old method seemed perfectly appropriate to the dignity he felt when “playing king” and gazing at that hovering sublime image.¹

Prelude

As a philosopher, aspiring to live a life guided by wisdom, I’m compelled to admit that my daily routine seems trite in these trying times.

Shouldn’t a professor of philosophy such as myself, and more than that someone who aspires to live philosophy as a

¹ Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. John E. Woods, intro. A.S. Bryatt (New York, London, and Toronto: Everyman’s Library, 2005), 1164-1165, Apple Books.

way of life, have superior ways of navigating daily affairs during the pandemic? With self-disparagement, I wonder whether Henry David Thoreau is all too correct that:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. The success of great scholars and thinkers is commonly a courtier-like success... They make shift to live merely by conformity.²

Do I live a life of “simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust,” and does my work really “solve some problems of life, not only theoretically but practically?” Over the last few years of the pandemic, I have often felt all too impuissant.

² Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden, The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, 15th Anniversary Edition, Intro. John Updike (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 14-15.

For a long time, I awoke every morning to look at the COVID-19 numbers (especially hospitalizations and ICU cases) from across the world. The knot in my chest tightened or relaxed. But that was not the final predicator of my sense of the world. I then followed up on some news about rising authoritarianism in one of my two homes Poland or the U.S., or on rapidly accelerating climate change, police brutality, or some other story to make the world darker. A favorite news satirist may have made the update sardonically less painful. On particularly rough news days, I felt (and still feel) disturbed, as if I was in Eugène Ionesco's absurdist play *Rhinoceros*,³ where more and more people are transforming into rhinos (cruel, violent fascist creatures) and in their attempt to get through the day they accommodate their situation as reasonable; we accept this world as how things are going to be, and some part of me (as for many others), like Ionesco's protagonist Bérenger, violently resists this as wildly unacceptable. But despite this

³ For more, see: Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinoceros and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1994). Although it has been critically panned, I am very partial to the US contextualized movie version with Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder: Tom O'Horgan, *Rhinoceros* (1974; United States; American Film Theatre).

resistance, I too adjusted to the “new normal”. It is here where I feel as if my life goals and experiences ought to give me more, some guidance on just action and to not stand still as the world turns to its dark side.

I do have some consolation for this anemia. I have philosophical life and work. I turned the pages of Dewey and a pleasure of deep consolatory insight into the cosmos washes over me. I am then reconciled to my situation. I try to contain my excitement (and not raise my voice) as I explain to a student, whose eyes gleam with interest and recognition, Bergson’s account of duration and the limits of quantitative measurement. The new round of citations to my manuscript, that adds historical insight to a playful piece few will likely ever read, provides an enormous sense of accomplishment. Writing, reading, teaching, or discussing philosophy has a kind of reverie to it. There is a deep holistic pleasure in working through a new way of framing a philosophical idea, in reading a piece of clever writing, or in a shared relation to wisdom that is powerful and central to my philosophical experience.

I conclude this volume by seeking to justify, through the insight of Dewey, the value of such philosophical reverie as one step toward living philosophy instead of merely professing it. While I largely agree with Thoreau's criticism of much of academic philosophy, I will argue there is a redemptive feature, or rather opportunity, for academic philosophy to do more than to profess: there is in the life of the professor of philosophy, something essential to promote for the philosophical life in general both inside and outside of the academy. I want to show that that if properly channeled, the reverie we can find in professional philosophy is of value not only to just pragmatist philosophers or even professors of philosophy, but to us all, especially as we try to live a good, meaningful, and civically engaged life during these trying times. The challenge is to keep it in dialogue with broader cultural life, and not merely let it atrophy in rarified circles.

Thus, the essay, like Paul Cherlin's, has a different role in the special issue than the other pieces. While the purpose of the other essays to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Dewey to addressing these

pandemic times and/or contribute to related Dewey scholarship, this essay seeks to draw upon Dewey to show that especially in these hard times and the hard times to come there is something of value to the daily practice of professional philosophers that we ought to promote more broadly. The piece is then a Deweyan appeal to our readers to take seriously reverie now and for the future. It will not offer direct ways to address the pandemic and democratic crisis of our time, and might not offer much new insight to seasoned Dewey scholars.⁴ It will however strive to show the value within what professional philosophers do, if properly channeled, and why it ought to be promoted beyond our circles. While the lives of many contemporary professional philosophers such as myself may seem mundane, and indeed often are, as Dewey shows, our philosophical reverie — genuinely philosophical in Thoreau's sense — can be helpful for living meaningful lives and is perhaps essential for times of crises.

⁴ Though I hope it will provide some much-needed Deweyan insight in the emerging field of philosophy as a way of life scholarship.

Introduction

As a philosopher who loves teaching and sees it as primary to philosophical practice, I can now admit a guilty secret to you. It is such a commonly held secret that it could be said to be the rarely spoken but commonly known center of pursuing such a vocation. This secret will be in the vein of the kind of uncomfortable revelations Anthony Bourdain once revealed in his now classic autobiographical work about the restaurant industry *Kitchen Confidential*.⁵ So what is the “philosophical confidential”?

We so-called philosophers are best understood as those hooked on the feeling of doing philosophy. Were addicted “to the life of the mind”. Perhaps the main lure and sustaining feature of the philosophical life, academic or otherwise, is the opportunity to practice what the character Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain* calls “playing king”. It is the sense of the responsible and important consummatory pleasure of the play of philosophical reflection as its own

⁵ Anthony Bourdain, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* (New York: The Ecco Press an Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2000).

worthy value, whether in the reading, writing, teaching, dialoguing, or facilitating.

But why is this such a dirty secret? It may seem like a truism. Yet today it is the very thing modern scholarly philosophy is supposed to get away from. We rightfully, in the spirit of Dewey (and others) are trying to support a public facing, engaged philosophy and humanities⁶ that serves to make a better world. We seek to escape the doldrums of ineffective isolated ivory tower behavior. We want to justify holistic student-centered learning to a public and government who increasingly question the value of the so-called “life of the mind”.⁷

⁶ For a philosophy-based example from philosophy, see: Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggles, *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of Twenty-first-century Philosophy*, Collective Studies in Knowledge and Society (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016). For a humanities based example, see: Katina L. Rogers, “*Putting the Humanities PhD to Work: Thriving in and beyond the Classroom*” (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020). I find both works and their proposals laudable and headed in the right direction. Their proposals desperately need our consideration. I bring them up to point to our shared academic recognition that the value of the humanities and philosophy has been put into question, and there is a new need to show their efficacy in cultural life.

⁷ Although it’s a bit dated, for more on this subject matter I recommend: Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

This sense of duty to justify philosophy as more than a playful pleasure is heightened by the overlapping world crises we face as we read the news with a slowly growing sense of dread, grief, and in some cases with a consequent responsive commitment to action and organizing. To be frank, how can we defend the consolation of playing around in our reflective life as the world burns, as we face an ever-accelerating ecological crises, as black, brown, and other people of color are being murdered on our streets with impunity by police, as we try to manage living through a pandemic as countless people die, while others are left with long-term chronic health issues? How trivial is it then to meditate on the cosmos as a kind of intellectual play? Isn't it another form of racial, economic, and cultural privilege to do so with our own kind of impunity? It is almost as if we are playing music with Nero as Rome burns. Or at least so it seems. For, it is not only the condescending Straussian classicist cultist that has a right to the kingship of reflective play. For this play is vital, as John Dewey — a quintessential

model of an engaged public intellectual⁸ — shows us. Philosophical reverie is the vital chthonic foundation for engaged philosophy. He saw the vital role for the consolation and reconciliation of philosophy — and the reverie they manifest — in improving our lot, a role that is in some ways all the more essential during the hardest of times. In one of his last and only relatively recently found and published major works, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*,⁹ he made an explicit case for the value of what I am calling “playing king” as part of the unique metaphilosophical focus of that work.

In this essay I will argue what might be a surprise to some: that Dewey too thought the reverie of philosophy was vital and essential for fruitful cultural life, even if its products take time and unforeseen situations to manifest. It is essential for broadening the horizons for insight and meaning for all, especially when our creative capacities are

⁸ For more on Dewey on the role of the public intellectual, see: Kenneth Stickers, “John Dewey on the Public Responsibility of Intellectuals,” *Etica E Politica* 12, no. 1 (2010): 195-206.

⁹ John Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, ed. and intro. Phillip Deen, fore. Larry A. Hickman (Carbondale, IL and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press: 2012).

stifled by trying times. “Playing king” done properly can be mature and necessary play. Despite how it may seem, it is something to be kept in the best “Modern” (in Dewey’s sense of the term) Philosophy. Dewey saw two dimensions to this play of philosophical reverie. Reverie is not a dirty secret. Through reverie we reconcile, we enjoy the activity of reflection such that we reconstruct our situation. Through reverie we are consoled; we enjoy the play of reflection and in doing so, adjust to our conditions. Without these two dimensions of reverie, our imaginative capacities to find new connections and insights to resolve our problems is stultified. Together in both of its dimensions it offers a rich synoptic aesthetic perspective, forging new connections and insight that help us more deeply address our present and future problems, what I call (re)consolation (my term for the dynamic matrix of philosophical consolation and reconciliation). In this capacity, it is the philosophical dimension of any good life as well as the guiding lure for those who pursue it as the vocation of philosophy. As we shall see, for Dewey in our classed culture where dualisms abound such reverie is available only to the elite, and

becomes anemic and isolated in its value. Even more insidious, only in such a culture is the joy of intellectual reverie seen as a luxury for those in the top classes of society, while everyone else is expected through their sweat and toil to create the conditions for only a few. Professional philosophers struggle as we often imagine themselves as the elites who have time for the leisure of thought, while increasingly in adjunct roles that make us part of the ever-large global precariat class. Despite this precarious situation, we do love such reverie and are often seasoned practitioners of it. I believe we can channel and advocate for it in its effective mode.

Today it is crucial to do so, for in pandemic times it is easy for society's vision and problem solving to become narrow, sectarian, and irresolvable. From debates surrounding in-home remote schooling to vaccine mandates, we find ourselves falling into almost irresistible patterns of thinking, that even if morally justified, do all too little to create solutions that lead to democratic solidarity and move toward the better. The more "wicked" the problem, the easier it is to fall into dead patterns of thinking,

and stifle the broad reflective play that might afford new routes forward.

I will focus on Dewey's *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*,¹⁰ where he made this case most clearly. The goal of this piece will not be a holistic study of Dewey's view on the role of the reflective life in culture,¹¹ nor will it be a study of Dewey's overall argument in *UPMP*.¹² Rather, it will draw on Dewey's insights to make a Deweyan point about the value and role of the reflective philosophical life in culture, and why the reverie of philosophical reflection is vital just when times are hardest, and ought to be maintained and even expanded in the new global paradigm to emerge from our present situation. I will also rely on some of Dewey's other works, and secondary literature on Dewey, where needed to flesh out some distinctive aspects of this insight. Although it will take some time to get there,

¹⁰ Hereinafter *UPMP*.

¹¹ For more on the role of imagination and reflection in Dewey, see: Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 159-206.

¹² For a close study of *UPMP*, see: Philip Deen, "Introduction," in *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, XIII-XL.

by the end of the essay I will be able to make a simple but important point about the role of philosophy during these pandemic times and the times to come.

The Origins, Role, and Purpose of Philosophy

In order to appreciate how Dewey can help us reconcile with the reverie of philosophizing as being personally and culturally vital, especially now, we need to better understand his late account of the role and purpose of philosophy (broadly speaking). In *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy* (UPMP), building on previous work,¹³ Dewey attempted to further demarcate how the baggage that we took from the scholastic Greco-Christian philosophical tradition has hampered Western philosophy's ability to be present, effective, and meaningful in cultural life. The work

¹³ In particular, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920) and *The Quest for Certainty* (1929): John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899 - 1924: Essays, Miscellany, and Reconstruction in Philosophy Published during 1920*, The Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 77-202; John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925 - 1953: 1929: The Quest for Certainty*, vol. 4, The Collected Works of John Dewey, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press 2008).

contextualizes philosophy within his broader history and philosophy of culture. For our purposes a few threads of this complex and important story will suffice to lay out the value of the reverie of philosophy for Dewey.

Like his view of the emergence of schooling as presented in *Democracy and Education*,¹⁴ Dewey saw the emergence of philosophy as only happening after a society's symbolic network of meaning and practices becomes too complex to hold together through the habits instilled in small communal kinship groups. Philosophy draws on the new modes of social organization and arts that attempt to address the complex social life that cannot be passed down directly from one generation to the next through direct learning.¹⁵ The culture is now so heterogenous that it cannot fully grasp the import and connection of all its activities. Philosophy emerges to find a way to synthesize,

¹⁴ For more, see; John Dewey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924: Democracy and Education, 1916*, The Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 22-26.

¹⁵ For more, see: Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 14.

adjust, and reconstruct a culture's beliefs to the broad situation in which it finds itself. It is the task of "criticism of criticism"¹⁶ of identifying and dropping the baggage that no longer serves our present for our future.

Ironically, specialized domains (like the sciences) that give us the best insight into experimental adjustment to and control of new contexts are liable to miss the cultural clutter due to their increasingly narrow scopes of specialty. These continually restrictive specialties blind them from relations of our transacting world, relations that may serve our broader purposes. Philosophy thus emerges from a certain historical and cultural context to help adjust the situation in which it finds itself toward more progressive humane ends.¹⁷ "It is at home when engaged in criticizing, evaluating, clearing up, and systematizing socially

¹⁶ For more, see: John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925 - 1953: 1925, Experience and Nature*, The Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 298.

¹⁷ For more, see: Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 14-15.

conditioned beliefs.”¹⁸ A genuine *Modern Philosophy*¹⁹ is distinctive from *Unmodern Philosophy*²⁰ because of its experimental attitude drawn from the sciences; this attitude helps us inquire into better procedures of responding to and dynamically controlling our environments. This work, especially in its exemplary modern form, is not to be reduced to what is called “philosophy” by professional academics. In fact, for Dewey, the term philosophy is less important than the social function, what we are exploring is a certain social activity, whatever it is called.²¹ That said, professional philosophers do, at their best, value the reverie of philosophy that Dewey saw as vital, so long as it is not socially isolated. While Dewey saw the Modern Philosopher as more of a luring ideal — one might see here his fellow pragmatists, especially C.S. Peirce and William James as

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Hereinafter referred to in capital letters to distinguish it as a special Deweyan term.

²⁰ Hereinafter referred to in capital letters to distinguish it as a special Deweyan term.

²¹ For more, see: Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 148.

models of what he was after — he saw colleagues such as Bertrand Russell, who espoused liberal values but carried along inflexible shutters to certain aspects of the world, as distinctively Unmodern Philosophers.²²

The problem is the very kind of vocation tasked with this work (philosophy) has its own baggage from high scholasticism in the dualisms between “things and persons”, “mind and body”, “the practical and the theoretical”, “the material and the ideal,” and “nature and human nature,”²³ that in turn it has helped spread throughout Western culture. This baggage carries along with it a dogmatic obsession with one side of these dualisms as somehow superior, where certain aspects of experience are selected as the “ultimate better part of reality”. For the Greco-Christian tradition the ideal, the mind, reason, the universal, and the

²² For Dewey’s critique of the Unmodern aspects of Russell’s thought, see: *Ibid.*, 95 and 181 [for critiques of Russell’s kind of positivism, and of phenomenology, as two sides of the same Unmodern legacy], 143 [critiquing the dualism in Russell’s philosophy between scientific propositions and the interests and concerns of social life, including science], and 186 [historizing Anglo-Analytic Philosophy as Unmodern] 309 [in reference to Unmodern nature of logical atomism].

²³ These are the very chapter titles of the second part of *UPMP*.

eternal hold this reverence, and everything else becomes less real. For the materialist only gritty matter is real, with consciousness as epiphenomenal. This obsession with hypostasized aspects of reality is for Dewey malicious cultural clutter that philosophy has carried with it and promoted as essential, rather than recognizing themselves as cultural hoarders who can no longer find their footing in their own homes. Modern Philosophers “have at least some responsibility for clearing away the elements of confusion and conflict that are a legacy from its past.”²⁴ If Modern Philosophy is to have a future, it must articulate contemporary problems and present working hypotheses for their solutions.

One would expect Dewey to then conclude that Modern Philosophy, inside or outside of the academy, would have a commitment to engage directly in social action to improve society, and break the class dualisms inherited from the ancients and medievals that philosophy helped maintain up until the present. However, Dewey sees a much more qualified role for philosophy:

²⁴ Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 150.

It is not the business nor problem of philosophy to remedy the social evils which are presented in and caused by social divisions into a class that is instrumental in a somewhat menial and unfree sense and a class that directs the productivity of others and that finds its operations enjoyable in quality. The work to be done has to be executed by all elements of society working together; it is a social problem in the deepest sense of the word social.²⁵

The social action needed for reform will take all of society, not just philosophers. Philosophy's task is to help the effective connection of forces in society so that this work can be catalyzed.²⁶ What is important here is that for Dewey, philosophy's work is in many ways always general, synthesizing, and systematic. It takes a great deal of reverie

²⁵ Ibid., 284.

²⁶ For more on the catalytic role in social action philosophers might play as part of institutions of higher education, see: Leonard J. Waks, "Dewey and Higher Education," *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey*, ed. Steven Fesmire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 393-410.

to carry out that work in a way that brings about broader, healthier perspectives in a culture. It takes a childlike “kingly play”, and one that ought to be done with the very joy and aim toward *eudaimonia* that it seeks to support in all of society.

The Limitations of the Purely Theoretical Life

The danger with this “kingly play” comes when it transforms into a form of elitist navel gazing built on the backs of the suffering of others. This practice was all too pervasive in scholastic Unmodern Philosophy, which holds itself aloof from culture, perhaps, ironically, because of the inferiority complex its adherents feel about their passion for the reverie of philosophizing.²⁷ In particular, Dewey is concerned that this over-compensatory obsession with “pure intellectual activity” and knowledge is a troubling legacy from the Aristotelian tradition.²⁸

²⁷ For more, see the very last page of the work: Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 335.

²⁸ For more, see: *Ibid.*, 53 and 208 n.1.

Despite his swipes at academic “over-compensation” for their feelings of inferiority, Dewey did recognize that philosophical distance, at least in reflection, from cultural life was necessary for philosophical imagination to be synoptic. Such reflection is not the dead baggage of Unmodern Philosophy. Synoptic reflection makes the philosopher, distant from daily life and perspectives, and for that reason she “was almost of necessity,” seen as, “a somewhat suspect character.”²⁹ This peculiar nature is productive if one’s fellow community members can “recognize, in spite of novelty of form, material congenial to the spirit of their own lives.”³⁰ And in turn such communication with culture provided a philosopher with “protection against mere private speculativeness and intellectual eccentricity,”³¹ i.e. reverie that is naval gazing. If

²⁹ Ibid., 9. For more on the suspicious character of certain modes of philosophizing see my essay: Eli Kramer, “Philosophical Wandering as a Mode of Philosophy in Cultural Life: From Diogenes of Sinope to Cornel West,” *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 2, no. 3(5) (2018): 51–73, <https://doi.org/10.26319/5815>.

³⁰ Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 9.

³¹ Ibid.

the distance was properly held in productive tension, the philosopher could offer new holistic perspectives to her fellow community members that spoke and incited them from where they are to new richer plateaus of experience.³² The philosophers are great teachers in their luring, synoptic psychagogy. They do so instead of focusing on speaking to an increasingly isolated community which only appreciates a few specified relations of the world in a particular abstract context.³³

This view is often misinterpreted as Dewey criticizing leisurely contemplation as without social context, and being the very kind of rarified obnoxious work that makes philosophy intolerable to most and meaningless to the growth of culture. Dewey clearly dismissed such accounts:

There is no involved disparagement of contemplation and no love of action. What is objected to is the complete separation of the realm of

³² For more, see: *Ibid.*, 9.

³³ An issue further touched on in the essay previously mentioned: Waks, *Dewey and Higher Education*.

actual experience from that of reason and thought. Exemption of the conclusions of thought from responsibility to application in directing and enriching experience. . . signifies that experience must be left what it was: crude, blind, the sport of accident, changing only through catastrophe and revolution, or through the efforts of that not contemptible body of persons—politicians, industrialists and financiers—who are interested chiefly only in those changes in its make-up and course which are turned to their own ledger account of profit.³⁴

Dewey was concerned with what happens to contemplation that never returns to transactional experience from the clouds of reflection.³⁵ Not only do the insights of that kind of contemplation go untested, but in its dualistic form

³⁴ Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 52.

³⁵ For more on the limitations of inquiry that never “returns from the clouds”, see: Thomas M. Alexander, “Dewey’s Denotative-Empirical Method: A Thread Through the Labyrinth,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2004): 248-256.

contemplation leaves the regulation of affairs in the hands of the morally bankrupt career politicians, industrialists, financiers, and otherwise corrupt, who have little concern for others outside a usually very small circle of colleagues and family. In turn, this kind of isolated contemplation begins to disparage the environment from which it emerged and was meant to coordinate and advance. Reflection must care for the social life from which it emerged as part of our reconstructive activities or other petty task masters will take charge. Another way to put it is that without philosophizing taking its place in social life, the reflective aspect of culture will be taken by others for the purposes of their cruder ambitions, themselves a symptom of a dualistic and reductive cultural life that philosophy left to its own devices. The problem is not with the reverie of contemplation but with contemplation that is not emerging from and that cannot speak to and serve a broader social life. It serves not merely by resolving problems in some narrow sense but in affording holistic reverie for all, that is joy and empowered (re)consolation to respond and control what we can in our cosmic condition.

The Purpose of Philosophical Reverie

As mentioned, the aim of Modern Philosophy should be to experimentally bring together a perspective on the complex social circumstance in which we find ourselves that further advances the growth of culture through a new angle of vision. It brings together diverse aspects of the world into relation for our own purposes. This task is more than a mere vulgar ability to expand industrial capacity or maximize our ability to force nature to do our bidding. The over-valuation of the advancing material industrial conditions is but a re-instantiation of the old dualism between matter and the ideal, while privileging the other side. Our task is to bear the insights of experimentalism on all aspects of life to a more integrated perspective. Our immoral industrial conditions, from sweatshops in Vietnam to Amazon Warehouses in the US,³⁶ and dogmatic, anti-experimental moral life, show we

³⁶ For more on Amazon warehouse conditions, see: Michael Sainato, “‘I’m Not a Robot’: Amazon Workers Condemn Unsafe, Grueling Conditions at Warehouse,” *The Guardian*, February 7, 2020.

have much work to do.³⁷ This integrated task of Modern Philosophy includes helping us find a fruitful and rich life in a developing cosmos, to grow and flourish as we can. It is for this reason that Dewey noted:

It is sometimes said that the effect of philosophy is to make man morally and intellectually at home in his world: to reveal the universe as something congenial to man's highest and truest aspirations. Of the beliefs which are the background of philosophy, it may at least be asserted that they are means of providing a working adaptation of human attitudes to whatever is most profoundly stirring in the environment... Philosophies have accordingly been doctrines both of consolation and reconciliation and of control.³⁸

³⁷ For more, see: Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, Chapter 12: The Material and Ideal, 286-303. For more on this aspect of Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy see: Philip Deen, "Dewey, Habermas, and the Unfinished Project of Modernity in *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*," *Oxford Handbook of Dewey*, ed. Steve Fesmire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 537-551.

³⁸ Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 9.

While Dewey was rightfully concerned that sometimes the underlying beliefs of philosophy that offer a world fully congenial to us, never mind the best of all possible worlds, led to an optimistic, blind dogmatism, he saw positive value in the (re)consolatory consequences of philosophy. Here we already see a hint at how a Modern Philosophy can provide reconciliation and control. A Modern Philosophy through its experimentalist procedures “provides a working adaption of human attitudes to whatever is most profoundly stirring in the environment,” it helps us find an ever-developing space of tensive balance with our environment. Such a balance provides us a way to not only survive, but to thrive (i.e., to control our situation), and even find reverie, in our complex-problematic world, without assuming everything is all well and good.

But what did Dewey mean by suggesting this dynamically held punctuated-equilibrium provides both consolation and reconciliation at the same time? Dewey went on to say that:

Never has there been a philosophy which did not show a trace of both aspects [(consolation and reconciliation)]; they are the passive and the active sides of the same experience. Philosophies of peace and refuge have at least also been methods of securing control of one's own desires when administrative direction of the external environment seemed most hopeless. Never has control been so adequate that the men who advanced philosophies of command of nature or of the supernatural have not been obliged to console themselves with anticipations of a harmony not yet attained to.³⁹

Consolation and reconciliation are two sides to the same consummatory experience of finding this balance in our lives; from one perspective we are undergoing an experience of adjustment to the world in which we find ourselves (i.e., consolation). We consent to *amor fati*,⁴⁰ as

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰ For those interested in understanding more about *amor fati* in this conciliatory role in Stoicism, in particular in the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, I highly suggest turning to Pierre Hadot, the

the Stoics used to call it, to “love our fate”. Dewey reminds us however that even philosophical traditions such as Stoicism that have a strong focus on consolation, do so not to make us apathetic to the world and renounce it but to help us find control over what we can (including in political life) when greater historic forces become well beyond our control. A Modern Philosophy should support us to reconcile ourselves to what is within our melioristic powers now (i.e., reconciliation), instead of a renunciation of this world for a more perfect world beyond this life or to pretend this world is already perfect.⁴¹ It should incite us to act now for a better world to continually come. The doing aspect is this empowerment to consummatory reconstruction to what is within our control upon reflection. It reconciles us to our conditions now. Together as (re)consolation we are prepared to find consummation *within* the travails of the adventures of inquiry and its ever new problems. It is “a

modern herald of Philosophy as a Way of Life: Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), Chapter 7: The Discipline of Desire or *amor fati*, 128-182.

⁴¹ For more, on the failures Dewey found in this kind of optimism, see: Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 77-202 and 181-182.

means of indirect preparation for accommodation, on the organic side, to later events—a kind of preparation carried to its extreme in Stoic doctrine.”⁴² We can even console ourselves with a harmony yet to come in order to prepare for a challenging present, but not in a way that asks us to renounce contemplation’s firm footing in the soil of the social world. The harmony should help us get through the day of tilling the soil of social life. We should not trust to Providence for our garden to grow. We are not in the garden of Eden. We want a philosophy concerned in and with social affairs. It is in fact in such social soil where Dewey argued we find the richest kind of reflective reverie:

That it is fun, sport, a joy, to ‘think’ or engage in reflective inquiry is evidence that one and the same subject matter is capable of being both a direct manifestation of life-activities, their immediate enrichment, and an agency in effective anticipation of

⁴² Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 224 n.12.

subject matter which is spatially-temporally remote from the here-and-now phase of life-activity.⁴³

As we shall see, the (re) consolation of philosophy, the reflective life, is one that finds reverie in its emergences from and relation with the fertile social world of which it is a part and of finding the direction for the reasonably hopeful in its future prospects.

Reverie in Philosophy and Broader Social Life

We are now in a position to comprehend what Dewey meant by philosophical reverie. It is his name for the consummatory joy in reflection. It also has another name which we will learn shortly. He noted that reverie is a consequence of our so called “idleness or laziness”, “a condition which arises when we are not under pressure from environing conditions to engage in doing something overtly.”⁴⁴ What Dewey found to be a distinctly Unmodern

⁴³ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 267.

Philosophical heritage were two opposing ideas: that such leisure either should be the privilege of only a select few who “earn it” and are capable of using it for good, or that it is completely useless because it has no direct social application and is but the self-deluding fantasies of the elite.⁴⁵ Both accounts miss the crucial distinctions that need to be made in order to appreciate the value of reverie. As usual, a lurking dualism needs to be ameliorated.

For reverie is a sort of experience available to all, and productive and necessary in social life. It affords us time for the imagination to take flight and to make new synoptic connections in experience. The vista this flight affords allows us access to new relations with the world, new pathways of relating that would not have been seen in the narrow view of the everyday. Reverie names that experience, denoting its aesthetic value that is authentically

⁴⁵ For an analogous discussion about the need and space for recreation in social life, see: John Dewey, “The School as Social Center,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey: 1899-1924: Journal Articles, Book Reviews, and Miscellany in the 1902-1903 Period, and Studies in Logical Theory and The Child and the Curriculum*, The Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 2., ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 91-92.

valuable in-itself, and for that very reason serves our purposes all the better. It is both in-itself and for others in how the more authentically consummatory reverie is, the more it deepens and broadens new relations with the world that would otherwise be difficult to transact with:

I doubt whether any important invention involving great novelty has ever been made save after and because of intervention of reverie. The same thing may be said of the emergence of new hypotheses in science. Certain ways of “seeing visions” have always been recognized as conditions of significant advance. However, its normal, in the sense of regular, function is exhibited in the fine arts, when reverie bears the more honorific title of imagination. Any experience savored and enjoyed for itself is esthetic.⁴⁶

Reverie is unmasked as imagination, or rather imagination as the flight of reflection whose synoptic insight and consummatory joy in-itself make it an aesthetic experience

⁴⁶ Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 269-270.

that leads to novel creation, from the sciences to the arts. We commonly find this kind of reverie in the experience of the fine arts where its role as imaginative vista building is quite clear. Dewey himself would support such activity at Black Mountain College, where free reverie in a community of artists catalyzed modernist painting, dance, and poetry. Indeed, Dewey's own play of reverie in *Art as Experience* was a great source and influence on their ability to have an artistic practice that meaningfully influenced cultural life for the better.⁴⁷ One also thinks of Dmitri Mendeleev literally dreaming up the current structure of the periodic table of elements, after playing in reverie with many different possible ways of organizing it.

Dewey lays out an interesting tensive equilibrium here: wholistic reverie emerging from and returning to the world is what leads to great insight and social action, but it is also of value in its consummatory dimension as the flight of imagination in reflection itself. It just so happens that healthy reverie, which is an aesthetic experience (i.e., it is

⁴⁷ For more, see: David A. Granger, "The legacy of John Dewey's *Art as experience*: from Black Mountain College to 'happenings,'" *Studi di estetica* 4, no. 3 (2019): 149-173.

“savored and enjoyed for itself”), will bear the best fruit if we trust to the holistic value of such experiences for all. That is what he saw as happening at places like Black Mountain College. The trust is built on the insight that to synthesize and provide new angles of insight requires this intense flight of imagination unfettered from our normal rush of activity.

There is however another kind of reverie that is far more negative, one that is not a cursive dimension to experience to broaden and deepen our horizons through imagination. When one is alienated from the ability to participate in the value, meaning, and ends of one’s work and one’s work is mundane repetition (as with the alienating work of getting packages to Amazon customers with free two day shipping with Prime Memberships), we dream of an imaginary better world, one where our desires are achieved, but such fancy does not provide full consummatory enjoyment of present experience.⁴⁸ We are pulling away from the world to find passive consolation in an idealized world, and to reconcile ourselves to an

⁴⁸ For more, see: Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 269.

atrophied existence in this one. This is not consummatory and empowering life activity valuable itself and that will serve future ends, but the life denying wish fulfillment that Nietzsche railed against.⁴⁹

For Dewey, philosophical reverie suffers when only some isolated navel gazers can afford the experience, and when everyone else is reduced to negative reverie, to daydreaming instead of empowering insight that will benefit all. By advocating philosophical reverie as valuable for all, Dewey was not rejecting that some will take particular joy in this dimension of life, and take it up as a calling. Of course, this calling could appear in many kinds of positions, inside and outside of the academy. As discussed, academic philosophy is not what Dewey was focusing directly on in this discussion. For it is through flights of imagination that philosophy (and those engaged with it inside and outside of the academy) can provide synoptic

⁴⁹ For example, in *On The Genealogy of Morals*: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Moral*, trans. Douglas Smith, Oxford World Classics (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996).

criticism and insight about where we are and incite us to where ought to head. More than that, it is only

prejudices due to traditions which have divided experience into separate non-communicating, or water-tight, compartments alone [that] stands in the way of recognition that for some human beings persistent reflective investigation is an occupation of the same order as the arts designated fine.⁵⁰

Even if only a small group of people make this reverie a vocation, like all the “finer” things in life, we all benefit when we share in it to some degree.⁵¹

This reverie is indeed quite beautiful but tragically difficult to defend. Philosophy at its best is a delicate and fine art, one that we all benefit from as affording us broader perspective and insight. While a few become philosophical artists as a life vocation, unfortunately many see the cursive duration and reflective space needed to enjoy and revel in imaginative reflection that can be meaningful for social life

⁵⁰ Dewey, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*, 271.

⁵¹ For more see: *Ibid.*

as unessential, as a reward for only those on the top of the wave of civilization. We are supposed have much more immediate problems, even though we perhaps just as desperately need new angles of vision and their consummatory (re)consolation to survive and deal with such trouble.

Conclusion

I don't feel relieved by my own investigation. How many will read this essay, how much will my reflective reverie be able to influence social affairs with a new angle of vision, even if but indirectly? Am I a philosopher, or merely professing it as Thoreau warned? I somehow doubt the current conditions of the life of a middling academic philosopher afford so much good. That last statement itself reveals the deeper problem. It is not that the reverie of doing philosophy is not of value, nor that teaching and research is defamed by our deep abiding joy in doing it, but that the current structures and organizations of professional philosophy do not afford us much opportunity for the kind of reverie that can empower the agora. Far worse, the agora

itself is far too bereft of it. This situation leaves to others, especially authoritarian populists, to feed false promises of fulfilling the dreams of negative reverie.

This theme of the anemic role of current academic philosophy has dominated much of my work.⁵² The pandemic only heightens my sense of the irrelevancy of our conversations in the academy for our most pressing problems. What Dewey teaches us is that there is no shame in the reverie of the philosophical life. In fact, its (re)consolatory value is of the utmost importance for all. Our philosophical work (whatever else we do as citizens) is perhaps best served but catalyzing the energy and support of the front lines of improving social life. We do so through modeling and luring our fellows to synoptic visions which teach the adventure and power of imaginative reflection in-itself and its flashes of new synoptic insight for a better world.

⁵² For example, see: Eli Kramer, "Introduction: Richard Rorty as a Transitional Genre," in *Rorty and Beyond*, eds Randall Auxier, Eli Kramer, and Chris Skowronski (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), 1-16; Kramer, "Philosophical Wandering as a Mode of Philosophy in Cultural Life."

Our shame should be the condition of assuming such reflection is the sweet reward of those on Mt. Olympus. The dirty secret is that the academy is not aligned with all that philosophy can and should be. In fact, the academy often stifles the very reverie of philosophy we find most valuable for us and for all. Reverie should be fostered in all corners of culture. It is an emergent feature of a healthy culture that can respond to the most “wicked” of crises. Perhaps Robert Maynard Hutchins, the only American intellectual Dewey lost his temper with so much that he called him an authoritarian (and carrying fascist habits of thought),⁵³ had at least one idea that is warranted: that defending the space for intellectual reverie is of utmost importance, and if we do not defend it on its own terms it will be reduced to mere instrumentalization toward the most banal and reductive of ends.⁵⁴ The problem is that Hutchins clung to the old

⁵³ See: John Dewey, “President Hutchins’ Proposals to Remake Higher Education,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953, 1935-1937, Essays, Liberalism and Social Action*, The Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 11, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 400.

⁵⁴ For more on this view, see: Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936).

Unmodern clutter that ignored the experimentalist adventure of reflection where reverie in and relevance to cultural life are two sides of the same coin.

This classicist perspective has become impossible to defend and in turn overstatement about engaged work returns to the forefront. The real culprit, the labor conditions in which academics and the rest of society find themselves in, remains largely unchanged. In the smaller world of the academy, the dirt is in clinging to tenured labor practices that do not fully serve philosophical reverie: we leave many on the bottom to only enjoy reverie as the desire for a better more deserving academic career, one that is narrow in focus, and leaves social life bereft of teachers of the joy of reflection. The task before us in the new global paradigm is to defend the reverie of reflection for both those who are called to it as vocation and for all as a critical resource. It's the most vital of what we need, not some isolated privilege for the top of elitist hierarchy of needs, where only the top 1% deserve joy, where only the last few tenured can really get to the fun of what they love doing, where only a few white men are lucky enough to deserve to

flourish. The Deweyan (re)consolation of philosophy is not an elitist endeavor but a commitment to the idea that the reverie and pursuit of a good life is the most important thing we ought to be defending, whether it takes place in the office of a scholar or in the workshop of a master carpenter. Base compromises to fulfill so called basic needs never solves our problems because they are but abstracted sides of old dualisms that are never at the heart of the reverie of being alive, of forging new paths of imaginative relation that help us take control of what we can in the present.

In pandemic times, it is incumbent upon us to resist the tendency to treat reverie as idle speculation for “good times”, which seem far away from our horizon for the future. Dewey suggests to us that perhaps the greatest task of philosophy is to keep the play of the reverie of imagination alive to find new routes when the habits of the past, and the challenges of the present are particularly difficult. Philosophy is childish in a way, but Dewey all too well knew that children have wisdom that we forget as we grow older. As outlandish as it sounds, we need more reverie in these times instead of less, to untangle our

situation toward the reasonable better always available to us.

We ought to be like children in a sense and be playful kings
of our present, that is our best kept secret.