

Dewey and Frost on
Facts and Infinities

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The context for my paper is provided by some comments of Tocqueville in Democracy in America from the chapter titled "On Some Sources of Poetry in Democratic Nations." His intent is stated with the kind of clarity we have come to expect from him, and which renews, rather than merely confirms, our admiration for his genius. "I want to inquire," he says, "whether among the actions, sentiments, and ideas of democratic peoples, some are not encountered that lend themselves to the imagination of the ideal, and that one ought to consider for this reason as natural sources of poetry."¹ Tocqueville's inquiry is structured by his contrast between aristocratic and democratic peoples. The contrast is not flattering to democratic nations, at least not initially. In aristocracies, the people, he says "often display poetic tastes and their spirits sometimes soar beyond and above what surrounds them."² The situation is rather different in democracies where

the love of material enjoyments, the idea of the better, the competition, and the imminent charm of success are like so many spurs that hasten the steps of each man down the course he has embraced and forbid him from deviating from it for a single moment. The principal effort of the soul goes in this direction. Imagination is not extinguished, but it is given over almost exclusively to conceiving the useful and representing the real.³

¹Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America trans. and edited by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), Volume Two, p. 458.

²Ibid

³pp. 458-59.

There is little soaring in democracies, and what there is of it, must be a "useful" soaring. Effort is directed toward a better, but this is a decidedly practical better. And what is one spurred on by, what inspires the soul? Material enjoyments, competition, the charm of success. What is poetry to do in such circumstances?

Tocqueville balances this rather bleak picture of the prospects for poetry in democratic nations with the sincere reassurance that "equality does not destroy all the objects of poetry; it makes them less numerous and more vast."⁴ He does not explain, however, how vastness counteracts the effects of the restive, doubting American mind. Doubt he says, "brings the imagination of the poets back to earth and confines them to the visible and real world."⁵ One can imagine greater misfortunes than to come "back to earth," to return to "the visible and real world." It is clear, though, that Tocqueville regards such returns as the natural tendency of what he calls the "impatient desires" of democratic peoples.⁶ Poetry is, he says, "the search for and depiction of the ideal."⁷ So conceived, poetry is not likely to flourish in the midst of a nation moved by--inspired is too elevated-- "impatient desires."

In many respects, most of which are easily specified, Tocqueville's characterization--it is also a forecast--turned out to be inaccurate. As David Bromwich says: "Tocqueville simply did not bank on anyone like Emerson occurring."⁸ The list of those who Tocqueville "did not bank on" is very, very long, certainly not beginning or ending with Emerson. Yet, despite the fact that his characterization of American habits of mind with respect to poetry is manifestly deficient, it is profoundly important. It gives us a standpoint, or at least a starting point, to watch how some American writers do manage to "soar beyond and above what surrounds them." It also provides a standpoint from which to watch

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⁸David Bromwich, 'Literary Radicalism in America, in A Choice of Inheritance Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 148.

literary and philosophical criticism come to terms with poetry of patient desire, the kind Tocqueville thought unlikely to occur in democratic America. I mean by this a poetry--and criticism--which does not hurry our understanding of how there might be meetings, perhaps even borrowings, of the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible, the actual and the ideal.

The intent of my paper, or at least part of it, is to observe a few of the ways Robert Frost exceeds Tocqueville's expectations regarding poetry in America. Frost is perfect because, as I shall show, he seems so peculiarly vulnerable to Tocqueville's criticisms. Indeed, he almost would seem to take pleasure in being evidence for Tocqueville's criticisms. I shall limit my remarks on Frost to his early poem "Mowing," and further focus on just one line in that poem, "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." Why that poem and that line will become apparent as I proceed.

Now, the scope and substance of my paper could be set by Tocqueville's doubts regarding the future of poetry in America if that was the only realm of the life of the mind, and the life of the spirit, where he thought Americans were earthbound. This is not, however, the case. The title of Chapter 10, Volume Two, gives a good indication of the extent of his skepticism regarding not only poetry but also American science and philosophy: "Why the Americans Apply Themselves to the Practice of the Sciences Rather than to the Theory." Sheldon S. Wolin, in his book, Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life, discusses in some length what Tocqueville regarded as one of the bad tendencies of American democracy, that is, pragmatism. Wolin does not mean pragmatism as a school of philosophy, but rather what he calls a "popular philosophy." He says:

Not the least of the anomalies that Tocqueville found in America was a democracy with strong traditions of learning and an unsatisfied appetite for knowledge. Instead of meeting resistance, modern theory encountered pragmatism--"working" knowledge, not "idle" speculation. Americans displayed a marked affinity for the "real and tangible" and "a scorn of

tradition and forms." Their distrust of utopian speculation was rooted not in conservative fears of change but in a scientific temper. They preferred to remain "close to the facts and to study them in themselves."⁹

How Frost remained "close to the facts" has been the subject of a considerable amount of commentary on his poetry and prose. A large part of that commentary has been devoted to explicating the relationship of Frost to American pragmatism, specifically, William James. The Frost/James connection is an obvious one. While Frost did not study with James but rather with Santayana and Royce, he had considerable admiration for James and used James's Psychology when he taught at the New Hampshire State Normal School in the year 1911-1912. In the present paper I do not wish to comment on the Frost/James literature. Neither is it my intent to get Dewey into the picture by showing in any detail how much he has to offer Frost scholarship. My aim is more general: by integrating, or at least mixing, a few ideas from James, Dewey, and Frost, I wish to sketch some of the ways in which the pragmatist as poet and philosopher can attend to nature's "visible and real word" and yet not be confined to it.

Let us start with the poem:

Mowing

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound-- 5
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak

⁹(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 358-59.

To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows, 10
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.¹⁰

The meaning--let us be clear, the *pragmatic* meaning--of the act of mowing would appear to be simple and straightforward. Work needs to be done, tasks accomplished. But a question presents itself with regard to the doing, the fact: what is the scythe whispering to the ground?

The transcendent more, the transcendent "something" in Frost is sometimes an aspiration--towards the sublime, the sacred, the Good, God. Most frequently, it is a more that is reticent, shy, slight. This more does not point toward a hierarchy with an ultimate that measures and is not itself measured. Regardless of whether the more is aspiring or reticent, it must occasion more than what James Woods calls "mystical goose bumps."¹¹ Well, there are no "goose bumps" evident in "Mowing." Things are offhand, allusive, and playful. The atmosphere is skeptical, restrained, and brooding. In "Mowing" the reader attends to the mower's attending to something which invites and resists attention, that is, the whispering of a scythe. The mower essentially has two labors: cutting the hay and thinking about the whispering scythe. The former is decidedly practical, the latter far less so. The hay, the "spikes of flowers," the green snake, these are facts, nature's facts. But there is another fact, the scythe is "whispering to the ground." The mower is not conjecturing, imagining, inferring that the scythe is whispering. It is stated as a fact, as a natural fact. How does Frost remain "close to the facts" and at the same time not be confined to Tocqueville's "visible and real world"?

¹⁰Robert Frost *Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1972), p. 9.

¹¹*The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), p. 168. This phrase occurs in an illuminating but not entirely balanced analysis of George Steiner, "George Steiner's Unreal Presence."

When we seek to be practical we attend with care to the finite. To care about the practical, to be practical, is to care about finitude. To care about finitude is to recognize human limitation. The most obvious limitation in "Mowing" is intellectual limitation, at least initially: the mower wishes to understand what the scythe whispers to the ground but its meaning eludes him. Recognizing our limitations, recognizing the fact of our limitations, as well as the limitations imposed by the world, we push against them, we desire to transcend them. In its longest arc, this longing to do justice to the phenomenon is the longing for the unlimited, the infinite, the perfect, the Good. Stirred by a shorter arc of transcendence, we long for the improved and better; not the Good, but the Good Enough. And it is here that Frost demonstrates the kind of patience which Tocqueville did not expect to find in American poetry or philosophy.

Frost's own commentary on "Mowing" shows his bent, his philosophical inclination towards the finite. He says:

I often think in these poems that one line in them--
nearly every one of them, one line in them--has
something to do with my own philosophy of art; not
philosophy, but philosophy of art. Take that line there,
"The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows."
Doting on things, gloating on things, just dwelling on
things. Not getting up things, not exaggerating things,
not whooping things up, but just gloating. 1 2

This remark is often taken to be the essential Frost: this-worldly, practical, ironic, skeptical, especially skeptical of talk about transcendence and the supernatural, and always supportive of the claims of fact and finitude. In short, a poetic pragmatist, though certainly one of the very greatest in giving the natural its deepest and most revelatory attention. Nonetheless, he is, to use a phrase

12from a talk given at Bread Loaf School of English, June 29, 1959 in Reginald Cook, Robert Frost A Living Voice (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 133.

from Charles Hartshorne, a poet of "the merely pragmatic natural."¹³ There are worse things, and there are better things, but what is the better, the more, for someone who does not want to exaggerate?

What pragmatism cannot do and still be pragmatism, and what Frost cannot do and still be Frost, is aspire to transcendence interior to practice. In other words, for pragmatism and Frost, perspective annulling infinities are a temptation which we should outgrow because there is not, and cannot be, infinities internal to practices and facts. It is fruitless to deny the finitude we meet in the world of practice. We chip away at it, we try this and that, in short, we progress. Progress which is a result of intelligent practices does not hope for perfection that transcends historical finitude. The Frost pragmatic desire is finite: satisfactory resolution of the problem at hand, or in the case of mowing, the problem is in the hand, i.e., cutting the hay and determining what the "something" more is in the scythe whispering to the ground.

This is not the extent or limit of the pragmatic desire in Frost, i.e., the essential Frost. However, a careless reading of the following remark of Frost would indeed end the search for something more inside of practice:

I have a growing suspicion, that might line me up in disloyalty to the humanists, that nothing comes down from above but what has so long since come up from below that we have forgotten its origin. All is observation of nature (human nature included), consciously or unconsciously made by our eyes and minds, developed from the ground up. We notice traits of nature--that's all we do.¹⁴

"Line me up." "Come up from below," "From the ground up." "Up" is on Frost's mind, but its origin is always the ground, the fact, the finite.

¹³Charles Hartshorne, Beyond Humanism Essays in the New Philosophy of Nature (New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1937), p. 5.

¹⁴cited in Robert Faggen, Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 27.

It is not the sort of above we find in T.S. Eliot who says in his "Second Thoughts about Humanism":

Man is man because he can recognize supernatural realities, not because he can invent them. Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above. There is no avoiding the dilemma: you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist.^{1 5}

Eliot starts with the assumption of supernaturals, of infinities which exceed our intellectual but not spiritual grasp. Frost starts with the ground and if there is something more, it has developed "from the ground up." It is not hard to imagine who Tocqueville would find most encouraging for the future of American poetry. Note, please, that we do not have the situation of two great poets starting from different assumptions but reaching similar conclusions. No, the issue concerns the starting point.

Frost considers practice to be primary, to be the ground rather than itself grounded. He does not gladly receive talk about transcendence and does not find much to admire in the ways Emerson spiritualizes nature. So, what can Frost's "up" come to if he wishes it to develop "from the ground up" but without "whooping it up"? What does it desire?

And thus we come to the great line in Frost's poem: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." Interpreted from the standpoint of Tocqueville, the line expresses a caution, ultimately, a confinement. Of all the things that labor might desire to work on, of all the things it might dream of encountering or handling, fact is the "sweetest." The advice is fairly clear: Be careful, do not magnify facts beyond what they are. The finitude of fact regulates its possible meanings. Support for this reading is found in a comment by Frost:

^{1 5}in Selected Essays New Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1932), p. 433.

But people say to me: "The facts themselves aren't enough. You've got to do something to them, haven't you? They can't be poetical unless the poet handles them." To that I have a very simple answer. It's this: "Anything you do to the facts falsifies them, but anything the facts do to you--yes even against your will; yes, resist them with all your strength--transforms them into poetry."¹⁶

There is, as you see, a lot of doing in Frost's response. The facts do something to the poet, the poet does something to the facts. The poet may hope for great transformations from metaphoric imagination, but fact and not-fact will control and guide what the poet does.¹⁷ No infinities are necessary when the poet's choice is either falsification or resistance.

Frost knew his William James quite well, and he certainly found the following from James congenial:

For pluralistic pragmatism, truth grows up inside of all the finite experiences. They lean on each other, but the whole of them, if such a whole there be, leans on nothing. All "homes" are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless.¹⁸

James, of course, did not consistently hold this view and neither did Frost. If Frost was in concert with the Jamesian notion of the homelessness of finite experience, he was no less convinced of what James says in "The Sentiment of Rationality": "Our mind is so wedded to the process of seeing an other beside every item of its experience, that when the notion of an absolute datum is presented to it, it goes through its usual procedure and remains pointing at the

¹⁶Frost quoted in Thompson, II, 77-78.

¹⁷See Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in Rationalism in Politics and other Essays (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1962).

¹⁸William James, "Pragmatism and Humanism," in The Writings of William James, Comprehensive Edition ed. by John J. McDermott (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), p. 457.

void beyond, as if in that lay further matter for contemplation." 19 Our home may be in finite experience, but our vision is of something beyond these finitudes. James generalizes his point:

... in reflecting men it is just when the attempt to fuse the manifold into a single totality has been most successful, when the conception of the universe as a unique fact is nearest its perfection, that the craving for further explanation, the ontological wonder-sickness, arises in its extremest form.²⁰

In many of his greatest poems, Frost is, in James's words, "pointing at the void beyond," as in "For Once, Then, Something," "Desert Places," and "Acquainted with the Night." Yet, Frost would not fully endorse James for this reason: "craving for further explanation," "ontological wonder-sickness," and "pointing at the void" are not equivalent. Voids are not remedied by explanations, wonder is not occasioned solely by voids, and the beyond, the further, is not necessarily a void. Despite this qualification, Frost would be in total agreement with James: "Contemporary philosophers, even rationalistically minded ones, have on the whole agreed that no one has intelligibly banished the mystery of *fact*."²¹ And here, at the meeting of mystery and fact, we turn to Dewey.

Before looking briefly at Dewey, consider these statements of Frost. On the occasion of a reading at Mount Holyoke College on February 13, 1931, Frost said: "Always, always a larger significance. A little thing touches a larger thing."²² In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Frost expresses what almost sounds like a personal and

19 Ibid. p. 322.

20 Ibid.

21 "The Problem of Being," from Some Problems of Philosophy in William James The Essential Writings ed. by Bruce Wilshire (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 7.

22 Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 325

poetic credo: "My ambition is to have it said of me: He made a few connections. "23 And in another letter, Frost says:

My poems... are all set to trip the reader foremost into the boundless. Ever since infancy I had the habit of leaving my blocks, carts, chairs ...where people would fall over them in the dark. Forward, you understand, and in the dark.²⁴

What sort of poetic and philosophical desire runs through these statements? I think Dewey gives us something to go on in many places, but I shall limit my remarks to Human Nature and Conduct in particular, the chapter titled "Desire and Intelligence."

Although the book is subtitled "An Introduction to Social Psychology," it is, I believe, one of the few great 20th century contributions to philosophical anthropology. The chapter "Desire and Intelligence" is concerned with ethical matters regarding the ends of desire, and one sure way to blunt the force of Dewey is to exaggerate what he has to say about what he calls "ends-in-view." Call this, if you wish, the realist or perhaps even immanentist side of Dewey. The fact of man's finitude did not escape Dewey, and that which is immanent in experience was never far from his mind. But, it was not the only thing in his mind. In his pragmatism Dewey attempted to keep in mind the immanent and the transcendent, the finite and the infinite, or, in Frost's language, the finite and the "boundless." Is our deepest, our most important desire to remain, as Tocqueville says, "close to the facts," close to the finite and the tangible? Dewey says:

In a genuine sense every act is already possessed of infinite import. The little part of the scheme of affairs which is modifiable by our efforts is continuous with the rest of the world. The boundaries of our garden plot join it to the world

²³Robert Frost, Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, ed. by Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 189.

²⁴Selected Letters of Robert Frost ed. by Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 344.

of our neighbors and our neighbors' neighbors. That small effort which we can put forth is in turn connected with an infinity of events that sustain and support it. The consciousness of this encompassing infinity of connections is ideal. When a sense of the infinite reach of an act physically occurring in a small point of space and occupying a petty instant of time comes home to us, the meaning of a present act is seen to be vast, immeasurable, unthinkable. This ideal is not a goal to be attained. It is a significance to be felt, appreciated. Though consciousness of it cannot be intellectualized (identified in objects of a distinct character) yet emotional appreciation of it is won only by those willing to think.²⁵

The central point to make should be obvious, but it seems to have eluded many of Dewey's supporters and detractors for a century. His pragmatism is sympathetic to, in certain respects, dependent on, a non-perspectival metaphysics. In other words, infinity was not a bad word for Dewey, a sort of cosmic wrong direction along his usual path of hypotheses tested, problems solved, finite ends achieved. An "encompassing infinity" is not simply a backdrop or background for what happens in the foreground, the serious work of deliberating and acting. It is, Dewey says, a "significance to be felt, appreciated." Meaning and value are not to be found solely in that which is near, useful, explicit, and finite. Pragmatic desire has a longer and more indefinite arc than a problem solved, an inquiry concluded.

Santayana did not see Dewey this way, and in his well-known remarks on what he calls "the dominance of the foreground," he manages to neglect what Dewey explicitly affirms. He says:

Pragmatism may be regarded as a synthesis of all these ways of making the foreground dominant: the most close-reefed of philosophical craft, most tightly hugging appearance, use, and

²⁵John Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology (NE York: The Modern Library, 1922), p. 262-63.

relevance to practice today and here, least drawn by the lure of speculative distances. Nor would Dewey, I am sure, or any other pragmatist, ever be a naturalist instinctively or on the wings of speculative insight, like the old Ionians or the Stoics or Spinoza, or like those many mystics, Indian, Jewish, or Mohammedan, who, heartily despising the foreground, have fallen in love with the greatness of nature and have sunk speechless before the infinite.²⁶

For Santayana, the pragmatist's effort is oriented to the near, the close. For Dewey, effort ought to be oriented to the "encompassing infinity of connections." These connections resist formulation, yet they provide a lure for precisely what Santayana denies to Dewey's pragmatism, i.e., "the lure of speculative distances."

Stanley Cavell has continued this tradition of compressing Dewey from the top, of denying Dewey much of a say in matters as lofty as the spiritual. In his Introduction to Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism, Cavell says:

Dewey's picture of thinking as moving in action from a problematic situation to its solution, as by the removal of an obstacle, more or less difficult to recognize as such, by the least costly means, is, of course, one picture of intelligence. Intelligence is to overcome inner and outer stupidity, prejudice, ignorance, ideological fixation. Intelligence has its beauties. Wittgenstein's picture of thinking is rather one of moving from being lost to oneself to finding one's way, a circumstance of spiritual disorder, a defeat not to be solved but to be undone. It has its necessities.²⁷

For the spiritually sensitive Wittgenstein, thinking involves "finding one's way"; such finding may involve action but it is action inspired

²⁶George Santayana, "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics," The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. XXII, No. 25 (Dec. 3, 1925); reprinted in Dewey and His Critics ed. by S. Morgenbesser (New York: The Journal of Philosophy, 1977), p. 349.

²⁷(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 21.

by "spiritual disorder." For the well-intentioned but spiritually adolescent Dewey, "finding one's way" is a problem not very different from finding one's way on the streets of an unfamiliar city. All the better if one is efficient in action and finds one's way "by the least costly means."

Rather than judge Cavell's view of Dewey's pragmatism to be mistaken and unsubstantiated, let us say that it takes the path of least resistance. In "Desire and Intelligence," in the paragraph immediately following the one I quoted above, Dewey says:

...there is a point in every intelligent activity where effort ceases; where thought and doing fall back upon a course of events which effort and reflection cannot touch. There is a point in deliberate action where definite thought fades into the ineffable and undefinable--into emotion.²⁸

One could say that this is a picture of the exhausted pragmatist, the pragmatist who is too tired to do any more. One could also say that it is the picture of the pragmatist who understands that the meaning of this act--the "infinite reach" of this act--is "vast, immeasurable, unthinkable." This is the pragmatist for whom the circumstance of "spiritual disorder" invites attention to intangibles and invisibles--to whispers really--which "effort and reflection cannot touch."

Very much like Frost, Dewey does not like "whooping things up," and thus his examples almost always begin with the familiar and ordinary. A garden plot is certainly no exception to this generalization. Garden plots are a wonderful symbol of nature as fact and our of desire to cultivate nature through human labor and effort. But garden plots are also Dewey's symbol of our desire to cultivate our human nature and to strive for what surpasses us and summons us beyond the tangibilities of the foreground. Reference to actuality, fact, is necessary, but so too is reference to the "encompassing infinity of connections" between facts. What was the scythe whispering? We do not know, but often, in the very midst of our most practical labors and efforts, we have a sense of what Dewey calls their "infinite reach." We attend to meaning that is

28Human Nature and Conduct pp. 263-64.

"vast, immeasurable, unthinkable." The large meaning, the transcendent meaning of gardens, efforts, facts, and dreams is not a desire for absolute, definite, or unconditioned meaning. "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" reminds us of the indistinct mixing of the immanent and the transcendent in our most and least effortful strivings.

At such times as these, Frost and Dewey show pragmatism to be something quite other than the "most close-reefed of philosophical craft, most tightly hugging appearance, use, and relevance to practice today and here" Neither Dewey or Frost want to stray very far from truth and thus the brilliance of Frost's line: "Anything more that the truth would have seemed too weak" The scythe's whisper is a mere whisper. Is that the truth? The scythe's whisper is more than a whisper. Is that the truth? Frost and Dewey agree: we cannot hug the shore of the definite and useful if we would seek the truth of a scythe's whisper. So, let Melville's Ishmael, the sailor/seeker, have the last word: "But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God--so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!"²⁹

²⁹Herman Melville, Moby-Dick or The Whale Ed. by Charles Feidelson, Jr., (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1964), p. 149.

Portions of this paper are adapted from the author's book, The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

MOWING

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Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct (MW 14: 180)