

Pragmatism and Privilege in the Crafts Including Teaching

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This paper critically examines the legacy of Deweyan pragmatism for its role in shaping the present cultural status of the crafts, including the practice of teaching. It reveals how the prospect of overturning classical antipathy towards the crafts through Deweyan pragmatism, is overtaken by scientism. Dewey's scientism misrepresents the role of habit in history and naively portrays the way in which habits are cognised in the virtuoso enactment of a practice. The paper concludes that a lingering pragmatism in the West presides over the gradual extinction of professional autonomy in the practical arts.

There is a clear dependency between the social status of the artisan and the epistemological standing of their crafts in ancient Greece. The ability to know in archaic thought relies upon the artisan's skill in uncovering a world in which the truth can be likened to a hidden adversary. Homeric truth is depicted in epics of discovery enacted within a hierarchy of clearly defined social roles. It is hardly surprising, then, that the socially codified skills of the archaic artisan are deeply implicated in the portrayal of knowledge. In as much as it is attached to the properties of things, rather than socially codified skills, however, the hunt for knowledge in classical thought gives way to private contemplation. But even in classical thought the exercise of rational autonomy in the contemplation of universals is nonetheless socially exclusive. The Platonic ability to disengage from the detail of everyday practical affairs is not restricted to individuals with the innate aptitude for abstract thought as is widely believed today. Rather it is a pursuit reserved for the aristocratic amateur who has sufficient economic freedom and the leisure for noble reflexion. The origins of the association between the power of abstract thought and superior mental resources normally drawn in contemporary education, is thus revealed as a profoundly social relation.

John Dewey's early twentieth century instrumentalism is devoted to restoring practical action to the forefront of human intelligence. Through his critique of the classical division between the virtue of thought and the falsity of labour, Dewey appears to confer new intellectual status on the crafts and trades. Dewey argues that the social oppression of the Greek artisan is "purely and unfortunately" responsible for subverting the development of scientific technology in the classical period, and for the delay in its development in Western culture. In a radical inversion of classical orthodoxy Dewey asserts that it is the practice of the artisans rather than of the sophists in fourth century Greece that is paradigmatic of intellectual thought.

At the core of this proposal is Dewey's notion of "ends in view". The concept of ends in view is at once an ontology, an ethics and an epistemology. "Ends" for Dewey are the active representation of an ongoing engagement with live events. Ends are not universals arrived at by contemplation. Authentic ends are experienced and made intelligible by their enactment within local contexts. Only in retrospect, as a reflection on the experience of past engagements, may ends be treated as formal abstractions. The existence of ends is coextensive with their enduring as an ongoing cycle of reflexive ("in view") interactions by humans with their environment. The truth of ends is realised in their reference to the solution of practical problems emerging within the conventions of particular rather than universal contexts. A belief in the conventionality of "ends in view" reaffirms Dewey's faith in the virtue of the tradesman whose skills and knowledges, he believes, are derived from habit rather than theoretical principle.

A truth built upon the diversity of particular forms of knowledge is the quality that distinguishes Deweyan pragmatism most markedly from the essentialism of classical epistemology. For Aristotle, the possession of *techne* did not mean that a person had control over the ends of what they produced. The essential form of artefacts, their teleology, was a question for philosophers to ponder, not artisans. Dewey on the other hand, regards teleological principles as tools and methodologies not as rules. The application of a rule

might be valued "as a principle" only in the result of its usefulness. Dewey's instrumentalism converts the sciences and humanities from bodies of knowledge into modes of inquiry. Art, even "thought" itself, Dewey views as a tool. In this sense he is a behaviourist. His is a brand of behaviourism in which the existential properties of things are considered to be redeemable only when re-applied as functional grist to the mill of further inquiry. The nature of things is shaped and reshaped by the conditions of their use. As tools, artefacts, even ideas themselves, are invested with properties and made valuable by their repeated application at any time in any particular and relevant context.

Dewey is consistent in his view that the value of an artwork is judged against its success within the conventional contexts in which it was commissioned. There are no good or bad pretexts for art, and thus no hierarchical distinctions between fine art and the crafts. The purposes and values of art are contemplated retrospectively. The design of a kitchen table is artistically authentic if it sets to its ends in ways that "work". A design "works" when it integrates the relation between ends and means in a manner that keeps faith with the context of its inquiry. Significantly, Dewey holds the beholder/consumer as much responsible for the success of this inquiry as he does the skill of the artisan. Even the appreciation of artworks that have been brought to a satisfactory conclusion by the artisan require beholders to "re-create" the finished work through their personal experience of it. Aesthetic immediacy must be re-worked into the nature of "an experience", because the aesthetic cannot work unless repositioned into a form that can be wielded as a reflexive tool of inquiry.

Pragmatists at large, including the early Heidegger himself, assess all knowledge and skill as if it was a tool at hand. They have a tendency to treat artistic performances as if they were at the unqualified disposal of the maker. This despite the fact that materials, tools, the secrets of the guilds, even finished artefacts themselves, impress their existential authority on the maker. While architects, for instance, anxiously reassure each other that CAD systems are harmless tools at their creative disposal, they may overlook the way that even the simplest building materials can 'corrupt' their designs. Architects not only use brick because it represents a good fit with some 'problem' at hand, they also surrender tacitly to brick's 'authority'. Tables are not necessarily designed to serve a need, nor solve a 'problem' at all. To some extent domestic needs are complicated by the 'neurotic demands' imposed by the convention of tables. Solutions to practical problems at hand are as much constructed by the rhetoric of everyday objects as they are shaped by the impetus of cultural needs.

Comparing the later Heidegger's anti-instrumental historicism with that of Dewey, Richard Rorty contrasts Dewey as a kind of "superscientist". Dewey's opposition to representing ethical and practical ideals in the form of grandiose metaphysical schemes may very well be shared by Heidegger, Rorty argues. But Heidegger could never ascent to the scientific "study of human nature" that Dewey poses as the alternative to grandiose metaphysical solutions. Heidegger rejects any form of instrumental interpretation of the forces of society and habit. He is opposed to the way in which experience captures for Dewey the essence of what was done, what is likely to happen, and what ought to be done next. Heidegger, says Rorty, sees the calculated use of experience in the crafts, including the "use" of language itself, as producing little more than so much static, drowning out the voice of time and culture at work within their practice. Heidegger's *Being and Time* was "...a proposal to teach us a new way of talking - one that would let us ask about God or Being without thinking of ourselves as superscientists." Heidegger doesn't use methodology in these contexts at all. He doesn't put the *habitus* to works as the pragmatists do. Heidegger embraces science but only as a way of generating knowledge. Science is not to be used as a way of adding truth to metaphysics, but as a way of testing propositions against "explicitly formulated public criteria". Thus Heidegger's rejection of pragmatism is not so much an attack upon technology as such, but an attack upon its use as an instrument of ethics. It represents a form of instrumentalism that he sees as originating with the reification of thought in the

Roman world and one that Heidegger despises. It is an instrumentalism that marks the corresponding entry of justifiable reason as the basis for an ethics of traditional practice in Western thought.

Platonic humanism moulded a corresponding uniformity of interpretive thought in the classical world that gathered intensity in the Hellenistic period. The reification of thought imposed increasing ethical constraints upon the structural diversity of Roman epistemology. "This conformity became involved with the notion of truth as *rectitudo*, correctness, *adequatio*. Truth as *veritas* and *rectitudo* passed over into the *ratio* of man." The gradual transfiguration of archaic *metis* into the *ratio* of the Roman world, Heidegger argues, instituted the attachment of a superior morality to rationalised truth that reserved the expression of moral virtue for the practice of theoretical sophistry. Any domains of social activity that were unsupported by the virtue of a *ratio*, that is, unendorsed by explicit theoretical frameworks, such as the traditional trades, were tainted with the ignominy of falsehood and unreason. Trades persons were numbered among those who lacked control of their own identity because, for something "to be", meant to know the causes or reasons which effected the way that things took up their teleological form. Divested of their past cult meanings and deprived of rational explanation, the handicrafts were stripped of virtue and relegated to the status of servitude. No amount of technical skill in their practice could compensate for this lack, and the social division between virtue and virtuosity was cemented.

Practical authorship of the truth re-emerges as an issue during the latter half of the twentieth century in the realist philosophy of the latter-day pragmatist Donald Davidson. Davidson highlights the egalitarianism implicit in the role played by the everyday use of language in formulating true assertions about the world. Egalitarian questions are raised where ever the assumption prevails that some form of privileged conceptual scheme is required to arbitrate the relation between language and the objects to which it refers. But the very idea of the existence of such schemes is framed against what Davidson regards as the false separation of language from the world. Self consciously framed conceptual schemes, groomed by a specialised philosophy, constitute questionable metaphysical systems that beg the very question of reference. Davidson favours referential truth as that resulting from the extension of generosity to those "practicing language in the field". Those practicing in the field include linguist anthropologists encountering a new language spoken in its natural setting for the first time. People encountering a spoken language for the first time, without lexical support, cannot rely upon universal meaning structures, such as those detailed by Lévi-Strauss, or upon some other form of principled conceptual framework for their translation of native meanings. When all is cleared away their only hope of support comes from the generous assumption that, when speaking of their local encounters with the world around them, these native speakers will speak of them truly. Insofar as the objects of native speaker's beliefs are inferred though experiences shared within the context in which their language is spoken it is, in the final analysis, real objects themselves which cause beliefs about the way in which language refers to the world and enable translation. Thus there is nothing more to grasp about the relation between the use of language and the reality to which it refers than can be accommodated in the causal relation between objects and the practice of saying things about them. There are no middle terms arbitrating what form, in general, these causal relations ought to take. Thus objects cause references made about them to be true as the result of inter-dependence between what words mean and the way the world is.

But this doesn't imply that a truth maintains its status as the result of the causal "explanation" it provides. For instance, even if we say that 'the artist captures a feeling of coolness in the painting', or that 'the teacher uses an appropriate analogy' we can state these assertions as true insofar as they are caused by 'the feeling of coolness' or by 'the appropriateness of the analogy' in a disquotational sense. These assertions, Davidson

argues, are not predicted by a theoretical scheme. By unharnessing the truth from privileged conceptual schemes Davidson foreshadows ways of unhitching practice and the crafts from the need for such schemes of their own. Following Davidson the truth of practices is affirmed in the generosity extended to what is evident in their performance, that is, in the practical equivalence of their ability to "speak the language". The truth of a practice does not lie in its reduction to a set of privileged rationalisations.

Teachers, craftsmen and practitioners at large are definitely handed back the opportunity to write their own professional rules under Davidson's radical proposal in a way that dispenses with the rationalisations of grand theory. However, the scientific experientialism of Deweyan pragmatism is still implicit in Davidson's otherwise egalitarian principle of charity. The Quinean processes under which experience is converted into the terms of practical explanation are culturally naïve. What is missing in Davidson is the European legacy of imparting an independent cultural function to the reflective participant via the agency of knowledge practices. Power and tacit agreements, the tricks which belong to practice and the trades, function within a social space as well as within, but parallel to, the practitioner. Thus it is by no means clear under pragmatism how, and under what cognitive terms, these cultural agencies, or habits, are able to enter into the practice of the craftsman.

Pierre Bourdieu rehearses this praxiological point in his theory of symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is the primary currency of exchange in the practices of the social economy. It is expressed in the types of social value underlying the *habitus*. Social values are redeemed or 'cashed in' in the token exchanges of day-to-day social relations. Fluent participation in this exchange is explained as the ability to distinguish the materiality of the tokens of social transactions, from the symbolic properties of the underlying social types they represent. A cornerstone of the exchange of symbolic capital is its reciprocity. The notion of reciprocity is shaped around the archaic "project of the gift". A person who participates in the practices of gift exchange is marked as one who is "...socially disposed to enter, without intention or calculation, into the game of the exchange". The gift is only a token however. Thus the reciprocity of symbolic transactions, such as gift giving, involve expectations of mutual understanding on the part of the giver about the motivations of other social participants. Otherwise the token quality of the gift might be misrepresented and taken as an insult by its recipient. In gift giving it is always a question of whether what has been given is appropriate to the symbolic content of the occasion. To be respectful of others is to possess social reasoning of sufficient subtlety to nuance the tacitly agreed social order betokened within an exchange.

Nevertheless, the key to reciprocity in the giving of gifts is registered in the symbolic asymmetry of the exchange. Symbolic asymmetry is expressed in denial of the instrumental value of the token exchange for relevant social 'reasons'. The agent "...either ignores or denies its objective truth as an economic exchange" by leaving its motive implicit or, by stating it through euphemisms - the "language of denial".

Practical euphemisms are a kind of homage rendered to the social order and to the values the social order exalts, all the while knowing that they are doomed to be violated.

It is no accident, Bourdieu remarks citing Benveniste, that the vocabulary of the archaic economy is entirely made up of double-sided notions that are condemned to disintegrate as, over time, the "social mechanisms sustaining them are weakened".

For pragmatists pedagogy that attempts to bring the socio-economic critique of culture to students is only able to justify the use of this critical methodology as far as it informs and emancipates their individual experiences. Of course, the reflective use of cultural agency for

purposes of critical deconstruction needs to be differentiated from the ironic forces exerted by cultural agency insofar as these forces enter into the actions of teachers and students. For instance, when teachers alert young students to the way in which their naïve palettes are commercially exploited by the food served at *McDonalds*, teachers are not merely warning students against the abuses of a global corporation. They are also being critical of their student's childish tastes. While on the one hand, under the explicit auspices of culture theory, teachers may claim the food served by *McDonalds* ought to be respected through the democracy of popular choice, they simultaneously imply, on the other hand, that the food at *McDonalds* ought to be condemned for pandering 'irresponsibly' to the values which underlie that choice. Pedagogical practice can be conducted as easily through the back door of disapproval as through the front door of cultural critique and respect for individual experiences.

Pragmatism overturns many of the classical assumptions about the crafts. The pragmatic egalitarianism and practical simplicity of Dewey's attitude to art and craft contrast dramatically with the classical elitism of his British contemporary Collingwood. However, it is questionable whether pragmatic instrumentalism provides the professional redemption for the crafts that it promises. Pragmatism fails to detail how the individual artisan/practitioner, even one working within a liberal and bureaucratically uncomplicated community, can be ensured against corruption by expediency. External contingencies such as commercialisation and privatisation, for example, impose constraints on a practice that can just as easily destroy as reform it. How does a pragmatic system evolve and transform itself when, in Dewey's own terms, the "tools" of thought, broadly defined, have no implications for the direction of practice? The crafts may function within the deterministic context of real life, but their content, solutions and significance depend for their survival upon conventions embedded deeply within their own traditions. Real contingencies, such as the ends and means that, for Dewey, authentically determine the shape of a kitchen table, have no implications for the practice of furniture design, because they are inexplicably emergent within it. If instrumentality is ever ascribed to artefacts, even to natural kinds, their instrumentality is always normatively derived. The application of these norms themselves is inaccessible to reflexive experience and any pragmatic attempt to retrieve them is condemned to an infinite regress.

Pragmatists provide no behavioural evidence that their methodological attitude towards knowledge will slow the momentum of social and intellectual prejudice levelled against the crafts. In particular, there are no pragmatic grounds for believing that a theory of intelligence modelled on practical inquiry is likely to favour an extension of the presence of traditional crafts and trades in schools and universities, nor raise their professional status. It is more likely that the crafts, under Dewey, have lost the one advantage they already have, namely their conventional and historical uniqueness. Dewey has done, in theorising the crafts, what Derrida could see should not be done in theorising texts. Rather than re-theorising the "*differance*" that furnishes the various crafts and trades with their singular histories Dewey, in exploiting the trades as an instrument of experiential thought, as if they were any other theoretical domain, provides universalist grounds for their redundancy.

The legacy of pragmatism in recent cognitive theory lends credence to this assertion. In current learning theory, for example, domain specific knowledge in the disciplines is rationalised into clusters of innate modular "thinking skills" or intelligences. Modular skills are mentally deployed by the knower in the solution to tacit representational "problems" of knowledge. Conceived as innately uncommitted tools of inquiry, modular intelligences appear to model themselves on the pragmatic instrumentality of the crafts; in as much as 'thinking' is made over into an allegory of virtuoso performance applied within a history of relevant cultural ends in view. In effect, "modular thoughts" are little less than functionalised forms of rationalised universal, self-regulating Cartesian mechanisms that refer thinly to the



idiosyncratic virtuositities of the crafts. Despite its fair minded promise to the trades pragmatism adds yet another form of Roman *adequatio* to be used for their academic and professional marginalisation.

Conclusion

North American pragmatism fails to explain how social agency, which lies ironically at the heart of pragmatic understanding, enters into the actions of individuals. Perhaps it is irony itself that escapes the pragmatic sentiment. The democratic ethic in North America blocks the possibility of an epistemology of praxis entering into the actions of individuals in any other way than corresponds with the possibility of free choice. It is not so much a lack of recognition of social agency at work in the critical practices of students, in the craft of teachers and of practitioners at large. Rather it is that a politics of subversion and evil is automatically ascribed to any agency that thwarts the intellectual autonomy of the individual. Epistemology is rendered evangelical by walling off pessimistic explanations of human practice from explanations of how to go on. Learning through experience imparts a gloss to the past in the belief that the past's only value is pedagogical. Habits are co-extensive with 'good' habits. History provides us with lessons to be learned rather than emic accounts of why we do what we do. Pragmatism has little to confer on the crafts and trades other than a long term forecast of their redundancy.