

*Interview with Larry Hickman*

**What was the state of Pragmatism studies when you first encountered pragmatism?**

After completing my undergraduate degree in psychology I decided that I wanted to study philosophy. In order to prepare for graduate school, I spent a year taking philosophy courses at the University of Texas in Austin. The faculty included Charles Hartshorne, who was co-editor of the Peirce Collected Papers. There was also David L. Miller and George Gentry, both of whom had been students of George Herbert Mead. I was particularly interested in Charles Sanders Peirce. After I was admitted to the graduate program I took a graduate seminar on Peirce offered by Irwin Lieb.

I read Peirce's remark that logic is the study of second intentions applied to first intentions. I had no idea what that meant, so I asked around the department. Only one professor, Ignacio Angelelli, seemed to have an idea. He said "I don't know the answer to your question, but I can help you find out. First, however you have to learn to read Latin." So I took intensive Latin courses and with his help I spent the next couple of years reading what the 16th century Thomists, Scotists, and Nominalists said about first and second intentions. I was reading some of the same Scholastic logicians that Peirce had read. After I finished my dissertation I spent almost two years of research in Germany supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and then published my own book on the subject. Now Peirce scholars can find out what he meant by that remark. So what did Peirce mean? Well, it had to do his interest in properties of properties. Beyond that, you just have to read my 1980 book *Modern Theories of Higher Level Predicates*.

After I returned from Germany in 1973 I taught courses on the philosophy of technology at Texas A&M. My interest expanded outward from Peirce to James and Dewey and I began to teach courses in American philosophy.

**What was the reception of Pragmatism in the United States in the Sixties?**

You will notice that I have so far avoided the term "pragmatism." This is probably an appropriate place to quote Dewey's letter to his colleague A. W. Moore. "I have never known a myth grow so rapidly as that of 'pragmatism.' To read its critics one would think it was a positive system set forth for centuries in hundreds of volumes, & that its critics were the ones engaged in a tentative development of new & undogmatic ideas. But I object root and branch to the term 'pragmatism' (except in its origin limited sense)..." (January 2, 1905). I suppose I'll follow Dewey in saying that pragmatism in the strict sense can more or less be summed up in Peirce's maxim and the ways it was adapted by James and Dewey. I've so far talked about American philosophy because it comprises a broader set of issues and problems among which pragmatism is but a part.

That having been said, however, I have to admit that during the late 1960s I was busy writing my dissertation and my information about what was being taught at various universities around the country was more or less anecdotal, with the exception of what was going on at Yale, which had a close relationship with some universities in Texas. From the graduate courses I was taking and the meetings of the Southwestern

Philosophical Society, however, I was generally aware that analytic philosophy, both the ideal language and ordinary language varieties, was more or less dominant in that region, as it certainly was at the meetings of the APA.

It was also becoming clear that philosophy at many Catholic universities was beginning to drift away from Thomism toward Continental philosophy and there was some interest in American philosophy there as well. Quine was, of course, very big. There was also a lot of interest in the Oxbridge philosophers, especially Ryle, Austin, and Wittgenstein. It was very difficult for Americanists to get papers accepted at APA, and I have been told that you couldn't find a course on William James at Harvard during those years.

**How did Dewey come into the picture? Was it because of technology?**

I was teaching courses in the philosophy of technology as well as American philosophy. It began to dawn on me that Dewey had a great deal to say about technology. At that time nobody had noticed that except Webster Hood, who wrote one brief, elegant essay on the subject. But there it was, clear as could be, in the introduction to his 1916 *Essays in Experimental Logic*, for example, where Dewey was writing about watch springs and telephones and treating logical objects and other concepts as tools instead of metaphysical or psychological entities.

At that point I was active in the Society for Philosophy and Technology. I realized that it was important to introduce Dewey into those conversations, because at that time it was mainly Heidegger and Jacques Ellul with their ideas about autonomous technology; it was the Frankfurt School with their critique of instrumental rationality, all very negative, anti-technology approaches. But Dewey was writing about technology before any of them, and he was very positive about the promise of technology. For the Europeans, technology was the problem. For Dewey, technology was never the problem because of the way he thought that we as humans inhabit the world as problem solvers who use tools, including ideas, to adapt to our changing circumstances. That was the path to focusing on Dewey as a research project.

**Did you join the SAAP from the beginning?**

No, I was not an original member of the SAAP. Their first meeting was in 1974, I believe, and I was more or less unaware of the organization until John McDermott came to Texas A&M as department head about 1976.

**At that time you did not have the sense of a community of pragmatism scholars but you were working on the philosophy of technology using Dewey rather than Heidegger.**

Up to the time I attended the first meeting of SAAP I had very little sense of a community of pragmatist philosophers apart from a couple of colleagues in the department. But McDermott was very well connected. Texas A&M was still quite

isolated, so he brought in people for lectures from other parts of the country and he hosted a meeting of SAAP in College Station.

**When did you get involved in the SAAP?**

John McDermott brought the annual meeting of SAAP to Texas A&M in about 1978 or 1979. It was a very small group, with maybe 20 people. The party at the end of the meeting would have been in somebody's kitchen. I mean it was that small. I was greatly impressed by the society. At the APA there was what the *Village Voice* once called a "designated hit man" for every paper, that is, someone there to try to demolish your argument. At SAAP it was different. There was a spirit of cooperative inquiry, and especially a lot of support for younger members.

**What about the perception of the rest of America in the 1970s. It was becoming more and more analytic, I suppose. Which was the feeling of pragmatists? Was it that of a minority?**

There was a feeling of being marginal. I was sometimes asked if I was doing philosophy or the history of philosophy. I usually responded with another question: "How can you do one without the other?" In a way I suppose there was a tendency to organize around the editions – Peirce, Dewey, James, Royce – where the center of gravity was in those days. The important thing was to provide access to the texts. McDermott selected one or two volume editions of James in 1967, Royce in 1969, and Dewey in 1973. Jo Ann Boydston published the first volume of Dewey's *Collected Works* in 1967, and the first volume of *The Works of William James* was published in 1975.

In 1979 SAAP commissioned a survey of courses in American philosophy in the U.S. There were at least some offerings in about 21 of the 73 universities that responded. In the rest, Chicago, Colorado, Cornell, Duke, Harvard, Illinois, MIT, Michigan, Northwestern, Princeton, Stanford, Virginia, and so on, there was no American philosophy taught.

Of course in 1979 there was Richard Rorty's famous presidential address at the APA during which he said that philosophers ought to read James and Dewey. Many of the analysts felt betrayed. And a little later there was the pluralist revolt at the APA, which finally forced its leaders to hold democratic elections and reach out to Americanists and Continentalists. As I said, during the 1970s departments at Catholic universities were turning away from Thomism toward Continental philosophy – Heidegger, especially – with some emphasis on American philosophy as well. Many of the members of SAAP during that time taught at Catholic universities.

**Even in philosophy of technology did you have difficulty in making Dewey's view acknowledged?**

Yes. Some of my colleagues in the SPT had a hard time understanding what I was

taking about. I got support from Paul Durbin, who identified himself as a pragmatist, as well as from Carl Mitcham, Bryan Norton, Paul Thompson, and others. But many of my colleagues thought Dewey's characterization of technology was just weird. I would say things like "What a novelist is doing is a kind of technology. There are tools, there are raw materials, there are intermediate stock parts, and there are skills, all of which enter into the finished product. What's not technological about that?" And I would tell them that Dewey thought that science was a kind of technology. Some of my colleagues in the SPT who were used to thinking mostly about engineering and treating technology as applied science, would tell me that was crazy. What do novels have to do with technology? They wanted to maintain dualisms of tangible/intangible, subject/object that Dewey rejected. Don Ihde was also sympathetic to what I was doing. In his 1993 book *Postphenomenology* he reported that Dewey's pragmatism had influenced his work. He has since described postphenomenology as a blend of pragmatism and phenomenology.

**Do you think your works on Dewey's philosophy of technology has favored a more positive pragmatists' opening/approaches to technology?**

Yes, but indirectly. The vogue has changed partially through the work of Don Ihde and others in the camp of postphenomenology (Ihde's term, by the way). When I published *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* in 1990, it was one of three books that inaugurated the Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Technology. The other two were Ihde's book *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*, and Michael E. Zimmerman's *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art*. Ihde had read my book because he was the editor of the series. In his very next book you can see a pragmatic turn in his own thinking. I think he was there already but he had not fully articulated it. In the introduction to his book *Postphenomenology*, he wrote that he had been sympathetic with pragmatism for a long time but that two people helped him bring it out. One was Rorty, and I was the other one. He has since influenced a generation of Dutch philosophers of technology who want to get past Heidegger's and Jaspers' negativity and metaphysics, and Ellul's reification of an autonomous technology, in order to effect an empirical turn. Peter-Paul Verbeek, for example, wrote a wonderful book called *What Things Do* that consigns Heidegger and Jaspers to a "classical" period of the philosophy of technology that can be safely bracketed. So at least indirectly the postphenomenologists have been influenced by Dewey. Like Dewey, they want to bracket the ontology and look instead at functions – what things do. So that's the direction philosophy of technology has gone recently. The problem with understanding Dewey's take on technology is that it is not in any one place: it is there all throughout his work. As someone said, we do not know who discovered water but we are pretty sure it wasn't the fish! So you swim around in Dewey's many publications and it is easy to miss what is effectively the very environment. His treatment of technology is everywhere, like water to the fish, so it is hard to see it. That's why I wrote *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* – to show people where to look.

**Talking about your work not only in terms of scholarship, what do you think is your major contribution?**

There are several things that I might mention. As I said, I published the first extended development of a pragmatist approach to the philosophy of technology. There is also my continuing critique of certain vectors in “postmodernism” from a pragmatic standpoint. There is still work to be done in that area. I tried to do a bit of that in my book *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism*.

The big thing is the editorial projects at the Dewey Center: the electronic edition of the *Collected Works*, the four volumes of the *Correspondence*, the two volumes of Dewey’s *Class Lectures*, and *Works about Dewey*. These have all been collaborative projects, and I cannot praise the editors at the Center for Dewey Studies enough for the energy and dedication that they brought to these projects. It has been an interesting and sometimes difficult process raising the funds to keep the Dewey projects going for some twenty years, but we have succeeded. It is important to emphasize that the type of editing we do at the Dewey Center is very much a scholarly activity. Choices have to be made, and they must be informed by careful scholarship. The editions – Dewey, James, Santayana, Peirce, Royce – represent scholarship that has made other types of scholarship possible. We edit the texts and then other scholars build on our work to write their essays and books such as intellectual biographies, for example. Works by Steven Rockefeller, Jay Martin, Robert Westbrook, to name a few, would not have been possible without the resources that have been developed at the Dewey Center.

I’m also pleased to have had a part in establishing several sister Dewey Centers around the world. The full list by country now includes China, Japan, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Argentina, and Brazil. I’ve done a lot of traveling over the years, logging in an average of about one external presentation per month for more than 20 years. Someone once called me the “Johnny Appleseed of pragmatism.” I happily accept that.

I’ll add one more thing. My wife Liz Porter and I decided that SAAP needed a summer institute, so we organized the first one in Burlington, Vermont in 1998, as I recall. Now, some 20 years later, thanks to the work of a lot of people including Scott Pratt, the summer institute is still going.

**Considering the work of people like Richard Bernstein, would you restrain the boundaries of the pragmatism conversation? Or rather, would you consider the pragmatist family to be smaller than Bernstein pretends it to be?**

It does seem that today just about everybody claims to be a pragmatist of one sort or another. I’m not interested in making judgments about who is in the club and who is not. As far as I am concerned, we should let a thousand flowers bloom. But I would just invite you to recall my earlier citation of Dewey’s remark that he understood pragmatism in a very narrow sense. What many people have identified as his pragmatism, I believe, is more or less what he summed up as his own philosophical method as opposed to “pragmatism” in its limited sense. In another part of that letter

to A. W. Moore that I quoted earlier he says: “Any name can only be one sided, and so it seems a pity to have any. Radical empiricism begs as few as any, though I should prefer the term experimentalism to empiricism. Philosophy is Functionalism in the sense that it treats only of functions of experience (not of facts, nor of states, ideas, &); it is Geneticism as a mode of analyzing & identifying these functions; it is Instrumentalism as a theory of the significance of the Knowledge-function; it is Experimentalism as a theory of the test of worth of all functions.”

So I would say that some neo-pragmatists seem to have taken an alternative path – a linguistic turn away from the path of experimentalism, functionalism, geneticism, and instrumentalism that Dewey recommended. Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead – they were all involved in some sort of scientific work, so I expect that they would be surprised that some self-described pragmatists today have so little to say about technology (which is, after all, our environment). Then there is the matter that some of the dualisms that Dewey fought so hard to eject from philosophical discourse seem to keep creeping back into discussions. Some pragmatists even seem happily employed in the “epistemology industry” about which Dewey warned us. There is also the matter of respect for the texts. As an editor I’m sometimes quite surprised to read what some pragmatists write about the “mistakes” of what someone has termed “paleo-pragmatists” such as Dewey and James. (I don’t like the term much, since it calls up images of dinosaurs.) The texts are our scholarly navigational tools. If we don’t give them their due, then we will be off on some other trip. So it is none of my business what people call themselves. As a pragmatist (in the narrow sense in which Peirce and Dewey understood the term) however, I am sometimes amused a some of the ways the term has been used.

#### **When did the project of editing Dewey’s works start?**

That was in 1961. George E. Axtelle started a small Dewey project at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. He wanted to put together a concordance of Dewey’s work. But it didn’t take long for him to realize that in order to have a concordance you have to have a standard edition. When Axtelle left SIU his assistant, Jo Ann Boydston, became the editor. Over the next 30 years she and her staff produced the 37 volumes of Dewey’s *Collected Works*. She worked with the Modern Language Association (MLA) to establish standards for editorial procedures. Each of her volumes received the seal of approval of the Committee on Scholarly Editions of the MLA. She retired in 1992. Volume 4 of the Dewey Correspondence contains an interview I did with Jo Ann about the history of the Center.

#### **Why did you decide to enter the Dewey’s editorial project, hence moving to Southern Illinois University?**

I had some experience editing journals. I liked editing and I felt it was important. But also given my interests the Dewey Center position was a perfect job. I arrived at the Center in 1993. My immediate tasks were to raise funds, to produce an electronic

edition of Dewey's correspondence and to publish an electronic edition of Dewey's *Collected Works*. We completed the *Collected Works* project first, since it was already in print, and we have since completed (electronic) editions of the four volumes of the *Correspondence* and two volumes of Dewey's *Class Lectures*. Although our publications have in the main been electronic, we have published some print volumes as well. I estimate that on average we have published the equivalent of about five 500 page print volumes every year for the past 20 years.

**What do you think is the situation of Dewey's scholarship in the world?**

There is a lot of interest and it is growing. The number of Dewey research centers is one indication. Barbara Levine, who compiles and edits *Works about Dewey*, tells me she is astounded at the proliferation of books and essays about Dewey. It has been growing steadily over the past 20 years. I think a lot of it has to do with Dewey's work on democracy and education. I go to places where I would not expect anyone to know much about Dewey, but I often find that there are teachers who use his methods, and that there are philosophers and political scientists and even activists who want to see their countries adopt the ideas about democracy that Dewey promoted.

**Do you think the Putnam-Rorty controversy had to do with that or was that not fundamental for making pragmatism more known?**

Rorty played a major role when he delivered that 1979 presidential address at APA. He was also a member of the board of the John Dewey Foundation for two decades. And the Rorty/Putnam debate has greatly raised the profile of American philosophy. Rorty was of course greatly influenced by French postmodernist writers, and he raised the eyebrows of more than one Dewey scholar with his pronouncements about what he thought Dewey either said or should have said. During recent years I think Putnam has moved a bit towards pragmatism, perhaps pushed a bit by Ruth Anna Putnam. But there is still a big gap between him and Dewey, for example, on issues such as truth and representationalism. I contributed an essay on Putnam and Dewey to the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume dedicated to him. (In his reply he disagreed with a good deal of what I had to say.) I think it has been extremely important to have the contributions of Rorty and Putnam, and even their famous debate, if only because if you go to a place like Argentina, for example, you find that there are three branches of philosophy: Marxism, Continental philosophy, and analytic philosophy. Pragmatism is considered a subset of analytic philosophy since students get to Dewey through Rorty (and now through McDowell and Brandom).

The other way you can go is to work forward from the classical pragmatists to the neo-pragmatists. In my view, which direction you travel makes a difference. The classical pragmatists are rooted in the American tradition of the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, the Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman, Jefferson, and so on. When people work backward from Rorty they tend to stop with Dewey and James and Peirce. I myself have worked in both directions: forward from the founding

pragmatists to the neopragmatists as well as backward to the roots of classical pragmatism.

Bernstein is a different matter. He has created a very important bridge between Dewey, whose work he knows very well, and Continental philosophers such as Hannah Arendt. I've suggested that he occupies a position somewhere between Rorty and Habermas on a number of issues. Joseph Margolis, whose analysis of what is going on in philosophy is almost always right in my view, is surely right on this as well: the future of American philosophy lies in its ability to find ways of engaging the Continental and analytic traditions. American philosophy has enormous and unique resources to bring to bear on that project. As far as I know Margolis doesn't mention neo-Confucianism and Buddhism, but I would add those traditions as well. Roger Ames is doing some of that, and I've been very interested in the similarities between Dewey's work and the interpretations of the Lotus Sutra that come through Nichiren Buddhism, especially as they impact pedagogy.

**Given your logical background, you are in a favorable position to appreciate the proximity between pragmatism and analytic philosophy, not being a priori against analytic philosophy.**

When I was studying the history of logic I read a lot of analytic philosophy, and it has served me well. I have certainly read and greatly appreciated the work of Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin, Russell and Frege. It is just that after reading as much Dewey as I have, I see him as having solved some of the problems that some analytic philosophers are still struggling with, and I see his work as more relevant to what he called "the problems of men [and women]." The continuing quest for certainty is one example. Philip Kitcher has suggested that we need to reverse the old paradigm, the one with logic and epistemology as providing the central philosophical problems and fields such as ethics and aesthetics as residing at the periphery. I think he is correct. Logic and epistemology are tools that we need to be able to work on the central issues. But those central issues include ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy.

**How would you locate your work in the pragmatism tradition or American philosophy?**

Apart from being the general editor of the *Dewey Correspondence*, I would describe myself as an Americanist who works in the fields of philosophy of technology and philosophy of education, and who has during the last couple of decades attempted to get the voices of Dewey and James, especially, inserted into debates where they are absent.

Because of my work at the Dewey Center I have had the opportunity to travel a great deal and have had occasion to work with philosophers in China, for example, on issues like the relation of Dewey to neo-Confucianism. In Japan I have worked with Buddhists on issues like the relation of Dewey's work to the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism. Jim Garrison and I recently collaborated on a book with Daisaku Ikeda,

the spiritual leader of some 13 million Nichiren Buddhists, on the importance of the educational theories of Dewey and the Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi for the 21st century. In Italy I've collaborated with philosophers of education, offering continuing education courses for teachers. In Vietnam I've presented seminars on Dewey and American democracy at the national research centers for philosophy and political science. All of this has been an attempt to raise the profile of a philosopher who I think mostly got things right and who is much more radical and much more relevant to our current situation than most people understand.

**The last part of our interview is about the future. What is going on, or what is more important to foster?**

Well, I think we are in a very difficult time right now in terms of the future of higher education, not just in the United States but elsewhere as well. Everything seems to be in flux: universities are being reconfigured according to business models, and that affects what is taught, how it is taught, and the distribution of educational opportunities. There are the still unknown effects of distance education. The recommendations put forward in the "Browne" report in the U.K. and the "Seven Solutions" report in Texas, for example, are frightening. American philosophers can have an enormous role in framing some of these issues, given resources such as Dewey's educational theories, Royce's ideas about community, James' radical empiricism and pluralism, and Peirce's pragmatism, to say nothing of Jane Addams' ideas about inclusion and democratic forms of life. I expect that professional philosophy will become less "hyper-professional" as the younger generation looks for ways to increase the relevance of what philosophers do. I'm already beginning to see some of that.

**People trained in the Deweyan tradition are maybe less interested in the essential part of the hyper-professionalization of philosophy, but on the other side this tradition has developed a high sensitivity about how to bring back cultural reflections to the life of communities, in their vague or specific form. Is it difficult to make it survive in an academic system that does not seem to leave room enough for more practice oriented attitudes in philosophers?**

You have put your finger on a very difficult problem, and it is not a new one. The issue calls to mind a philosopher of education who is not a Deweyan in terms of self-identification, but who is quite Deweyan in terms of his practice. Pedro A. Noguera has written well-received books about how to improve education in underfunded, de facto segregated schools in the inner cities of the United States. When he was in graduate school at Stanford University pursuing a degree in philosophy of education he was also a member of a local school-board. That is a very Deweyan approach that combines scholarship with practice outside the walls of the academy. So if graduate students can do it, faculty can do it. Another example: I am often invited to give talks in Buddhist community centers in places like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The audiences tend to comprise school teachers, lawyers, doctors, unemployed people

– a cross section of the community. The point is that you can teach and write books and articles and still have time for activities outside the university.

**This attitude towards ‘philosophy outside the academia’ is a common feature among American scholars of your generation: I am thinking e.g. about Jacquelyn Kegley and John Lachs. Do you see this attitude towards the philosophical practice to keep on also in younger generations?**

It may be difficult for the younger generation because of the additional pressures on the younger faculty. With one-year appointments they never know where they are going to be next year. And even if there are continuing non-tenure track appointments, there is also the pressure of increasing loads of teaching. So it is difficult. But I see many younger philosophers just working harder to make a difference outside the classroom as well as for their students. We will have to resist increasing attempts to reorganize universities on business models. If it comes to the point that philosophers are regarded as “knowledge workers” who have clients and consumers instead of students, then it will be a very sad day for education.

**Do you see other important challenges for pragmatism in the future? Is education the first one?**

Yes, absolutely! Education is first, because that is the way that society renews itself. As university professors we have access to a large number of students over the span of our careers. What we say makes a big difference. I’ve already mentioned the obvious fact that higher education is in trouble, and I’ve already said something about that. Beyond that, however, I can say that a generation slightly younger than mine has provided some very good examples of philosophers trained in or sympathetic to American philosophy who have been able to make significant contributions outside academic circles. Paul B. Thompson does work in the ethics of food biotechnology. Bryan G. Norton has done important work at the Environmental Protection Agency on environmental sustainability. One of my former students, Tibor Solymosi is also a good example. I believe he is the one who coined the term “neuropragmatism.” Jonathan Moreno has made important contributions to medical ethics and has done work at the Center of American Progress, a progressive public policy think tank. I think that’s where we are going: more syncretism, with respect to philosophical orientations and engaging in research that has the possibility of changing people’s lives.

**Only philosophers or sociologists are doing this intellectual work?**

No. There are others as well. Because of my association with the Dewey Center I get to know people in lots of different fields who conduct intellectual work outside the fields of philosophy and sociology. Just to mention a few that come to mind, there are architects, engineers, public policy researchers, public school teachers, and

historians. But in philosophy there are still people who want to hang on to some of the old problems. There are people still publishing and getting tenure by worrying about the problem of other minds and whether we can know that we have interior states! I saw an old professor of mine from many years ago at an APA meeting. I had not seen him in more than two decades. I asked him how he was doing. He said “Let me check my internal states.” And sometimes we wonder why the public thinks philosophers are irrelevant.

I don’t want to end on that negative note however. I see enormous energy in the younger generation of philosophers. Some of my graduate students are doing marvelous things. Eric Weber, for example, who works in the area of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, recently published a book on democracy and leadership in the southern part of the United States. And I could go on, but it is probably time to stop. Thanks for the opportunity to respond to your questions.