

Resenha

Book Review

CALCATERRA, Rosa M. *Idee Concrete. Percorsi nella filosofia di John Dewey.*
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Rosa M. Calcaterra's last book is a most welcomed introduction to Dewey's philosophy with a focus on its practical dimension.

It is a short and dense book of 130 pages, composed of seven chapters and a rich bibliography of secondary sources. Calcaterra reads Dewey's work in the light of what she calls "concrete ideas", that is to say Dewey's conception of philosophy as a transformative enterprise. Yet her book is not merely a book on Dewey's moral and political ideas. Following a tradition willing to locate Dewey's practical starting point first of all in his understanding of logic and epistemology, Calcaterra devotes two chapters to Dewey's "instrumentalism". One might have preferred here a more cautious terminological choice, perhaps a conservative use of the term "pragmatism". Indeed, Dewey's use of the term "instrumentalism" significantly declined after 1917, and was generally meant by him as a way to denote his theory of logic rather than his whole philosophy, which he preferentially referred to as "pragmatism".

The book opens with a biographical note (written by Roberto Gronda, author also of the bibliography) that will be of use to any beginner.

In the following (second) chapter Calcaterra attempts to assess the central roots in Dewey's thinking that she locates in Darwin's naturalism, in Hegel, and in Christianity. Joseph Margolis has once defined pragmatism by a two interrelated moves consisting in Darwinizing Hegel and Hegelianizing Darwin. In a similar way, Calcaterra takes her starting point in the acknowledgement of this double line of influence, by all means central to Dewey's philosophical development. Calcaterra highlights the idealistic bends of the young Dewey and correctly points out that any trace of idealism will vanish out after the turn of the century. One may wish to have some few lines devoted to what Dewey lately called the "permanent Hegelian deposit". A deposit that, we would add, lies more in his social understanding of the moral and political life than in any supposed continuity with the idealistic tradition, a tradition – as Calcaterra correctly points out – well abandoned by Dewey in the last decade of the Nineteenth century.

The third chapter brings us into the core of Dewey's philosophy: his logic and his epistemology.

Calcaterra correctly fixes the transition from idealism to pragmatism in the publication of John Dewey "Studies in Logical Theory", published in 1903, but already anticipated, three years before, by his "Some Stages in Logical Thought", the text where Peirce's influence is the most explicit and the most direct. In this

chapter Calcaterra traces Dewey's new theory of thought and logic to his discovery of James's psychology as a basis for his forthcoming practice-based conception of thought as a form of inquiry. Here, as Calcaterra reminds us, we should be aware of a double genealogy: a Peircean strand leading to Dewey's theory of logic, and a Jamesian strand leading Dewey to emphasize the role of pre-logical experience, and of its continuity with logical thought. In the following of this chapter Calcaterra proceeds then to show how the years 1900-1917 were decisive for the development of Dewey's mature conception of pragmatism, and the importance taken by logical and epistemological reflections in this process. We cannot but praise Calcaterra for insisting on the importance of this formative phase, and on the particular importance of Dewey's 1917 *Essays in Experimental Logic*, where Dewey collected his most interesting essays of the 1900-1917 period.

In the next chapter Calcaterra furthers her interpretation by a close comparison of Dewey's and Peirce's philosophies. While one might consider that Dewey's admiration and interest for Peirce's logic is more ancient than Calcaterra says it is, she is totally right in pointing out the philosophical importance of Dewey's essay "The Pragmatism of Peirce", published in 1916, where Dewey shows his allegiance to Peirce's understanding of the relationships between belief, habits, and conduct.

One may compare this article with Dewey's review of James's *Pragmatism*, published in 1908 under the title "What Pragmatism means by Practical". Here too Dewey shows unambiguously where he stands in the Peirce-James controversy.

Calcaterra then moves to discuss Dewey's most innovative idea in logical theory, that is to say his notion of "warranted assertibility" that Dewey introduced as the proper normative standard of discourse. According to Dewey, in fact, once we acknowledge the epistemological priority of judgments over propositions – a claim stated in *The Logic of Judgment of Practice* of 1915 and then fully developed in the first chapters of his *Logic. A Theory of Inquiry* of 1938 – then truth-talk should be dropped. According to Dewey, in fact, warranted assertibility provides all that we need as an epistemic – although not a semantic – theory of truth, as it refers to what an agent can justifiably say, given the state of knowledge and method available at a certain time.

To appreciate the importance of this move, one has only to remind that Dewey's defense of warranted assertibility should be understood as an anti-relativistic move. On this point, as probably elsewhere, R. Bernstein's reading is to be preferred to R. Rorty's. Calcaterra is in line with this interpretative tradition that she explicitly connects to Putnam, but that can also fruitfully be brought back to Ralph Sleeper's essay *The Necessity of Pragmatism*, one of the milestone of the contemporary rediscovery of Dewey's logic and epistemology.

Calcaterra rightly insists on the positive and permanent influence of Peirce's philosophy on Dewey's fashioning of his own logical theory, and this is very heartening at a time when too many continue to insist in reading Dewey as a follower of James or a forerunner of Rorty: not only Dewey's theory of inquiry is deeply influenced by Peirce's theory of rationality as inquiry. Dewey takes from Peirce also the naturalistic outlook that he will then radicalize in a way that was impossible for Peirce. Dewey will then go as far as reclaiming for himself the idea of a natural theory of thought – an idea that Peirce could not but despise.

Calcaterra reminds then the centrality of what Dewey termed the cultural

and natural matrix of inquiry, and the radicality of his naturalistic stance. She also points out and shows clearly that Dewey's naturalism never becomes reductionistic: Dewey's inscription of logic into a naturalistic and evolutionary program never undermines the normative pretenses of logical thought. Nor is he interested, as is the case in contemporary naturalism, to reduce thought to one or another biological or neurological processes. His aim, rather, is to point out that logical thinking is but the cultural evolution of a natural trait, whose understanding requires that we show its continuity with other, human and animal, strategies for coping with the environment.

Still in this chapter Calcaterra introduces the central theme of Dewey's understanding of thought as a form of action, his idea - as he says in *The Logic of Judgment of Practice* - that "things exists in relation to *agenda*, things to be done", and that thinking is in itself a form of action. Here we are reminded of the theoretical role of the theory of habits that Dewey had developed in the previous decades, and that he presented in his masterpiece *Human Nature and Conduct*, published in 1922. The chapter closes with a detailed account of Dewey's theory of judgment and of its importance for the whole project of Dewey's logic.

The fifth chapter marks the transition to the second and last part of the book, where the author focuses on Deweyan contributions to questions of practical normativity. This part of the book follows logically from the first, as Calcaterra is persuaded not only that Dewey's logic and epistemology point towards an active and transformative attitude towards the world, but also that Dewey's moral, social, and political theory should be understood against the background of his instrumentalism, that is to say his general epistemology.

Calcaterra locates the main link between these two dimensions in Dewey's theory of rationality as inquiry, and in its corollary that thought is essentially a problem solving activity. Therefore, the domain of the ethical, the social, and the political is rightly seen as being problem driven, as being qualified by the emergence of problems to which human inquiry tries to find solutions.

Here the Deweyan theory of "reconstruction" appears appropriately to denote at the same time the goal of human action and the way of proceeding of thought.

Therefore, once the activity of thought has been correctly understood as being transformative, we are naturally brought to see thinking as a practice-based activity, and the social and the political as the highest spheres to which humans should devote their reflective efforts.

Calcaterra insists correctly on the importance of publicity in Dewey's social and political thought. Publicity, in fact, is the overarching concept of both Dewey's anthropology (a point clearly stated in *Human Nature and Conduct*) and of his social and political theory. Publicity is therefore preordained to the better known but much more controversial concept of "democracy as a way of life". So Calcaterra starts with the right foot her inquiry on Dewey's social and political theory.

Calcaterra then turns to the analysis of Dewey's theory of the relationship between the individual and the social that she rightly points out as another central pillar of Dewey's social and political theory. Indeed, Dewey develops, since the Twenties, a processual understanding of society, and defended a social conception of human agents, in which the social is never identified with pre-existing social structures but always with the processes of socialization by which humans are fashioned and re-fashioned and by which experiences, values, emotions, ideas are constantly selected

and transmitted. While one might prefer not to define Dewey's theory of society as being organicistic (this reminds of idealistic positions that by that time Dewey had totally overcome), Dewey's anti-individualistic approach and his critique of reductionistic atomism are rightly pointed out as some of the most important ideas of Dewey's social theory. It is along these theoretical lines that, as Calcaterra points out, Dewey defends his social variant of individualism: his social understanding of individualism proves that he was not after a re-actualization of organic metaphors and ways of thinking, but that he sought to reconcile an individual-centered philosophical vision with the acknowledgment of the natural and social constitutedness of human being. Dewey's critique of dogmatic individualism is at the same time epistemological and genealogical. Epistemological, as he tries to undermine the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions that underlies traditional individualism. Genealogical, as he traces this conception back to a politically conservative understanding of society and to the ideology of the frontier, that according to Dewey could no more sustain the form of life that Americans were beginning to build.

Dewey's theory of rationality as inquiry is brought into the service of this new individualism, as Dewey saw clearly the huge potentiality opened by an experimental approach to social reality and social problems. Indeed, as Calcaterra points out, Dewey staunchly defended a thoroughly reformist approach to social problems.

Another point stressed by Calcaterra concerns the importance of the Dewey-Lippman debate in the development of Dewey's understanding of the form of intelligence that should characterize the public life. In discarding Lippman's anti-democratic conception of the role of experts, Dewey was able to develop a theory of public inquiry that has rightly been considered as the first attempt at developing a deliberative conception of democracy. Indeed, in his definition of the public, Dewey left to experts the role of knowledge-bearer, but stated that only the public, that is to say those that are affected by the social problems under discussion, have a complete knowledge of the nature of the problems. In Dewey's approach then, experts and the public should take part together to a deliberative and cooperative process of inquiry, and only through their joined effort and participation can inquiry hope to be successful.

The sixth chapter is devoted to one of the most well know and recently most controverted themes in Dewey's social and political thought: his theory of democracy as a way of life. Calcaterra's account follows that interpretative line that praises Dewey's critique of proceduralism in favor of a more complete understanding of democracy. Accordingly, she does not deal with recent attempts to assess Dewey's political theory in the light of political liberalism, but rather prefers to emphasize the relevance of Dewey's theory of democracy for a humanistic conception, where Dewey's *Public and its Problem* stands side by side with *A Common Faith*.

Not surprisingly, then, the book closes with a chapter devoted to Dewey's humanistic naturalism.

Here Calcaterra recalls the importance of the scientific attitude for Dewey's overall philosophy, according to a principle of continuity that wishes to emphasize continuity between the natural and the social sciences, between the scientific and the lay ways of thinking, and between human and non human ways of problem solving. It is here that Calcaterra locates the thread that unites Dewey's thought: his focus on practical values, and his conception of philosophy as a transformative enterprise

finally freed from the metaphysical myth of “the spectator theory of knowledge” that Dewey had so powerfully criticized. It is around this theme that, according to Calcaterra, all the most important Deweyan philosophical ideas gather: not only his logic and epistemology but also his pedagogy, his ethical theory, his late metaphysics.

We are then forced to acknowledge what Calcaterra terms “the intimate relationship between nature, rationality, and sociality”, a thesis that, better than any other, captures the permanent vitality of Dewey’s philosophy.

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