

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Fairfield's *Education After Dewey*

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Paul Fairfield, *Education After Dewey*. London: Continuum, 2009. 308 pp. ISBN 9781441142733. \$39.35 (pbk).

In *Education After Dewey*, Paul Fairfield advocates a philosophy of education that combines John Dewey's thinking with ideas drawn from continental European philosophy and 20th century social theory. In particular, Fairfield argues that putting Dewey in conversation with philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger can lead to needed improvements in contemporary ideas about education. *Education after Dewey* seeks to rehabilitate Dewey's thought for students of European philosophy and for humanities educators. It argues for the merits, and concedes the limitations, of Dewey's educational emphasis on experience. The many connections that Fairfield establishes between Dewey's educational thinking and the works of Continental European philosophers is a boon to Dewey studies, and his argument that we need better ideas about education should find adherents among contemporary Deweyans and humanists generally.

Education After Dewey is divided into two parts. The first three chapters, on "The Educative Process," begin by establishing the relevance of Dewey's philosophy in the context of contemporary educational practice. These longer chapters then discuss how resources found in Gadamer's and Heidegger's philosophies can improve Dewey's conceptions of experience and thinking. In the book's second part, six shorter chapters on "Education in the Human Sciences" address educational issues in philosophy, religion, ethics, politics, history, and literature. These chapters do not merely apply Dewey's philosophy to contemporary teaching practice; they also explore and extend Dewey's ideas through dialogue with Friedrich Nietzsche, John Caputo, Hannah Arendt, Paolo Freire, Michel Foucault, and Paul Ricoeur.

Chapter 1 establishes educational philosophy—and particularly Dewey's educational philosophy—as a critical resource for contemporary educational reform. Beginning with a brief history of Dewey's criticisms of both child-centered progressives and curriculum-focused traditionalists, Fairfield asserts that Dewey remains relevant to what he characterizes as today's outworn educational debates, specifically, over "oppositions of student-centered or curriculum-centered education, critical thinking or factual knowledge, [or] active or passive learning."¹ He dismisses scientific approaches to educational research and practice, contend-

ing that these flawed models of scientific and economic rationality already dominate school learning. He also critiques the proposals of Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch. These educational conservatives argue that schools fail to adequately acculturate young people, but they misconceive acculturation as the accumulation of information or as a process of normalization. Instead, as Dewey's educational philosophy makes clear, learning itself is acculturative, and education is "entirely consistent with the basic human practice of making ourselves at home in the world through understanding."² Fairfield argues that philosophy can aid in making experience (not vocational preparation or other external ends) the model for school learning.

Chapter 2 develops Dewey's focus on experience in education by putting Dewey in conversation with Gadamer and with German philosophy's *Bildung* tradition. Specifically, Fairfield characterizes Dewey as reconceiving education as *Bildung*, which Dewey defined as "the conscious and deliberate formation of human personality through assimilation of the spiritual products of the past."³ Fairfield characterizes Dewey's idea of experience as critical to Dewey's groundbreaking educational arguments about curriculum and knowledge. He situates this idea in the history of Enlightenment thinking and philosophical empiricism. Fairfield also likens Dewey's ideas to phenomenological philosophy, noting that both reject empiricists' ideas about subjectivity and mind. Similarly, both emphasize intentionality, consciousness's implication in the world, and experience's continuity. In education, Dewey's idea of experience should lead educators away from traditional teaching practice and toward the inculcation of intellectual virtues such as flexibility, open-mindedness, and originality. In other words, this idea implies that education has more than instrumental value. Fairfield contends that Gadamer's philosophy in particular can extend this implication into a critique of technique or scientific method—a critique that Dewey did not pursue. Drawing himself on the *Bildung* tradition, Fairfield argues that Dewey might have also written more about experience's dialectical and narrative qualities.

Chapter 3 compares and contrasts Dewey's and Heidegger's accounts of thinking. Through this treatment, Fairfield sharpens his critique of Dewey's commitment to scientific method. Both Dewey and Heidegger "sought to reconceive in an essentially phenomenological way the basic nature of human thought, identifying its intimate connection with practice, language, and culture as well as its relation to science."⁴ However, while Dewey believed that scientific habits of mind were applicable to human problems, Heidegger was not so sanguine. The German philosopher denied the relevance of scientific reasoning to philosophical thought and practical problem solving. Fairfield argues that Heidegger's idea of meditative thinking is superior to Dewey's method of intelligence. Missing in Dewey's account are Heidegger's emphases on questioning, on dwelling in preliminaries, and on poeticizing. Fairfield argues that Heidegger's philosophy can illuminate how thinking is "experimental in a way or to a degree that Dewey did not see."⁵ He argues that

such illumination is particularly needed in thinking on education, which is overly beholden to science and its methods.

Chapters 4 through 9 detail the implications of Fairfield's Deweyan educational philosophy for teaching in the humanities. Each of these chapters also pairs Dewey with another thinker, comparing their positions on some key aspect of the discipline under discussion. Thus, in Chapter 4, on "Teaching Philosophy: The Scholastic and the Thinker," Fairfield notes that both Dewey and Nietzsche felt disdain for academic philosophy. He employs their criticisms to reinforce his own call for philosophy education "far beyond the obligations of the scholar or professional."⁶ Despite their formulaic structure, the chapters in this part are fresh and distinct. They showcase the creative connections Fairfield makes between Dewey's and other thinkers' ideas.

Taken as a group, the chapters in part 2 cohere around themes including indoctrination, discussion or dialogue, and understanding. In his remarks on religious education and ethics pedagogy, Fairfield echoes Dewey's arguments against teaching as indoctrination, contending that schooling should provide experiences in which undirected growth is the goal. For Fairfield, a teacher's key resource for promoting this kind of open-ended learning is class discussion or conversation, which Fairfield conceives on the model of dialogue. In Chapter 1, citing Gadamer, Fairfield likens education to a conversation. Fairfield's later chapters make clear that class conversations form the core of humanities education. Drawing on students' interests in philosophy, ethics, and politics, case-based courses can frame problems for discussion, which allows students to exercise powers of critical thinking and judgment, to develop arguments, and to defend positions. By contrast, in history or literature, subjects whose material Fairfield treats as operating more directly on learners, instruction should emphasize understanding. In historical study, educators might take their cue from Dewey and Foucault, for whom research and writing about the past offers insights on the present. In the terms of Ricoeur's narrative theory, reading literature presents special opportunities for self-understanding and for understanding experience and subjectivity in narrative terms. Indeed, Fairfield values literature more than all the other humanities subject matters for its capacity to aid students' understanding to develop students' actual interests, to foster social intelligence, and to illuminate the temporal structure of their educational experience.

Education After Dewey argues for a philosophy of education that begins in Dewey's writings and ends with the concerns expressed by Continental European philosophers. Although its widely ranging arguments are schematic at best, the book offers an engaging and inventive map for what such an educational philosophy might look like. Particularly effective are Fairfield's couplings of Dewey's educational ideas with other philosophers' concepts. Most of these connections invite further research by scholars who might find them worth pursuing in more

specificity. In this direction, Fairfield's statements about Dewey's and Gadamer's agreements deserve significant elaboration. It would also be helpful to explore, however, the dissonances between Dewey's philosophy of education and Continental European educational thinking. Fairfield strongly emphasizes Dewey's intellectual debt to G.W.F. Hegel. However, Dewey's philosophy, including his educational philosophy, was more complex than its Hegelian roots (even though Dewey admitted that Hegel had "left a permanent deposit in my thinking").⁷ Moreover, Dewey's commitment to inquiry was central to his educational thinking. Yet, Fairfield neglects Dewey's repeated defenses of commonsense and scientific modes of inquiry (as well as their consequences). Fairfield is correct in asserting that Dewey's thinking shows affinities with continental philosophers—and that this is the case even though many have failed to observe them. Yet, the many differences that separate Dewey from these other thinkers should also be accounted for. In short, Fairfield's work to link philosophical traditions deserves its own conversational rejoinder, which should contextualize and question this bridge-building project.

Finally, Fairfield's approach to Dewey's philosophy blocks creative thinking about how to specify the proper *means* for humanities education. Fairfield focuses attention on Dewey's ideas about the ends of education, particularly in his discussion of intellectual virtues. Beyond praising free and open class discussion, however, Fairfield does not tell the reader much about how students engage in the learning process. From his early advocacy for "learning-by-doing" in the Laboratory School to his later opposition to the "Great Books" approaches, Dewey was sensitive to the open-ended relation between educational means and ends. Fairfield's acceptance of traditional humanities teaching methods—all the way down to the divisions between subject matters—indicates a failure to think through the wide range of possible futures for humanities education. Today, "experiential learning" often functions as a synonym for vocational education. In contrast, Dewey understood that practical activities fund learning and growth as purely contemplative pursuits seldom can. To be sure, no practical change in classroom activities can alone improve poor humanities instruction. Better educational philosophy, as Fairfield has cogently argued, is also sorely needed. However, an improved philosophy of education will certainly be hobbled if we neglect Dewey's important contributions to thinking in terms of means and ends.

Much remains to be said about how Dewey can inspire humanities educators—as well as humanities students—to reconstruct the activities of teaching and learning in this traditional area of academic inquiry. As part of this project, it will be important to engage those influential schools of philosophy and social theory that Fairfield's book highlights. *Education After Dewey* provides much-needed resources for those who wish to reform humanities education—a project Dewey described in 1911 as among the most urgent in educational practice.⁸ For this reason, Fairfield's book is a significant contribution to the current literature in Dewey studies and philosophy of education.

NOTES

1. Paul Fairfield, *Education After Dewey* (London: Continuum, 2009), 38.
2. *Ibid.*, 43.
3. MW 6:405.
4. Fairfield, *Education After Dewey*, 128.
5. *Ibid.*, 141.
6. *Ibid.*, 175.
7. LW 5:154.
8. MW 6:407.

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