

IN MEMORIAM

PHILIP W. JACKSON,
DECEMBER 2, 1928-JULY 21, 2015,
A LIFE WELL LIVED

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The world of John Dewey scholarship recently lost one of its most thoughtful contributors, and teachers of all kinds lost one of their most passionate and committed advocates. Philip W. Jackson was born in 1928 in Vineland, New Jersey, a locale known historically for its excellent grape-growing soil (hence the name) and veterinarian Arthur Goldhaft's famous pledge to "put a chicken in every pot." Jackson's adoptive parents were, appropriately enough, chicken farmers, and, as the story goes, they noticed early on his indisputable knack for singing and poetry recitation. Feeling very at home on the stage, the plucky six-year-old even tried his hand as a vaudevillian, performing a snake charmer act between reels at movie theaters and employing all the usual accoutrements. For a time, a career as a performer seemed a very real possibility.

Jackson's life, however, took a momentous turn in 1948 when he married his high school sweetheart, Josephine D'Andrea (Jo), before spending a brief stint in the Navy. After being encouraged by his peers to set his sights on higher education,

Jackson's initially uncertain path led him first to what is now Rowan University, where he earned a bachelor's degree, Temple University, for his master's degree, and, eventually, a doctorate in developmental psychology from Teachers College at Columbia University. Upon obtaining his PhD in 1955, Jackson took a position at Wayne State University for a short time before proceeding on to the University of Chicago, where he eventually became the David Lee Shillinglaw Distinguished Service Professor of Education and Psychology.

Though Jackson's training in psychology would always serve him well, he soon developed a keen (and, depending on its use, at times painful) awareness of its limitations, especially methodologically. In 1962, Jackson and his colleague Jacob Getzels published a book entitled *Creativity and Intelligence: Explorations with Gifted Students*. The study was very well received and utilized numerous tests and test subjects as a means of developing a useful measure of creativity. The book's chief finding, surprisingly, was that high IQ was not a strong correlate with giftedness. Moreover, Jackson and Getzels discovered that, while high creativity could result in as much academic achievement as high IQ could, gifted children were often not at their best with traditional academic tasks and testing, which they typically found unengaging.

What Jackson himself began to find unengaging, however, was the prospect of a career spent administering paper-and-pencil tests to children (and often in test centers rather than classrooms), which he later likened to poking a chimp with a stick, and generating and analyzing reams of statistics. The paltry empiricism (as Emerson might put it) of this behaviorist methodology became fully evident to Jackson during a year's research leave at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, where he met a group of anthropologists studying the social behavior of primates in the wild. The researchers stressed the need to study these animals in their natural habits, which meant developing and honing their individual perceptual abilities as the instruments of research. This proved an epiphany for Jackson and led, in 1968, to the publication of his most enduring work, *Life in Classrooms*, an ethnography of school life based on almost five years of observations in elementary classrooms and one of the first book-length qualitative studies in the history of educational research.¹

Jackson's interest in John Dewey's philosophy was piqued shortly after when he became Director of the Laboratory Schools at the University of Chicago in 1970. He was surprised to discover that Dewey's ideas seemed absent from the thinking of the teachers and administration of the school. So, to amend the situation, he commenced a project of reading some of Dewey's works and discussing them as a school community.

Like many others who first encounter Dewey through his educational writings but move beyond those to Dewey's ideas about other philosophical topics, Jackson became especially fascinated with Dewey's aesthetics and his metaphysics. His interest in Dewey's aesthetic theory was piqued by his efforts in the early 1980s to review

Dewey's poetry (1982, "John Dewey's Poetry," 65–78)², and developed through the 1980s, resulting in a graduate seminar he taught in the fall of 1989 that included a reading of Dewey's *Art as Experience*. Jackson's interest in Dewey's metaphysics arose initially from his reading of Thomas Alexander's *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature* (1987), and was deepened through conversations with Jim Garrison and through the same graduate seminar just mentioned, which also included a reading of Dewey's *Experience and Nature*. Jackson further explored both of these interests through encouraging work by his graduate students.

By the early 1990s and continuing through his retirement in 1998, Jackson had devoted his scholarship almost exclusively to Dewey's aesthetics and metaphysics.³ These interests led to Jackson's *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (1998) and *John Dewey and the Philosopher's Task* (2002). Like others, Jackson saw Dewey's aesthetics as offering a "poetic" corrective, of sorts, to Dewey's sometimes "relatively prosaic writings on education" (Granger 2003, "John Dewey's Aesthetics and Romanticism," 46).⁴ This corrective is always in the direction of greater emphasis on the moral dimensions of education. Dewey's thoughts about aesthetics, Jackson writes, "lead us to an enriched understanding of the experienced object and, ultimately, to a deepened understanding of the self. The arts reveal, in other words, what more of life could be like and, concomitantly, what we ourselves could be like if we really worked at it. . . . They open the door to an expansion of meaning and to an enlarged capacity to experience the world. In short, they teach us how to live richer and fuller lives" (1995, "If We Took Dewey's Aesthetics Seriously, How Would the Arts Be Taught?" 26–27).⁵ In *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*, Jackson refers to the enlarged capacity to experience the world as a "development of perceptual acuity" (1998, *Lessons of Art*, xiii).⁶ Such acuity "reveals the potentiality of the world in which we live" (*Lessons of Art*, 61)⁷

Jackson's interest in revealing potentialities is indicative of his longstanding interest in both the moral development of the self (i.e., morals) and the qualities of everyday experience. That the development of the self and qualitative experience are intimately connected helps to explain Jackson's move from focusing on Dewey's aesthetics to his fascination with Dewey's metaphysics. The work on aesthetics highlighted for Jackson the importance of paying closer attention to everyday experience, and its qualities, not only because of what they reveal about experience, but also because of what they reveal about "nature, the world, the universe" (Jackson 2002, *John Dewey and the Philosopher's Task*, 8)⁸ In *John Dewey and the Philosopher's Task*, Jackson explores these philosophical implications of experience—and Dewey's attempt to articulate how best to explore them—through an examination of Dewey's repeated attempts to write an adequate introduction to his *Experience and Nature*.

Characteristically, Jackson does not focus so much on the findings or conclusions of Dewey's metaphysical explorations, but rather on the moral aspects of that exploration. He emphasizes philosophy's "call upon its practitioners to adopt a set of attitudes that allow for the exercise of reflective thought. These include a certain

tolerance of ambiguity, a respect for the opinions of others, and open-mindedness with respect to contrary views, a patience in following the intricacies of complex argument, and so forth” (Jackson 2002, 93).

Jackson concludes *The Philosopher’s Task* with an afterword that purports to summarize what he has learned from his inquiry into Dewey’s efforts to introduce *Experience and Nature*. Dewey, he writes, drifted from his earlier close allegiance to the purposes and methods of the sciences toward “a closer alignment with some of the more humanistically inclined disciplines” (Jackson 2002, 96). At the same time, Dewey also drifted away from what might be called a Eurocentric understanding of metaphysics to one that acknowledges the contextual and culturally conditioned nature of any philosophic investigation. Interestingly, these two “drifts” can also be seen in Jackson’s own career as an educational researcher. As noted earlier, Jackson himself can be seen as abandoning the certitude and concreteness of his early inquiries as a quantitative psychologist and pushing ever further into the “fog” of “human entanglements, where it is not necessarily possible to “[ask] the standard questions or [use] the approved procedures for answering them” (2002, 101).

After Jackson’s so-called retirement in 1998, he learned to read German fluently in order to study firsthand the collected works of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, as well as to immerse himself in the rich, extensive secondary literature on the two influential philosophers. Jackson climbed this intellectual mountain, in part, in order to better grasp the background to Dewey’s thought, since the latter had engaged both Kant and Hegel during his initial formative years as a scholar.

For over a decade, Jackson read deeply and comprehensively in Kant and Hegel. He also sat in on graduate courses on their work offered at the University of Chicago (a mere stone’s throw from the front door of his home in Hyde Park). The upshot of this intensive reading program, for Jackson, was his conviction that Dewey had not adequately grasped either Kant’s or Hegel’s visions of the human condition. Jackson felt this to be particularly true with regard to Hegel, whose overarching philosophy Jackson found to be the most “true to life” among the three renowned thinkers. During this period, he published a series of six articles on Hegel’s logic in *Teachers College Record* (2011), which were closely followed in that same journal by a critique he penned of Dewey’s and William James’s conceptions of thinking.

Not long after completing these writing endeavors, however, Jackson soon concluded that Hegel, too—like Kant and Dewey, in his view—misconstrued the nature and limits of reason and thinking. Jackson was particularly troubled by his emerging sense that for Hegel, philosophy constituted the apotheosis of the Logos—a kind of intellectual lord of the cosmos. Jackson rejected that view. At this juncture in his ever-changing career, and after twenty-five years of systematic research into Dewey, Kant, and Hegel, Jackson turned to theology. He devoted several years to reading comprehensively the collected works of figures such as Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich. Jackson also read voraciously in the secondary literature on twentieth-century theology.

What propelled Jackson to spend his “retirement” living with such profound and difficult-to-grasp thinkers? Why did he take up one august thinker after another, only to find each one wanting? What was the nature of his hunger, since his search seemed driven by far more than intellectual curiosity? We would posit the following: while Dewey ultimately invested his religious sensibilities in democracy—democracy really was a kind of religion for him, as it was (and is) for many other American writers (consider Walt Whitman and James Baldwin)—Jackson took another path. For him, both the religious and religion—the latter standing for the institutionalization of the former—necessitated a robust conception of the transcendent, of a godhead, of something outside or beyond human ken that is, in a manner of speaking, the source of the human.

Jackson began attending Sunday church services—which he continued to do for several years—and he also participated in a bible study group comprised of men and women from the immediate neighborhood. He preceded these commitments by contemplating Judaism—going so far as to enact himself various practices such as lighting candles in his home at Hanukkah—and in his final months turned to a close study of Sufism.

Jackson appreciated that his personal odyssey, or quest, could be pictured merely as an all-too-familiar attempt by an elderly person to come to grips with his mortality. But there was nothing desperate or alienated about the later movement of his thought and imagination. Jackson’s immersion in religion, for instance, never preempted or substituted for his abiding love of art, as the following vignette suggests.

In 2014, Jackson attended the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (held that year in Philadelphia), where he gave one of his last public lectures thanks to an invitation from the Lives of Teachers Special Interest Group. One evening during the conference, Hansen had occasion to escort Jackson and his wife, Jo, to a reception given by the John Dewey Society at the Barnes Museum, a fantastic repository of great art collected by Dewey’s associate, Albert Barnes, during the first half of the twentieth century. Jackson made use of a wheelchair for ease of movement, and after he and his wife made the social rounds, Hansen took them up to the second floor of the museum, where the galleries of art can be found. Upon entering the room, both Jackson and his wife spontaneously burst into tears. In wondrous ecstasy, Jackson cried out over and over and over, “It’s so beautiful!”

Many of Jackson’s friends and associates can relate tales of walking a museum gallery with him, and becoming mesmerized by his engaged, erudite, and critically appreciative criticism of one work of art after another. It seems that virtually every day of his life, Jackson pondered art and its lessons (to echo the title of one of his books on Dewey).

Jackson held together his aesthetic and religious sensibilities with how he practiced that fundamental human endeavor we call inquiry (an undertaking quite different from problem-solving, as such, and to which Dewey’s thought is often mistakenly reduced by casual readers of his oeuvre). Jackson’s final book, *What is Education?*—published in 2011, when he was 82 years old—constitutes a response

to the question: What did Dewey mean when he concluded, in *Experience and Education* (Dewey's own swansong as a writer on education), that "what we want and need is education pure and simple" (1988, 62, emphasis added), unadorned or weighed down by qualifiers such as progressive and traditional, or new and old? Jackson argues in his text that education "pure and simple" boils down to a moral endeavor in which the very persons we humans are becoming is always at issue.

Jackson's final publication brought him full circle from two of his most widely read books, *Life in Classrooms* (1968/2000) and *The Moral Life of Schools* (1993, co-authored with Robert E. Boostrom and David T. Hansen, with Jackson as the lead writer). Both of these texts resulted from intensive qualitative research in schools fused with philosophical inquiry. They are composed in the clear, specific, straightforward, and poetic style that Jackson refined over his long career—a style that mirrored his articulate and highly affecting rhetorical talents as a lecturer, classroom teacher, and conversationalist (cf. Hansen, 1996; Hansen, Driscoll, & Arcilla, 2007).⁹

Throughout his remarkable life, both inside and outside of educational institutions, Jackson had a magnetism that drew people to him. He will be remembered as a brilliant scholar and passionate human being, a man for all seasons who undertook everything he did with great energy, relish, and conviction.

NOTES

1. The significance of this achievement can be easily gleaned from the title of Jackson's 1990 AERA Presidential Address, "The Functions of Educational Research."
2. See Philip W. Jackson, "John Dewey's Poetry," *American Journal of Education* 91, no.1 (1982): 65–78.
3. Jackson explored his aesthetic interest further while writing "If We Took Dewey's Aesthetics Seriously, How Would the Arts be Taught?" in *The New Scholarship in Dewey*, edited by Jim Garrison (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), 25–34. Jackson writes in his acknowledgments to *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998, x) that Garrison had invited him to write the chapter on Dewey's aesthetics "when my ideas on the subject were just beginning to form." What Jackson likely meant is that he felt he knew enough of Dewey's aesthetics to be able to form some *original* ideas.
4. David Granger, "Expression, Imagination, and Organic Unity: John Dewey's Aesthetics and Romanticism," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 46.
5. Jackson, "If We Took Dewey's Aesthetics Seriously, How Would the Arts Be Taught?" 26–27.
6. Jackson, *Lessons of Art*, xiii.
7. Jackson, *Lessons of Art*, 61.
8. Philip W. Jackson, *John Dewey and the Philosopher's Task* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 8.
9. Again, cf. David T. Hansen, "In Class with Philip W. Jackson," in *Mentoring: Portraits of and by Distinguished 20th Century Educators*, edited by C. Kridel, R. V. Bullough, and P. Shaker (Hamden, CT: Garland, 1996); David T. Hansen, Mary E. Driscoll, and R. V. Arcilla, eds., *A Life in Classrooms: Philip W. Jackson and the Practice of Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

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