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The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent. Victor Kestenbaum. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. 261 pp.

Barely four years after his controversial appointment at Union Theological Seminary, Reinhold Niebuhr published *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), which opened with a broadside against John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey had joined the Columbia faculty in 1904, and three decades later had become the chief academic spokesman for American liberalism. Over the course of one of the longest philosophical careers on record, Dewey would manage to address nearly every major philosophical issue of his time. By 1929 he had also become something of a spokesman for his own culture—though to a lesser extent than his contemporary, the liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). (This places Dewey in roughly the same general relation to Niebuhr as Harnack had to Karl Barth.)

Dewey's relation to mainstream culture was complicated. He was the most influential theorist for the progressive education movement, which was on the rise at that time. Yet, he was also a socialist who worked against Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, whose star was, of course, rising even faster. Dewey's relation to later philosophical developments is no less complex. He had anticipated major aspects of the postmodern turn in philosophy while missing almost entirely its now famous "linguistic turn" and never recanting his allegiance to the liberal idea of progress.

Dewey produced academic work in philosophy in a style much more accessible than has since become. This common touch in philosophy is reflected in his conviction that everyday experience could be mined for insights into vast untapped human potentiality, which gets

In his first chapter, which gives a good overall synopsis of his project, Kestenbaum surveys the majority and minority report on the question of Deweyan interpretation, and places himself squarely on the side of the minority who find more than a light literary metaphor in Dewey's frequent use of a term like "spirit." *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal* aims to show how, for a Deweyan, human thought is more than just an instrument in the service of the tangible objectives—the concrete "ends-in-view"—of ordinary experience. Kestenbaum's emphasis on the phenomenological and religious side of Dewey keeps the discussion right where it should be.

"Intelligence" for Dewey was a real feature of human nature, at least in its potentiality to exercise critical control over a wide range of likely situations.⁴ This is grounded in the phenomenology of lived experience, which Kestenbaum (much to his credit) never discounted, even in the face of the now standard neopragmatist interpretation of Richard Rorty. Kestenbaum's earlier work had interpreted Dewey through the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), and *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal* continues on a similar hermeneutical track. As humans, we idealize our future in details not "tangible" to us—i.e., not drawn from the world as we actually know it to be. Faith in this human future is what virtually defines a liberal of Dewey's era, and this is what has made theological anthropology appealing to religious liberals. But this is largely faith in things unseen. As Christians we live in hope and continue the task of reconciliation, either by community work or personal witness. Here and there we do see some evidence of this new-born future human world, like the first fruits of the post-millenarian vision that inspired the old doctrine of progress. Unfortunately, it has not always been kept in mind that this is not an ideal we can control by instrumental reason. It is an ideal that, as Kestenbaum says, "is not an intention, but . . . does prescribe the intentions which steady it in consciousness and which, through action, fulfill it in experience" (37).

A reader of this book would do well to remember that Dewey begins his *Quest for Certainty* (1929) with the following sentence: "Man who lives in a world of hazards is compelled to seek for security"—which a Calvinist might recognize as a secularized version of the doctrine of God's Sovereignty. Dewey accomplishes this secularization not by abandoning the

concerns of spirit, but by focusing on the spiritual side of the human. What Dewey did and Kestenbaum implicitly does is what Schleiermacher had done—which is to work from the side of the Calvinist tradition that begins with self-knowledge. To this, Kestenbaum adds the idea that self-knowledge can never be gained at the purely instrumental level. The extent to which self-inquiry has an ulterior purpose is the extent to which we are opaque to ourselves, no better able to penetrate those operative motives than the human eye is able to gaze directly at the instrument of its own sight.

If all this is right, then Dewey seems to have more interesting things to say about religious life than one might suppose just from his rather thin *A Common Faith* (1934), which is his only extended treatment of the topic. The fact that Dewey wrote so little about the subject can perhaps be explained partly by the fact that its illumination requires some of the tools from formal logic and linguistic analysis that had passed by Dewey. The fact that Kestenbaum does not directly address these formal matters does not detract from the book's interest nor from its importance, and actually makes the reading more pleasurable.

There are still some quibbles to be made about some of Kestenbaum's own assumptions. Many religious liberals have tended to see spiritual matters in terms of the activation or creation of natural capacities, and for this reason have frequently been content to be "naturalists." Kestenbaum is wary of this characterization—he fears being "hemmed in" by "the natural" (24). I think this may be a confusion on Kestenbaum's part (though this might really be more a matter of semantics than substance). I still do not see why a sophisticated naturalism cannot treat guidance by the phenomenology of idealized possibilities to be a purely natural fact.⁵ But one can disagree with Kestenbaum's rejection of naturalism without failing to see the value and originality of this book, which deserves to be read widely and carefully.

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5. See, for example, the defense of naturalism in Nathan Tierney, "The Evolutionary Self in Christian and Philosophical Perspectives," in *Ethics in the World Religions*, ed. Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, The Library of Global Ethics and Religion, vol. 3 (Oxford and New York: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 137-59.

4. See David I. Seiple, "DEWEY, JOHN: Experience and the Organic Unity of Art-works," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, vol. 2 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29.