

Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture: Comments from an Activist Perspective

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Larry Hickman includes a headnote from John Dewey in his *Philosophical Tools*:

An empirical philosophy is...a kind of intellectual disrobing. We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intelligent furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically (*Experience and Nature*, 1925, p. 40).

Then, in his acknowledgment (p. ix), Hickman says this book is “an attempt to rethink and refine some of the central arguments” of his earlier *John Dewey’s Pragmatic Technology* (1990). I take that to mean that *Philosophical Tools* continues the effort to “divest ourselves of old intellectual habits” that impede the process of social amelioration that Dewey invites philosophers to share in.

At the end of the earlier *Pragmatic Technology*, Hickman discusses responsibility, and he has this to say:

There was also a sense of urgency in Dewey’s critique of technology. Failure to be responsible sets in motion trends and events that are increasingly difficult to divert or overcome. I think that Dewey would have argued that the destruction of the tropical rain forests, the desertification of vast areas of Africa, and the destruction of the environment due to acid rain and other industrial pollutants are not technological failures . . . : they are instead problems that are consequent upon the failure to sharpen and use the technological tools required for intelligent social planning (1990, p. 203).

A few times in *Philosophical Tools* Hickman touches on such environmental issues—on p. 37 he says Dewey’s/his approach “has profound consequences for environmental philosophy”—and in an essay not included in this collection he

explicitly addresses “green pragmatism” (*Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 18, 1999, pp. 39-56).

It is this aspect of Hickman’s work that I want to address here. Since his views and mine are, as far as I can tell, in almost perfect accord, what I have to offer is not so much a critique as a call for elaboration or clarification.

My perspective is the same as Hickman’s, namely, American Pragmatism of the classical period—though I sometimes prefer George Herbert Mead’s version of the approach to Dewey’s. Hickman refers favorably (p. 197, note 25) to my book *Social Responsibility in Science, Technology, and Medicine* (1992), but I will here lean on another of my publications, “In Defense of a Social-Work Philosophy of Technology” (*Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 16, 1997, pp. 3-14), which I have incorporated into my own set of follow-up essays to *Social Responsibility* (see www.udel.edu/Philosophy/pdurbin). I end that collection this way: “My only complaint [about philosophers already doing progressive work with activists outside the academy] has to do with any academicism—any needless worry about doing ‘real philosophy’—that would keep *more* of them from venturing outside the walls of academe to get involved in the pressing social ills that vex our technological world.”

The issue I focus on in part one is Hickman’s first example of an urgent environmental problem in *Pragmatic Technology*, the destruction of tropical rainforests. And my question has to do with how best to balance two roles that Hickman sees Dewey assigning to philosophy: (1) divesting ourselves of old intellectual habits, and (2) actually getting involved with others in progressive activism. The question then is, Is it possible to spend too much time in divesting ourselves of old intellectual habits, so that we do not have enough time left for progressive activism? In part two I expand the question to other sorts of activism.

Part 1. Saving the Rainforest in Costa Rica: Any Role for Philosophers?

For some years now I have been involved with efforts to save one of the most pristine tropical rainforests in Costa Rica, Corcovado National Park and its surrounding Golfo Dulce Forest Preserve. In June 2000, I participated in a conference in Costa Rica based on the assumption that the principles of the Earth Charter—or some similar holistic “integrity principles”—are necessary if we are to save Costa Rica’s incredibly rich forests, indeed if we are to save all of Central

America's forests (see Mittermeier et al., *Hotspots: Earth's Biologically Richest and Most Endangered Terrestrial Ecoregions*, 2000). My contribution to the proceedings ended up being entitled, "Can Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica Be Saved? How to Apply the Principles of the Earth Charter" (Durbin, 2002, pp. 303-310).

In that essay, I look at two threats to Corcovado—one a potential gold rush in the 1980s that would have directly damaged the park, the other a proposed wood chip mill that would have sat athwart the biological corridor linking Corcovado to another park whose destruction would turn Corcovado into an ecological island, destroying its incredible biodiversity—and I ask how Earth Charter-type principles impacted (or did not impact) the actors in the two crusades that have (so far) saved the park. (The two stories can be seen in D. Wallace, *The Quetzal and the Macaw: The Story of Costa Rica's National Parks*, 1992, chap. 14; and in Helena van den Hombergh, *Guerreros del Golfo Dulce* [1997].)

What I conclude is that highminded principles influenced only a small percentage of the actors involved—mainly leaders and agents of international environmental organizations (for example, Greenpeace) that got involved. In my view, the environmental ethic that Mead and Dewey would have defended is one that says philosophers, if they get involved in such issues, can not afford to take too-theoretical a stance; they must get involved, on an equal footing with other activists, and they must work with (sometimes collectively against) people who do not share highminded views—indeed, often with people who oppose them.

Here's how I ended that paper. As good as it may be to invoke lofty principles of the sort espoused in the Earth Charter, it is just as important to become *progressive* activists. And it is never assured that the outcome of a particular struggle—say, to make a project "sustainable" (?)—will be what defenders of lofty principles hope for. High-sounding principles are good, and may even be necessary. But blood, sweat, and tears are also needed to get any worthwhile environmental goal accomplished.

One of the environmental philosophers addressed by Hickman in his "green pragmatism" article, J. Baird Callicott, was at the conference in Costa Rica. Another presenter was Eugene Hargrove, long-time editor of the journal, *Environmental Ethics*. And what struck me most at the conference was the wall of incomprehension that grew higher every day between the environmental philosophers (mostly on the podium) and environmental activists (mostly in the

audience). The activists tended to find the philosophical argumentation abstruse and obscure—and they did not seem to see *any* possibility that the philosophers' articulations would help them at all in their efforts to save the rainforest or block any development projects that are unsustainable despite government and corporate protestations to the contrary.

I do not want to suggest that Hickman, in his article, "Green Pragmatism," was wasting his time by entering into contemporary debates in environmental philosophy—any more than he is wasting his time in *Pragmatic Technology* and *Philosophical Tools* in the "divesting" of bad "intellectual habits" of such philosophers as Albert Borgmann, Jacques Ellul, Jürgen Habermas, Martin Heidegger, Max Horkheimer, Andrew Feenberg, Herbert Marcuse, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or Langdon Winner—even such distorters of the Deweyan legacy as Emmanuel Mesthene or Richard Rorty. In fact, my lesson here is not for Hickman at all; I know that he gets involved in progressive activism—possibly even as much as Dewey did (an amazing amount according to Gary Bullert's *The Politics of John Dewey*, 1983) or as Mead did (see Andrew Feffer's *The Chicago Pragmatists and American Progressivism*, 1993). My lesson—in the form of a request for elaboration by Hickman—is aimed at those philosophers who would pay more attention to Hickman's philosophical arguments with these philosophers than to his calls for social reform, or to the activism needed to deal with the urgent social problems of our technological world. Philosophical argumentation is surely called for, but problems such as deforestation and global warming are so urgent that they call for action—including action by philosophers willing to get their hands dirty with real-world problems.

Part 2. A Philosophical Career Devoted to Activism

In the discussion after the American Philosophical Association panel out of which this author/critics collection grew, I took issue with Hickman—something I rarely do because our views converge to such a high degree. I felt that in his reaction to me he had not stressed a Deweyan *activism* enough, and I asked him specifically about how to answer my question about balancing intellectual discussion and activism. Hickman's reply was this: "That's a matter of personal preference." I disagree, and I want to address that reply, briefly, in line with Dewey's resistance to either-or thinking. It is not, in my reading of Deweyan pragmatism, a matter of *either* discussion *or* activism; it is really not even a matter of balancing the two. In my opinion, Deweyan philosophizing should

always have an activist component—at least an activist aim. For Dewey and Mead, philosophizing always merged seamlessly with their activist involvement in progressive causes. (Again see Bullert, 1983, and Feffer, 1993.)

From everything I know about Hickman, this is as true of him as it is of myself; at least it was when he was at Texas A&M. For my part, I have been involved more or less sequentially; and I have always seen my activist involvement as continuous with, as an extension of, my philosophical work. For example (and the list is by no means exhaustive), in the early 1970s I tried to work with the local Democratic Party—not wholeheartedly endorsing everything they stood for, but with a group of “new Democrats” who were pressing the party to take up more progressive issues. I next got involved with Common Cause, again primarily at the local level where I thought real and much needed reforms were possible. When it seemed to me that Common Cause was neglecting local issues where success was possible for the single-minded national issue of campaign finance reform, I began instead to work on local biomedical issues—in a bioethics committee and an institutional (research) review board—where it seemed possible to have a direct impact on positive outcomes for patients and human subjects. Finally, in the efforts discussed here in part one, I devoted myself with enthusiasm to efforts to protect biodiversity, especially in tropical rainforests, in Costa Rica (see part one). All along, I was working diligently, in the establishment (after 1975) of the Society for Philosophy and Technology, especially to protect an opening in the Society for activist work, and to avoid seeing the Society turn into a narrow philosophy *of* technology community.

I catalog these efforts, not to pat myself on the back—many of the efforts were failures; some would say abject failures—but to emphasize that, at least in my case (and, I would say, in Dewey’s and Mead’s), philosophical argumentation was *directly* related to progressive causes.

I would bet that Hickman could provide a comparable list—perhaps one with even more progressive connotations—but all I want to say here is that he has, it seems, sometimes acquiesced in the academic downplaying of such efforts as *mere* “service” work, in the academic argot. At least so it seemed when he replied to me, at the APA meeting, that how one balances such efforts with “academically respectable” pursuits is a “personal” matter. I think he was at least momentarily forgetting the Deweyan both-and imperative of combining “academic rigor”(whatever that may mean nowadays) with the always-needed

“service” work (in the positive sense) that is at the very heart of a Deweyan pragmatism.

Conclusion

Whether it is in a Deweyan environmental philosophy or in a *progressive* recognition of the continuity between the best philosophical work and progressive activism, I assume that Hickman agrees with me (and Dewey and Mead). All I call upon him to do here is elaborate on *how* he sees the continuity between thought and action play out *concretely* in our present academic climate—and in the real world of contemporary sociotechnical issues with *urgent* impact.

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