Abstract. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, John Dewey issued an eloquent call for contemporary philosophy to become more relevant to the pressing problems facing society. Historically, the philosophy of a period had been appropriate to social conditions (indeed, this is why it had developed as a discipline), but despite the vast changes in the contemporary world and the complex challenges confronting it philosophy had remained ossified. Karl Popper also was dissatisfied with contemporary philosophy, which he regarded as too often focusing upon “minute” problems. Both Dewey and Popper, however, were optimistic that the situation could be turned around. In this essay D.C. Phillips argues that the resources they mustered give no basis for this optimism; in particular, Phillips emphasizes that philosophy cannot have traction with closed-minded or fanatical individuals. Dewey passed over cases where his ideas about democratic processes and free intellectual exchange faced intractable difficulties, according to Phillips, and he further suggests that Popper “waffled” over the so-called “myth of the framework.”

Introduction

On a number of occasions John Dewey issued a powerful call — in unusually eloquent prose — for philosophers to reconstruct their discipline so that it would be able to “deal competently with the serious issues of the day.”¹ Noteworthy in this respect is his book *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, which was first issued shortly after World War I in 1920, and was reissued with a new and long introduction after the end of World War II, in 1948. Dewey — and for that matter Karl Popper, the other hero mentioned in the title of this essay — was disappointed that philosophy was not making more of a contribution to the resolution of the crises that confront modern societies. The years between the two wars, Dewey stated, “have sharply defined, have brought to a head, the basic postulate of the text: namely, that the distinctive office, problems and subject matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life in which a given form of philosophy arises” (*RP*, v).

The expectation of something better from philosophy should not surprise us, for Dewey was a pragmatist, and pragmatists believe that the function of ideas (even philosophical ideas) is to serve as instruments, that is, to guide our actions along fruitful paths. However, Dewey pointed out that the world had been changing at a rapid pace, while philosophy was still rooted in approaches that had reached the apogee of their appropriateness many centuries ago. Popper’s philosophy was, of course, different — but on the issue of the current relevance of much contemporary philosophy, his thought leaned pretty much in the same direction. Both men, however, seemed optimistic that the situation could be turned around;

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¹. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, enlarged ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), vi; see also vii and xi. This work will be cited in the text as *RP* for all subsequent references.
my purpose is to show that — given the resources that they marshaled — their optimism was unfounded. The main focus shall be on John Dewey and his call for “reconstruction”; however, Popper will be introduced from time to time, not only as an interesting parallel case but because he identified and gave a name to the fallacy [he called it a “myth”] that later will play an important role in my discussion.

The topic pursued here — and indeed the whole of Reconstruction itself — is of great educational significance, although the terms “education” and “philosophy of education” rarely appear in his text. (What is at stake here, as will become clear as the discussion continues, is the key educational and philosophical issue of the efficacy of rational considerations in changing beliefs and actions.) Four years before the book in question first appeared, Dewey had famously argued that philosophy “is the theory of education in its most general phases” and that “the reconstruction of philosophy, of education, and of social ideals and methods thus go hand in hand.”2 If the reconstruction of philosophy that Dewey canvassed four (and thirty-two) years later eventually meets with success, there will be far-reaching educational ramifications — but if the thesis of this essay is right, the educational challenge is even more enormous than Dewey supposed and the consequences of failure possibly are more devastating.

**Dewey’s Call for a Reconstruction in Philosophy**

In 1920, soon after World War I ended, Dewey first published the book that is my centerpiece, which argued that the horrendous events of the preceding years showed that there was an urgent need for a “Reconstruction in Philosophy.” Throughout the extended introduction that he added to the 1948 edition of the book, he referred to “the disturbance and unsettlement” that now marks human life, to the “troubled affairs of the present,” to “moral chaos,” to the “serious practical issues demanding immediate attention,” to “the crisis in which man is now involved all over the world,” and to “the present state of drift, instability and uncertainty” (RP, vi, vii, xiii, xxi, and xxvii). Indeed, in 1948 Dewey thought that what was needed was so far-reaching that it was better termed a “reconstruction of philosophy” rather than a “reconstruction in” it.

Here is a passage from the opening pages of the introduction to the new edition issued after WW II, it reads as if it were written yesterday, so clearly does it apply to the situation in the first decades of the new millennium:

> The First World War was a decided shock to the earlier period of optimism, in which there prevailed widespread belief in continued progress toward mutual understanding among peoples and classes, and hence a sure movement to harmony and peace. Today the shock is almost


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incredibly greater. Insecurity and strife are so general that the prevailing attitude is one of anxious and pessimistic uncertainty. Uncertainty as to what the future has in store casts its heavy and black shadow over all aspects of the present. In philosophy today there are not many who exhibit confidence about its ability to deal competently with the serious issues of the day. The problems with which a philosophy relevant to the present must deal are those growing out of changes going on with ever-increasing rapidity, over an ever-increasing human-geographical range, and with ever-increasing intensity of penetration; this fact is one striking indication of the need for a very different kind of reconstruction from that which is now most in evidence. (RP, vi–vii)

Dewey went on to argue that the philosophies that had arisen in past ages were relevant to their social contexts, and provided perspective on the tensions within these; unfortunately, however, these philosophies — although still with us — are not of relevance to the problems and social conditions of today, and indeed are quite outdated given the resources of factual knowledge, skills, and methods of inquiry that we now have available [among other things, the older philosophies were dualistic, and endorsed transcendentalism]. Hence the need for the “reconstruction” of contemporary philosophy. It is worth noting, in passing, that Dewey was not alone in offering a less than flattering account of contemporary philosophy — about three decades after the second edition of Dewey’s book was published, for example, Karl Popper wrote that “in my own view, professional philosophy has not done too well. It is in urgent need of an *apologia pro vita sua*, of a defence of its existence.”

It seems a reasonable bet that were Dewey still alive, he would reissue his book for a third time; another new introduction would hardly be necessary. There is probably little need to give an in-depth account of the factors that make our current situation at least as perilous as those that existed during the period of the two great world wars. A brief and therefore incomplete listing will suffice: the rise of religious fundamentalisms around the world (including in the United States), covering a range from benign to fanatically militant, with the concomitant willingness of some fanatics to commit random mass murder of civilians; the persistent wars in the Middle East; the growing disparity between rich and poor nations, and between rich and poor classes within these nations (including those nations with so-called developed economies) and the concomitant lack of concern of many of the wealthy about the plight of the poor; the crisis in and near-collapse of the international financial system; the threat of global warming and the refusal of some to acknowledge it; the pernicious racism and sexism that are alive and well in many societies; the difficulty that has existed in the United States of convincing all citizens that it is a moral affront that more than thirty million of their fellows lack basic health care; the degeneration of political debate to name-calling, the deliberate promulgation of lies, and the refusal to be bipartisan; the bitter and often intractable controversies about abortion and homosexuality; and the failure to provide effective schooling and even decent facilities in which learning can take


4. I regard the problems listed here as so well recognized as to make documentation unnecessary.
place. The words Dewey penned after WW II are indeed applicable, although they may be quite an understatement: “Insecurity and strife are so general that the prevailing attitude is one of anxious and pessimistic uncertainty” ([RP], vi).

The time has come to start on an assessment of the case Dewey presented to support his call for reconstruction.

**Perilous Times, Irrelevant Philosophy**

It is far from clear how the horrors that were just listed can be alleviated. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey’s reaction to the frightening social problems he discerned was to discourse about the role of philosophy. He wrote that “in philosophy today there are not many who exhibit confidence about its ability to deal competently with [these] serious issues of the day,” as if it was an undisputed fact that this indeed was a major part of philosophy’s role. And, of course, he had to face the issue of what a philosophy that was relevant to the present actually would look like.

From a Deweyan perspective, much of the philosophy of the early twenty-first century (and one can be fairly confident that philosophy of education would be included here) would have to be rated as just as irrelevant to contemporary affairs as were the philosophies that existed immediately following WW I and WW II — but the crucial issues are whether philosophy could be relevant and should be relevant. The interpretive problem, of course, is that expressions that assert philosophy should be “relevant to,” and that it “grows out of and is connected with,” what Dewey termed “human affairs” (expressions that recur throughout the introduction to the book), or claims to the effect that “philosophy originates out of social material” (made in chapter 1), are at best vague enough that their purport is not fully clear. Of course Dewey was not so unreasonable as to expect philosophy single-handedly to resolve current crises in society — but certainly he believed that it could and should help to bring about their resolution:

Reconstruction can be nothing less than the work of forming, of producing (in the literal sense of that word) the intellectual instrumentalities which will progressively direct inquiry into the deeply and inclusively human — that is to say, moral facts of the present scene and situation. ([RP], xxvii)

A couple of pages later, he attempted to clarify the role of philosophers by using the example of what they had contributed in earlier ages; he drew attention

to what certain human beings classed as philosophers accomplished in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the way of clearing the ground of cosmological and ontological debris which had been absorbed emotionally and intellectually into the very structure and operation of Western culture. ([RP], xxix, emphasis added)

There are some serious difficulties confronting Dewey’s position, but before turning to discuss these, it is important to recognize that in essence there are two agendas in his book that do not sit well together. The first of these is reflected in the call for philosophy to become more relevant to the pressing social problems of the day, and the second is the detailed suggestions Dewey provided in each of the book’s chapters about how philosophy should be reconstructed so that it will no longer be intellectually out of touch with the times. My discussion here focuses
upon the first agenda, about which, I will argue, there are serious criticisms to be made; but Dewey’s second agenda, with his suggestions for updating philosophy’s conceptions of experience and reason, moral and social philosophy, logic, and so forth, are far more defensible. For it seems eminently sensible to hold that the philosophy of our own day should be intellectually up to date and should take account of recent developments. Philosophy of language, for example, should take account of developments in linguistics; philosophy of mind should take account of — should be informed by — recent work in cognitive and brain science; and epistemology should be informed by the knowledge-validating processes found in the sciences. However, this is quite different from saying that philosophy should be relevant to social conditions and problems, and it is to the difficulties associated with this first agenda of Dewey’s that I now turn. The place to start is with the concept of “relevance” itself; then the issue of how to deal with the serious problems facing us in the contemporary world will come to the forefront.

Problems with the Criterion of Relevance

First, it is important to note that Dewey’s view that philosophy should be relevant to or connected with “human affairs” rests in large part upon his interesting historical thesis (a type of creation myth) about how philosophy originated: it “grew out of” our ancestors’ struggle to survive in an environment over which they had almost no control, and which they dealt with initially by means of myths and rituals that eventually became consolidated or institutionalized. According to Dewey,

Whether this is literally so or not, it is not necessary to inquire, much less to demonstrate. It is enough for our purposes that under social influences there took place a fixing and organizing of doctrines and cults which gave general traits to the imagination and general rules to conduct, and that such a consolidation was a necessary antecedent to the formation of any philosophy as we understand that term. ([RP], 9)

Eventually these institutionalized moral rules and ideals needed “reconciling” with the facts about the workings of nature that gradually were accumulating, and to meet this need for reconciliation, philosophy was born ([RP], 9–10).

Whatever the status of Dewey’s historical speculations here, they form part of a fallacious train of reasoning — what might be called an evolutionary or genetic fallacy. Dewey put himself in jeopardy of committing this fallacy — one he must have been well aware of — as a consequence of the method of exposition that he consciously adopted:

Common frankness requires that it be stated that this account of the origin of philosophies … has been given with malice prepense. It seems to me that this genetic method of approach is a more effective way of undermining this [older, now outdated] type of philosophic theorizing than any attempt at logical refutation could be. ([RP], 24)\textsuperscript{6}

5. In light of the facts that Dewey’s account cannot be definitively tested, and that he himself stated [in a passage quoted subsequently in the essay] that whether or not this account “is literally so or not, it is not necessary to inquire;” it seems that usage of the expression “creation myth” is appropriate.

6. It is worth noting here that what Dewey did not anticipate in 1920 and 1948 was the late twentieth-century resurgence of fundamentalisms and transcendentalisms that do not accept that they had either
The genetic approach, to be efficacious, must develop a theme — for example, the theme that entity E arose to fulfill some function or purpose, and its success or failure at doing so is revealed in the subsequent sequence of historical (“genetic”) events. In developing such an account, one must take care not to trip over the following: From the fact that some entity E originated or developed in order to carry out some function F, it does not follow that after it has developed, entity E can only carry out F and cannot and should not acquire other functions. Indeed, it does not even follow that E should continue to carry out its original function F. A semi-fanciful example that is provided only for illustrative purposes is the following: The human hand first evolved to grasp branches firmly as our ancestors swung from tree to tree, and then it became slightly modified to hold lumps of rock that were being used as primitive tools. How far should this evolutionary function determine — in the twenty-first century — what use the hand is put to? Does its original function, eons ago, rule out the present-day use of the hand to skillfully play the piano, or it being used for sign language in order to communicate with individuals who are deaf? Should this original biological purpose still play any part in the lives of most of us, who never swing from branches or grasp at rocks [let alone at straws]? Should a school make time in its curriculum for branch swinging and rock grasping? Clearly not. The parallel case that can be made about philosophy is far and away much stronger, for — unlike bone or muscular structure and function — philosophy is a human construction that can be used for a variety of human purposes. Its original function does not constrain what it should aim to do in the present age in the way that perhaps the biological structure of the hand does constrain the future uses it can be put to. Dewey’s self-proclaimed “genetic” criticism of traditional philosophy (which, as he stated, he thought effectively undermined it) certainly develops a theme, namely, that the historical record shows that philosophy has failed to carry out its original purpose — which can count as a criticism only on the basis of the fallacy described previously. To repeat, the argument that because traditional philosophy originally had the function F, and had failed to carry this out in the modern period, it was effectively undermined, hinges upon the faulty principle that a human construct should not deviate from its original, foundational purpose. (Without such a principle or theme, a historical account cannot undermine anything at all.)

A second skeptical point about relevance needs to be made. This criterion is of very little use for the simple reason that relevant and irrelevant activities are not fixed or predetermined categories that are context-independent. Whether or not some activity or pursuit P is relevant depends upon the question “relevant to what” being answered, and also upon the specific argument that is made to establish the claim of relevance. And, sadly perhaps, a case can almost always be made that a particular P (no matter how offbeat or been “refuted” or “undermined” by anything — or, for that matter, that do not accept that they possibly could be so refuted or undermined. This matter will be pursued later.
esoteric) is relevant for something. Israel Scheffler made the following pertinent comment:

The theoretical problem, with relevance as with virtue, is to say in what it consists and why, thus specified, it ought to be pursued. Relevance is, in particular, not an absolute property; nothing is either relevant or irrelevant in and of itself. Relevant to what, how, and why? — that is the question.7

Here is another example, entirely for expository purposes: A number of philosophers of language around the world are deeply interested in indexicals, about which there is a substantial literature. What are indexicals? They are words such as “I,” “now,” “she,” and “that,” whose reference shifts from one context to another. Strange as it may seem, the use of these terms gives rise to many complex problems in philosophy of language, and even in metaphysics. And so the question arises: Is this body of work relevant? Well, it might not be relevant to the problems Dewey listed, but we have seen that his argument that philosophy should be relevant in this way was not logically compelling. Crucially, however, indexicals are relevant to the advanced problem solving of philosophers of language. Popper calls such problems “minute”; he adds that “scholasticism abounds” in philosophy and he insists that “we should avoid hairsplitting.”8 Both Popper and Dewey are surprisingly shortsighted here, for as they well knew, during the development of most if not all disciplines — including philosophy — complex esoteric problems arise that, unless resolved, will put a halt to that discipline’s development; in other words, a field’s research agenda tends to get set by internal pressures as much as or more than by external, social ones.9

Care also needs to be taken for an additional reason: following upon the preceding point, a case can be made that indexicals are relevant to broader matters. Indexicals thus play a role in some crucial epistemological and metaphysical discourse (think of René Descartes’s famous “I think, therefore I am”), and it is possible that reaching clarity about them might help to defuse some controversies about the philosophical or theological interpretation of religious texts, which is indeed relevant to one of the pressing social problems that were listed earlier. In other words, relevance to broader issues, which might not be present at dusk, can emerge at dawn.

The point here is not to convince the reader to take up the study of indexicals; rather, the example is intended to illustrate the point that a justificatory argument can be constructed to show the “relevance” of even the unlikeliest of pursuits. And the more basic lesson is that calling for a reconstruction of philosophy on the grounds that traditional philosophy is not relevant to the problems of contemporary life is unlikely to be a fruitful way to proceed.

But clearly there is a residual issue here: Contemporary societies certainly are faced with the deep and possibly cataclysmic problems that were listed earlier. Is it the case that contemporary philosophers have nothing to contribute? Even if we reject Dewey’s view that social relevance was the raison d’être for philosophy’s development as a discipline, nevertheless is it not reasonable to expect that it might be a field we could call upon as we struggle with these dreadful problems? This leads to the next phase of the argument, and to the justification of skepticism about philosophy’s (and relatedly, education’s) role in alleviating our social problems.

Skepticism About What Philosophy Can Achieve

Several points can be made that lead toward skepticism. First, philosophers do not speak with one voice; one of the charms of philosophy is that individuals frequently take up reasoned positions on both sides of an issue. Dewey himself regarded philosophies that were dualistic, or transcendental, or both, as outmoded, but nowhere near all contemporary philosophers and theologians agree. Any light some philosophers can shed on an issue, other philosophers can extinguish — so where does this leave the layperson who is seeking philosophical guidance?

Second, on those perhaps rare occasions when philosophers do seem to be addressing relevant (rather than minute) issues, their work only has direct traction with a rather limited audience — an audience that has philosophical or conceptual interests. After all, this is the audience that philosophers generally write for, and the one that understands their concepts and rhetorical approaches and methods of warranting claims. The passages quoted from Dewey earlier actually illustrate this: philosophers can “clear the ground of ontological debris”; they can “produce the intellectual instrumentalities which will progressively direct inquiry.” Clearing ontological debris and making intellectual instrumentalities are intellectual and (dare it be said) academic contributions that are valued by some individuals, but that unfortunately have little traction with most of those who are embroiled in the crises listed earlier. To take perhaps the most extreme case, a fanatical suicide bomber does not need to have ontological debris removed; he needs to have his explosives removed! The problem such a person presents is not a philosophical one; it is a practical and political one. The problem presented by the terrorist, as well as the problems presented in most if not all of the other less violent examples listed earlier, cannot be disarmed by philosophy.10

Why not? Simply because in many cases the individuals concerned are not open to philosophical persuasion — perhaps because they have been persuaded

10. A parallel point can, of course, be made about education. Educational processes are likely to affect only those individuals who are open to them. Such individuals might present difficulties for the educator, but with skill and effort often these can be overcome. Far more intractable are the cases of individuals who are closed or insulated against the influence of education. Dewey undoubtedly has much of great value to say about the education of the former individuals, but — like most of us — does not address folk in the other category in any depth.
already and are not open-minded about the issues; or perhaps their viewpoints are Quinean networks that can absorb without damage what seems to outsiders to be counterevidence, or maybe these viewpoints have logical features such as “protective belts” that insulate them from outside influence; or perhaps they are wedded for psychological reasons to their present viewpoint; or perhaps they simply despise those who are attempting to enter into discussion with them. To revisit the stark illustration of the fanatic, it has rarely been the case in the course of human history that a fanatical terrorist has been converted to the use of peaceful democratic means for achieving his or her ends, or has become dedicated to developing the dispositions and character traits necessary to leading a life open to the light of reason, by cogitating about the kinds of arguments presented in philosophical works such as Eamonn Callan’s Creating Citizens and Harvey Siegel’s Rationality Redeemed.11 The transcendentalism that underlies the worldview of such a fanatic (possibly) may have been philosophically refuted, but this has no traction at all with a person who has no interest in philosophical argumentation (a point Dewey indirectly acknowledged when he chose to use the genetic method discussed previously). In addition, there are of course many who believe that transcendental views remain fully viable, even in the light of criticism (and it is to be remembered, from the passage quoted earlier, that Dewey acknowledged that logical refutation might not be “effective”).

A third point in support of skepticism is, to put it bluntly, that the awful problems we face at this moment in history are due in large part to the actions of individuals who have adopted systems of belief that are self-sealing and well insulated from outside interference, so that there is little or no hope of them entering into rational and open-ended discourse with a philosopher, and much less chance of them undergoing rational conversion. (It needs to be stressed that the issue being pursued here is not whether philosophical or educational input can be effective with the many individuals who are open to these; the issue being addressed is the hard case of those who are insulated against such input.12) Here an appeal can be made to several intellectual “heavyweights” to support this skeptical case, namely Sidney Hook and Karl Popper.


12. Some readers of an earlier draft of this essay seemed to be in denial about the seriousness of such cases, and about their frequency. While it is part of this essay’s thesis that Dewey also tended to bypass these cases, some of his prose was prescient — witness part of a passage quoted earlier: “The First World War was a decided shock to the earlier period of optimism, in which there prevailed widespread belief in continued progress toward mutual understanding among people and classes, and hence sure movement to harmony and peace. Today the shock is almost incredibly greater.” The lack of understanding among people continues to shock, and it falls under the ambit of the “hard cases” rather than the easy ones — otherwise it would be a challenge but not a “shock” generating “pessimistic uncertainty.”
Let’s start with Sidney Hook, who was of course one of Dewey’s students. In his introduction to volume 17 of the *Later Works of John Dewey*, in which he discusses the “relevance” of Dewey’s philosophy (a discussion clearly relevant to my own enterprise), Hook wrote the following passage, one so forceful that no comment is necessary:

The major threats to democratic political and social life stem not from relativism or skepticism but from fanaticism. We live in an age of true believers whose self-righteous absolutisms brook neither contradiction nor delay in bringing about the promised land of their faith. Disagreement is automatically attributed either to immeasurable stupidity or to unmitigated venality. Some of these fanaticisms are on the side of the angels, like absolute pacifism whose consequences often embolden aggressors like Hitler to believe that they can make armed moves and, ultimately, war with impunity. The fanatical social revolutionist equally with the fanatical reactionary or standpatter holds his beliefs in such a way that nothing that occurs can disconfirm them. The less fruitful and effective those beliefs are, the greater his impatience, the more intense his conviction of their truth. Only too often he ends up proclaiming that the evil system that defeats his demands — demands so clear, so obvious, so eminently reasonable — must be destroyed “by peaceful means if possible, by any means if necessary.” In a few short strides the Utopian idealist becomes a bomb-throwing guerrilla warrior, an arsonist or an assassin.13

Turning to Popper, one finds the following passage that also is extremely enlightening:

It was during the great and heated discussions after the First World War that I found how difficult it was to get anywhere with people living in a closed framework — I mean people like the Marxists, the Freudians, and the Adlerians. None of them could ever be shaken in his adopted view of the world. Every argument against their framework was interpreted by them so as to fit into it. And if this turned out to be difficult, then it was always possible to psychoanalyse or socioanalyse the arguer.14

Here is a simple contemporary example to reinforce the ones used by Hook and Popper. It is taken from the winter 2010 edition of the American Civil Liberties Union’s newsletter, *Civil Liberties*:

The ACLU of Tennessee has filed a lawsuit against the Cheatham County School District, where a history teacher lectures that the separation of church and state doctrine doesn’t exist, the United States is a Christian nation, and there’s no such thing as an atheist.15

The prospects of rational argument changing this teacher’s position, or even of convincing him or her that the position *might possibly be* wrong, seem slim indeed.

There are two bodies of work in philosophy of science — work that, interestingly, Popper was highly critical of — that throw further light on the kind of situation that he and Hook described so well. First, the controversial thesis

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14. Karl Popper, *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality* (London: Routledge, 1994), 53. Popper was of course referring to dichards; some Freudians, Marxists, and others have altered their views as a result of outside influence.

of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* — a thesis that I do not accept as being true of the natural sciences — can be applied here. It certainly seems that the individuals embroiled in many of the crisis situations that are being discussed live inside different, incommensurable paradigms, or have been “transported to different planets.” According to Kuhn’s analysis, movement or conversion from one paradigm to another is not possible by rational means and can only take place by processes akin to religious or political conversion — the reason being that incommensurable paradigms are self-insulating in the sense that the considerations that are pertinent to one (the explanatory concepts, the types of evidence, the methods of inquiry, the types of argument that are regarded as authoritative, the issues that are taken as being central, and so forth) have no traction in the other and may even seem meaningless or irrelevant when seen from this second framework. As Kuhn wrote in a famous passage:

> Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm’s defense. The resulting circularity does not, of course, make the arguments wrong or even ineffectual. The man who premises a paradigm when arguing in its defense can nonetheless provide a clear exhibit of what scientific practice will be like for those who adopt the new view of nature. That exhibit can be immensely persuasive, often compellingly so. Yet, whatever its force, the status of the circular argument is only that of persuasion. It cannot be made logically or even probabilistically compelling for those who refuse to step into the circle…. As in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice — there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community.

The (essentially rhetorical) question can be posed: Doesn’t this passage throw light on the situation of fanatical terrorists; of religious fundamentalists [of virtually any religious persuasion]; of political ideologues from both the right and the left; of unshakeable pro- and anti-abortionists, who each regard their opponents as the embodiment of evil; of those who see advocates of social programs designed to help the poor or to redistribute wealth as evil, antidemocratic monsters — and those who see the people who oppose these programs as heartless money-grabbers; of those who see the threat of global warming as a liberal, anticapitalistic plot, and refuse to take seriously scientific work supporting the thesis of warming on the grounds that it was produced by individuals who simply have sold out?

The second body of work from philosophy of science that seems highly relevant may actually contribute something even more helpful than Kuhn’s notion of “incommensurable paradigms.” Imre Lakatos proposed a theory of how scientific research programs respond to, and oftentimes survive, the appearance of apparently refuting evidence. Those theoretical, or conceptual, or methodological, or other items in the program’s web of belief that are expendable, constitute what he called a “protective belt.” Changes in this belt could be made so as to disarm or counter the negative evidence and to preserve the essence of the program — its “hard

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16. This is no surprise, for Kuhn’s view on scientific revolutions was influenced by his analysis of political and social revolutions. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

17. Ibid., 94.
core” — that had to be preserved under any circumstance (for to abandon the hard core would be to close down the research program):

All scientific research programmes may be characterized by their “hard core”… we must use our ingenuity to articulate or even invent “auxiliary hypotheses,” which form a protective belt around this core. … It is this protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses which has to bear the brunt of tests and get adjusted and re-adjusted, or even completely replaced, to defend the thus-hardened core.18

If we examine the wonderful autobiographical example given by Popper from this Lakatosian perspective (Popper could not do this for himself, for he regarded Lakatos as a depraved enemy — a nice example of Sir Karl actually using a protective belt to save his own hard core from Imre’s criticisms), this process of defending the hard core of their programs is precisely what the Freudians and Marxists and Adlerians did when evidence challenging their system was put forward — the hard core of their systems was always preserved, and as a last resort they attempted to disarm the criticisms by psychoanalyzing or “socioanalyzing” the critics themselves.

To sum up, in a world full of crisis situations where the key actors are, in Hook’s terminology, “true believers” — individuals with worldviews that are thoroughly insulated against criticism, negative evidence, and the like — there is little prospect that philosophical methods of persuasion will work. If Popper could not change the opinions of Marxists and Freudians and Adlerians, there is no hope at all for philosophers who are mere mortals!

Here the argument I am developing takes an even more negative turn. For it is at this point that both Dewey and Popper turn out to have feet of clay — the sad reality is that at this crucial point, they fail us.

**How Popper and Dewey Fail: The “Myth” of the Framework**

The case I am making is that the crises pointed to by Dewey, Hook, Popper, and myself are in many instances made intractable by the fact that the relevant actors have worldviews or belief systems that are very well insulated against evidence, criticism, and the like that come from outside. This is why one must be skeptical, even pessimistic, about the prospects for philosophy having an alleviating influence.19 Philosophical considerations can only influence those who are open to them, and this is the key issue with which both Popper and Dewey failed to grapple.

I begin by examining Popper, whose case is more straightforward: He would assert that when I sum up my position as being “philosophical considerations can only influence those who are open to them,” in effect I am acknowledging that I have fallen prey to what he called “the myth of the framework.” In

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19. Here of course one must bear in mind Dewey’s identifying philosophy and education. The pessimism about the efficacy of philosophy carries over to a skepticism about the possibilities of educative processes.
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between people who agree on fundamentals."\textsuperscript{20} Elsewhere he says "the myth of

the framework" can be stated in one sentence, namely, "A rational and fruitful
discussion is impossible unless the participants share a common framework of

basic assumptions or, at least, unless they have agreed on such a framework for

the purpose of the discussion."\textsuperscript{21} This is, indeed, very roughly what I have been

arguing; furthermore, it seems obvious that this also is the thrust of Popper's

example concerning the breakdown of his efforts to communicate fruitfully with

Marxists, Freudians, and Adlerians.

Why, then, did Popper call this position a "myth"? Because, contrary to the

thrust of his earlier example, he believed that discussion across differences can

be efficacious. In one place he alluded to some of the dreadful events that occurred in

the twentieth century, events that call to mind the events that sparked Dewey's

book on reconstruction in philosophy. Popper wrote,

\begin{quote}
I do not intend, here, to talk about these dreadful events. Whatever one may try to say — or
even to think — it always seems like an attempt to belittle events that defy the imagination.
The horror continues.... What can we do to prevent these monstrous events? Can we do
nothing at all? My answer is: yes. I believe that there is a great deal that we can do. When I say
"we," I mean the intellectuals, that is, human beings who are interested in ideas, especially
those who read and, perhaps, write.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

So, although the problem is that the individuals in question hold worldviews

that are insulated, and thus are not open to outside rational or intellectual

argument or criticism, nevertheless this outside criticism can be efficacious!

This sleight of hand on Popper's part is only possible because he immediately

softens his position concerning the "myth of the framework" in a way that is

reminiscent of Kuhn's treatment of incommensurable paradigms. Kuhn insisted

that rational communication across paradigms, and potential conversion of a

person in paradigm X to paradigm Y, was not possible; rather, conversion had
to be thought of as similar to political or religious conversion. This proved an
impossible position to defend, so Kuhn backed off and said that communication
(and potential conversion) merely were very difficult. Kuhn held both of these

incompatible positions at the same time. The same is true of Popper. He wrote,

\begin{quote}
Let me say at once that the myth [of the framework] contains a kernel of truth. Although I
contend that it is a most dangerous exaggeration to say that a fruitful discussion is impossible
unless the participants share a common framework, I am very ready to admit that a discussion
among participants who do not share a common framework may be difficult.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Shortly before this passage, he stated in more positive terms that "I argue that
if common goodwill and a lot of effort are put into it, then very far-reaching

\textsuperscript{20} Popper, \textit{In Search of a Better World}, 181.

\textsuperscript{21} Popper, \textit{The Myth of the Framework}, 34–35.

\textsuperscript{22} Popper, \textit{In Search of a Better World}, 188–189.

\textsuperscript{23} Popper, \textit{The Myth of the Framework}, 35.
understanding is possible." Popper also asked, "is it possible to avoid fanaticism and its excesses?" and he answered that our attempts "need not always be futile" and our efforts have been "crowned by success only where people had learned to respect opinions that differ from their own." This, however, is merely a slightly disguised form of the point that I have been making: When we are dealing with people who do not respect our opinions — when we are dealing with people whose belief systems judge our framework to be totally incommensurable (or, worse, totally evil) — the "prerequisites" (as Popper called them) for rational or intellectual communication do not exist. So, to repeat, the issue is not whether (with difficulty or with ease) we can communicate with people who differ from us but who at least respect our position; rather, the issue is whether we can communicate with people who do not respect or comprehend our position. I answer this in the negative, and, myth or not, this is the answer that — despite all his waffling — Popper also gave.

Finally, to return to Dewey: Unfortunately, he did not raise the "myth of the framework" for explicit discussion, but nevertheless it is possible with some effort to discern his position. It turns out to have similarities to Popper's, and is subject to the same kind of criticism, for Dewey frequently assigned a major role to open communication and "conjoint inquiry" — yet he did not show how such openness is possible in the serious intractable cases.

As is well-known, Dewey was writing in the context of modern Western democracy; crucially, he thought of democracy as being a way of life rather than in terms of it being a political mode of governance in which parties vied for influence through free elections. In Reconstruction in Philosophy, Dewey asserted that democracy is the best form of social arrangement, for it is able to "set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status" (RP, 186) — a point he also made in many other of his writings. A few pages further on, he elaborated:

Full education comes only when there is a responsible share on the part of each person, in proportion to capacity, in shaping the aims and policies of the social groups to which he belongs. This fact fixes the significance of democracy. It cannot be conceived as a sectarian or racial thing nor as a consecration of some form of government which has already attained constitutional sanction. It is but a name for the fact that human nature is developed only when its elements take part in directing things which are common, things for the sake of which men and women form groups — families, industrial companies, governments, churches, scientific associations, and so on. (RP, 209)

Thus, the picture that emerges from Dewey's writings (and there are many of his works that paint this same picture) is this: A democratic society is one in which individuals form groups or associations or small communities where they engage in what he called "conjoint activities" and pursue common goals. Within these groups, individuals may have differing opinions about what these goals and values ought to be and the means by which they can be attained; but these differences will

be resolved by negotiation in settings of free communication, and a joint course of action will be settled upon and tried out in practice to see if it is satisfactory. This is “the method of intelligence,” and essentially it is the application in social life of the experimental method of the sciences.

According to Dewey’s picture, then, all differences (that is, the kinds of differences he considered — the differences about which discussion can be entered) will be negotiated away, and compromises reached, and these will be tested or acted upon to see if the result is satisfactory. If it is not, a further round of discussion and experimentation will take place. Dewey avoided giving detailed examples to show how this process would work, and it is particularly noticeable that he never dealt in depth with the really hard cases. Consider — as Dewey did not — the example of abortion. Many individuals favor a social policy that would allow abortions to be legal, and indeed see a woman’s freedom to decide as being a fundamental human right; but they are opposed by many who see abortion (and also birth control) as an affront to the word of God. Fundamental human rights, and the word of God, cannot readily be negotiated away, like diehard Marxism and Freudianism, they are beliefs that are rather effectively insulated against outside influences. Cases such as this are tough, if not impossible, for Dewey to handle, which perhaps is why he did not raise them.

Stated crassly, then, we are able to communicate and appeal to reason and negotiate philosophically with others in our society who are open to such appeals, but we are not given guidance about the crucial cases of those who are not open! It can be responded, of course, that Dewey was putting forward an ideal, a picture of how a democracy should function at its best; but an ideal that does not show how the tough cases can be dealt with is not an ideal at all (especially according to the standards of pragmatism) — it is a pipedream. It is here that we can appeal once again to Sidney Hook. A sentence or so after the passage from Hook’s “The Relevance of John Dewey’s Thought” that was quoted earlier, he wrote that “Dewey is interested … in an intellectual approach that would prevent or at least hinder the emergence of fanaticism.” And that is precisely the point — preventing or hindering fanaticism from appearing. But that is not our current problem, for fanaticisms are already with us. The pressing issue is not to stop them from appearing (although of course that is an issue, and one that Dewey’s views on education can probably illuminate), the pressing matter is how to deal with them now that they exist. We cannot confine our attention solely to situations in which the conditions for meaningful dialogue and interaction currently exist.

This harsh conclusion about Dewey is reinforced by one of the few places where he came close to dealing with a tough case — he came close, but then backed away. In the closing chapter of his The Public and Its Problems (a book published in the late 1920s and again in the mid-1940s), Dewey raised the following

issue: “Think of the meaning of the ‘problem of minorities’ in certain European states.” After a cursory elaboration of the problem, he wrote,

The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public. We have asserted that this improvement depends essentially upon freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions.27

Improving the conditions of debate and inquiry across groups that differ will, of course, only be successful with groups who respect each other enough to feel that such debate is worthwhile and will possibly be fruitful rather than a waste of time. Once again Dewey has avoided the tough intractable cases, the sort of cases that were listed earlier.

Right at the end of the book, Dewey became lyrical (as he sometimes did) — the key to solving the urgent problems of the public, indeed apparently a necessary condition, is a surprising one, namely, the “restoration” of local “community life” so that it manifests “a fullness, variety and freedom of possession and enjoyment of meanings.”28 After this restoration of community life takes place,

Territorial states and political boundaries will persist; but they will not be barriers which impoverish experience by cutting man off from his fellows; they will not be hard and fast divisions whereby external separation is converted into inner jealousy, fear, suspicion and hostility…. The problem of securing diffused and seminal intelligence can be solved only in the degree in which local community life becomes a reality. Signs and symbols, language, are the means of communication by which a fraternally shared experience is ushered in and sustained.29

Lyrical or not, this still does not deal with the tough cases. Dewey assumed here that there is fruitful communication within “local communities,” perhaps because he did not recognize groups with insulated belief systems — groups working within incommensurable paradigms — as being part of the “local community.” It is indeed part of Dewey’s conception of a community that webs of interconnection and communication and conjoint action exist within it — that is, it is essentially a matter of definition that closed-minded believers and fanatics are not members of the communities he had in mind.30 In Democracy and Education, Dewey wrote,

Individuals are certainly interested, at times, in having their own way, and their own way may go contrary to the ways of others. But they are also interested, and chiefly interested upon the whole, in entering into the activities of others and taking part in conjoint and cooperative doings.31

28. Ibid., 216.
29. Ibid., 217–218.
30. He came close to acknowledging this in his remark that “seminal intelligence” can only be “secured” “in the degree in which local community life becomes a reality,” but his argument can be turned around, for it can be held that his definition makes possession of something like seminal intelligence necessary for the securing of local community life.
The intractable cases that are not discussed here revolve around those individuals who are not interested in conjoint and cooperative doings with our community (but of course they may be interested in such doings with members of their own community); the problem is that these folk, although (by definition) not members of our community, are sometimes our neighbors and also are members of the global society with which we have to deal. Some might be more optimistic, but I am not sanguine about the consequences of failing to discuss in depth the cases of fanatics and closed-minded folk because they are neighbors but not fellow community members; they exist, and many are rubbing shoulders with us. The neighbors (if not members of my community) with whom I have to deal include the following: social Darwinists who believe that those who are falling behind in the social struggle for existence deserve to fall behind; people who regard the Book of Genesis as a cutting-edge biology and physical science textbook and others who think The Flintstones cartoons are documentaries; individuals who believe that the original intent of the founding fathers was that everyone has the right to possess AK47s; individuals who claim that Barack Obama is a Muslim, is not an American citizen, and is also an extreme socialist, beliefs that insulate those who hold them from taking the president’s policy proposals seriously; people who regard abortion as a sin and those who regard the freedom to choose as a right; and so on. There is something of a challenge here for adopting the “restoration of community life” and the establishment of “fraternally shared experience” by means of “open communication” as solutions to our pressing problems! But at any rate, Dewey believed that at the local level a minor miracle can occur, and “seminal intelligence” can emerge. Then, by way of another miracle, at the international level major differences will suddenly become peacefully negotiated, and seminal international intelligence will emerge.

This chain of miracles should be rejected. It is clear that Dewey was focusing upon the not necessarily easy but non-intractable cases involving local communities in which individuals respect each other’s viewpoints enough to communicate openly with them, and he made the same assumption about the international communities. Unfortunately, this is of no help at all in dealing with the dire situations we frequently are facing today, where this assumption does not hold — for in addition to the tractable cases, we also are facing groups large and small, national and international, that do not respect the viewpoints of others, that do not wish to communicate with others in a spirit of openness, and that have worldviews and belief systems that are closed and very well insulated from outside influences.

**Conclusion**

In this essay I have laid out a chain of reasoning that supports skepticism about the possibility that philosophers — or any other group, such as educators, that uses rational argument and evidence — can resolve many of the crises listed earlier, that they can open up the lines of communication that are necessary if these problems are to be resolved peacefully. The considerations that I have presented also preclude being sanguine about the chances of solving the huge educational
challenge here — a challenge that has not been highlighted because it is so obvious. But, by way of closing, it is worth placing it explicitly on the agenda: How, using morally acceptable educational means, can we make closed-minded individuals, and the insulated belief systems or worldviews that they hold, amenable to open communication and critical rational input from “outside”? If this problem can be cracked, then philosophers will be able to make a contribution after all; but it is not clear that there are grounds for much optimism. As one anonymous respondent remarked to me, “cases such as this are tough, if not impossible, for any philosopher — whether Dewey, Habermas, or whomever.” Indeed; and that has been my point.

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