

**THE SUBJECT AND ITS PROBLEMS: REASON AND SUBJECTIVITY IN JOHN DEWEY'S
PHILOSOPHY OF COMMUNICATION**

By

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

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ABSTRACT

One major theme of John Dewey's social philosophy that remains salient for critical theorists today is his investments in theorizing a democratic model of reflexive communications. From a contemporary perspective, Dewey's writings on communications, particularly his efforts in *The Public and its Problems*, continue to offer present-day thinkers fruitful insights into the logic of democratic citizenship and social action. At the same time, one limitation of Dewey's work reveals an ongoing challenge for developing a critical theory of communications. While, as Dewey appreciated, we have good reason to link the inclusivity of political discourse to the relative quality of democratic life, I contend that we need to consider some even more basic questions about communications. That is, we need to consider just who is recognized as a proper communicative subject *prima facie* before theorizing about the content and "quality" of communicative utterances. Therefore, this project examines how the underlying processes of subject formation have historically shaped, regulated, and defined the precise limits of who implicitly is taken to embody certain performative discourses of democratic action in Dewey's philosophy.

LAY SUMMARY

That communications requires communicators is, perhaps, self-evident. Less obvious – albeit always present – are the embodied power dynamics of who is socially recognized as a quality, capable communicator: a capable subject, as I develop it in this paper. At base, this research is motivated by two key questions: who is implicitly recognized as a capable subject – a subject *capable* of being capable – in John Dewey’s philosophy of communications? and, further, how is the capable subject installed in the discursive uniformity of the present? I argue that undergirding Dewey’s vision is a narrow partition of the how the archetypal democratic interlocutor is to behave. I call this assumed, at times parochial subject the *Ciceronian subject*, so as to highlight the subtle foreclosures of subjectivity that, I claim, are internal to the crafting of the capable Deweyan subject.

PREFACE

This thesis is the original, unpublished work of the author, Joshua D. Santeusanio.

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DEDICATION

To the memory of David Berman, 1967-2019;

Bruce, Byron, Katie;

and the clamor of writing as several.

Introduction

We can find John Dewey in strange places. References to his work surface in edited volumes on contemporary affect theory,¹ in new works on object-oriented ontology,² on the front-page of *Jacobin*,³ and even Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*.⁴ So too we can find Dewey in, perhaps, some more obvious quarters: in Jürgen Habermas's work on the democratic public sphere⁵; in Axel Honneth's theorizing of democracy as "reflexive cooperation"⁶; and in Nancy Fraser's critical engagements with a "new" pragmatism.⁷ Dewey's ubiquity is surprising at times. Consider how Dewey occupies significant intellectual space in the works of both Jane Bennett and Jürgen Habermas. Despite their striking and often irreducible differences, Dewey still occupies a pivotal role in each of their respective works. While Bennett mobilizes Dewey to articulate a "more materialist theory of democracy,"⁸ Habermas draws on Dewey and Wittgenstein to lay the theoretical foundations for an "intersubjective" philosophy of rationalization.⁹ Both Bennett and Habermas would likely agree that Dewey is limited in both

¹ Seigworth and Gregg, "Inventory of Shimmers," 1-25.

² See: Bennett, "Vibrant Matter," 94-109; and, Marres, "Issues Spark Public," 208-12.

³ Livingston and Quish, "John Dewey's Experiments," n.p. Available online: <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/01/john-dewey-democratic-socialism-liberalism>

⁴ Ambedkar quotes Dewey at length on two separate occasions, and even dedicates portions of the text to "Prof. John Dewey, who was my teacher and to whom I owe so much." 310.

⁵ See: Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, 69; Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 262; and, Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions," 198.

⁶ See: Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive," 764-6; and, Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 268, 269-270 especially.

⁷ Fraser, "Another Pragmatism," 172.

⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 106-7.

⁹ Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, 272.

scope and content surrounding a number of relevant issues.¹⁰ Yet, surprisingly, contemporary academic applications of Dewey often suggest that his own critical horizons were – and still are – limitless. John Dewey, it would seem, is fashionable once again.

One major intellectual theme in Dewey's work, a theme which still remains salient for critical and democratic theorists today, is his investments in theorizing a democratic model of reflexive communications. From a contemporary perspective, Dewey's writings on communications, particularly his efforts in *The Public and its Problems*, continue to offer fruitful insights into the logic of democratic citizenship and social action. For example, Bennett finds in Dewey an affective "confederation of bodies" which allows her to conceive of political action as a "kind of ecology."¹¹ Following Bergson, such an ecology – political ecology as she suggests – is rooted in a vital materialist impulse, and is deeply attuned to the non-linguistic "channels of communications" between human and non-human members.¹² Such channels are precisely what Bennett finds in *The Public and its Problems*. And so too can we discern the centrality of communications in Habermas's mobilizations of Dewey. If we compare how Habermas lauds Dewey for seeking an "interconnection of values" with Habermas's own emphasis on "reaching understanding" in the communicative act, we see how the import of communications is again the driving reason for taking up Dewey. But what are we to make of the communicative actor – the subject of communications – in Dewey's work? Communications, after all, necessitates *communicators*.

¹⁰ For Bennett, nonhuman communications; for Habermas, the limits of capitalist transformation.

¹¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 101.

¹² Ibid., 104.

This is where a fresh look at Dewey might prove especially illuminating. Upon a closer reading, we can isolate in his writing a tendency to romanticize communications in general, and subjects of the communicative act in particular.¹³ “[O]f all affairs, communication is the most wonderful,” he writes.¹⁴ “Society,” he says in *Democracy and Education*, “not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but ... exist[s] *in* transmission, *in* communication.”¹⁵ For Dewey, reflexive, empathetic communications is an act of community formation; it is requisite for the fostering of a democratically inter-dependent society of creative, free people. Accordingly, if a democratic community is discursively constituted in transmission, as Dewey gestures towards, my interests lie in making sense of just *who* such performative discourses of democratic action are *implicitly and explicitly embodied in* throughout his work. Thus, in order to assess the tenability of his democratic philosophy of communications, I claim that we first need to understand just who (or, as Jane Bennett demands we ask – *what*) is doing the communicating. Hence, this thesis questions head-on *who is designated as a proper communicative subject*, according to Dewey? Or, put in the language of Paul Ricœur, *who is latently recognized as a “capable subject”* in Dewey’s political thought.¹⁶ Despite both the semi-perennial flurry of new scholarship on Dewey, and the recent criticality with which he is granted, few accounts have attempted to analyze the underlying processes of subject formation that constitute the communicative agent undergirding Dewey’s philosophy.

¹³ See Haskins, “Dewey’s Romanticism,” 97-131.

¹⁴ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 166.

¹⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 4. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ Ricœur, “Self as Ipse,” 118-9.

Considering this issue from a slightly different angle, Frank Margonis has recently suggested that “Dewey was blind to the ways in which his vision of democracy would actually forge and reinforce patterns of white racial formation.”¹⁷ My focus is to show some ways in which the assumed subject at the core of Dewey’s work is entangled in his “vision of democracy” – how it buttresses some of his distinctly racialized and gendered assumptions about who is most capable of being *capable*. Such a subject, I argue, not only restricts Dewey’s stated intentions of advancing a “democratic political theory ... of social communication, cooperation, and interaction,” but so too functions as a regulative tableau of proper democratic reasoning that is, in-part, based on the exclusion of the non-common, as I later develop it.¹⁸

I argue that implicit in Dewey’s analysis of the ideal, democratic communicative actor are the coordinates of what I call the *Ciceronian subject*. Tellingly, Dewey himself often references Marcus Tullius Cicero, the first-century BCE Roman statesmen, orator, lawyer, and philosopher, as the ideal, archetypal democratic interlocutor. Dewey saw in Cicero someone worth repeating; he valued Cicero’s contributions, as he saw them, to the practice of communications, intuition, and inquiry. Thus, in what follows, I attempt to demonstrate how the modal Deweyan subject, the Ciceronian subject, is markedly exclusionary insofar as it grounds the normative basis of communications in certain gendered and racialized assumptions of who, a priori, embodies the ostensibly neutral-universal democratic norms of reason, self-reflexivity, rationality, and temperance. By drawing on Dewey’s references to

¹⁷ Margonis, “Dewey, Du Bois, Locke,” 182.

¹⁸ Dewey, *Lectures in China*, 93.

Cicero, I lay out how Dewey has substantially aided in the ideological construction of the Ciceronian subject, and I argue for a more dialectical reading of Dewey's *most* radically democratic impulses. My interests in reading Dewey are indebted to both his vast scope and historical uniqueness, as well as the promise a critical, genealogical reading of Dewey's writings on communications might hold for critical theorists today.

This thesis will proceed in four turns. First, I begin by briefly situating Dewey's life and works historically. I pay particular attention to the emergent regimes of industrialization and technological transformation specific to Gilded Age and beyond in which we find Dewey's career spanning. From here I sketch out two core features of what I refer to as Dewey's normative philosophy of the political, and then examine how similar works have attempted to highlight the limitations of the subject at the heart of Dewey's writing. In section two I move to advance my own theory of the Ciceronian subject. To make this case, I ground these discussions in a close re-reading of Dewey's earliest works on ethics, morality, and what he calls "intuitionism."¹⁹ I find, more precisely, that his ideal communicative actor, the capable subject, is one who is attuned to a particular set of practices of, care of, and "knowledge of the self," *gnōthi seauton* (γνῶθι σεαυτόν). Contained within such practices, I claim, are the very expressions of power that Dewey was committed to challenging. In section three, I turn to explore how the subtle foreclosures of subjectivity – a narrowing which I claim is internal to Dewey's conceptualization of the self – limits his capacity to articulate a radically democratic philosophy of the everyday (or, "democracy as a way of life," as he often puts

¹⁹ Dewey "Intuitionism," 123.

it).²⁰ Building on this in section four, I move to examine how even the more fruitful aspects of Dewey's philosophy of education and communications are both, in some respects, critically hampered by his reliance on the Ciceronian subject. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how contemporary works in critical and democratic theory might avoid the Sisyphean task of articulating a radical theory of democracy while still, implicitly, holding something like the Ciceronian subject as its point of departure.

²⁰ Dewey, *Problems of Men*, 57-62.

1. Deweyan Antimonies

In what follows I establish an interpretive basis for my critique of Dewey's reliance on the Ciceronian subject. First, I provide a brief historical overview of the transformational moment in which we find Dewey writing. Second, I highlight two key features of how he conceptualizes the political, focusing in particular on the centrality of reason in structuring Dewey's ontology. Third, I discuss Max Horkheimer's critique of Dewey's epistemology in *Eclipse of Reason* to pinpoint some limitations of Dewey's understanding of reason.

1.1 The "Real" John Dewey?

Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont in 1859 to a working class Christian Congregationalist family.²¹ Reconstruction-era Burlington was at the time an industrial town composed of Irish, French Canadians, and multi-generational families.²² Employment generally centered on blue-collar labour, construction (especially of railroads with the chartering of the Central Vermont Railroad in 1849), and lodging and hospitality.²³ From 1860-1870, Chittenden County, home to the city of Burlington, grew almost 30% in total population from 28,052 to 36,350 – the largest increase of all counties in Vermont.²⁴ While there are no precise county-by-county demographic breakdowns of where new migrants came from, immigration statistics from neighboring states suggest a plurality traveled from

²¹ West, *American Evasion*, 77. Emphasis added.

²² Westbrook, *John Dewey*, 2.

²³ Archives and historical overview available on the Central Vermont Railway Historical Society's website: <https://cvrhs.com/>

²⁴ I am grateful to Victoria Hughes and the Vermont Historical Society for providing me access to Vermont's population by county from 1870-1870, as well as additional recourses on county demographics during the post-civil war area.

Italy, Germany, Poland, and various parts of Eastern Europe.²⁵ During this transformative period, Dewey witnessed firsthand thousands of new immigrants struggle for inclusion into the dominant white racialized *herrenvolk* that monopolized the status of full-fledged American citizens.²⁶ The landscape around him was in constant flux. This struggle for inclusion, community, and prosperity would continue to motivate Dewey's thinking indefinitely.

At the age of twenty, Dewey graduated from the University of Vermont where he was introduced to the ideas of Darwin, Hegel, and Leibniz – all of whom would remain silent partners for the duration of his intellectual career. After teaching elementary school in northeastern Pennsylvania for three years, Dewey began his doctoral studies with Charles Sanders Peirce and G. Stanley Hall at Johns Hopkins University; his dissertation, “The Psychology of Kant,” was never published and has since been lost. Most importantly, Dewey was a child of industrializing North America, of McGuffey Readers, and mass transportation linking distant cities (and even countries²⁷); of Jacob Riis' photojournalism, nascent mass-media outlets, and especially of the western intellectual tradition. From his earliest years in Burlington to his graduate training in Baltimore, Dewey – soon to become “America's

²⁵ Information available online:

<https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/twps0029.html>

²⁶ See Ignatiev, *How Irish Became*, 149-76, for an example of this struggle for inclusion into “white” American society.

²⁷ The Vermont and Canada Railroad connected Montreal to not only Burlington, but even (then-small) hamlets as far south as Battleboro, VT, and onto Massachusetts, Connecticut, and beyond.

Philosopher”²⁸ – was shaped indelibly by his liberal, working class, white, evangelical upbringing.²⁹ As Cornel West accords, “Dewey was bred a liberal, evangelical Congregationalist. He would not break with the church until he was nearly thirty years old; the reformist energies encouraged by the church would never leave him.”³⁰

Such reformist energies translated for Dewey into concrete, progressive socio-political impulses. He stood in support of the women’s suffrage movements and fought for coeducational experiences, both in and out of the classroom.³¹ Dewey would go on to become a founding member of the NAACP; he was in many substantive ways an early champion of civil rights and other struggles for liberation.³² As for his academic career, one witnesses in the earliest works at the University of Michigan – the place of his first university appointment – Dewey’s interests growing discernibly more political. From first publishing essays on the empiricism of Hume and the metaphysical sensibilities of Spinoza in 1883, to more pointedly writing on the “Ethics of Democracy” as early as 1888, Dewey, likely owing both to his

²⁸ Dewey’s obituary in *The New York Times* (2 June 1952) describes Dewey as “the foremost philosopher of his time.” Available online:

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1020.html>

²⁹ See Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers*, 228-61 for a discussion of the impact Dewey’s Congregationalist upbringing had on his intellectual and political life.

³⁰ West, *American Evasion*, 77.

³¹ Vorsino, “Dewey Through Feminist,” 51.

³² These accounts have not gone undisputed, however. See Seigfried (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of John Dewey* for a number of provocative essays, Chapters 1, 4, 8, 9, 11, and 12 in particular. For a discussion of Dewey’s “racialized visions of the classroom community,” see: Margonis, “Dewey’s Racialized Visions,” 17-39; and, Stack, “Dewey and Question,” 17-35.

personal and professional upbringing, grew critically attuned to the “historical urgencies” of the present, as he would later formulate them.³³

But *on what* exactly were Dewey’s “reformist energies” centered? How does he characterize, diagnose, and attempt to solve the urgencies of the present? Perhaps even more basically, we should first ask how Dewey himself understands the present.

1.2 Dewey’s Normative Philosophy of the Political

Dewey offers in the opening pages of *The Public and its Problems* an analogy for conceptualizing the state. “The purpose is formal,” he writes, “like that of the leader of the orchestra who plays no instrument and makes no music, but who serves to keep other players who do produce music in unison with one another.”³⁴ Dewey’s orchestra metaphor, sharing some similarities with Marx’s analysis of the state in Volume One of *Capital*, is insightful. Tellingly, however, Dewey fails to clearly address just how “silent” or, apolitical, the conductor is (i.e., to what extent is the state to intervene in everyday affairs); who is included in – or excluded from – said orchestra (i.e., who is allowed to participate in public, political life); and what type of music the orchestra plays (i.e., what is being produced and reproduced, and how so?). Let us briefly explore each of these concerns.

To the first point of interest – just how silent is the conductor? – Dewey offers a suggestive response: “The different theories which mark political philosophy do not grow up externally to the facts which they aim to interpret; they are amplifications of selected factors among those facts. Modifiable and altering human habits sustain and generate political

³³ Dewey, *Individualism, Old and New*, 66.

³⁴ Dewey, *Public and its Problems*, 4.

phenomena.”³⁵ Elsewhere, Dewey posits that human habits are not primordial, but that modern historical consciousness is contingent on a vast array of experiences, associations, and becomings.³⁶ “These habits” Dewey writes, “are not wholly informed by reasoned purpose and deliberate choice – far from it – but are more or less amenable to them.”³⁷

This belief in the common person’s capacity for reason is crucial for grasping both Dewey’s democratic optimism, and his stalwart insistence on the importance of cultivating experimental, *experiential* scientific thinking. Dewey argues that while human behaviour, the ways in which “organic beings associate with one another,” is not always reasoned, it can be *made* reasonable through democratizing the means and methods of education, association, and communications.³⁸ Importantly, Dewey does not claim reason is Universal; dogmatic conceptions of reason were offensive by their very nature to Dewey. As we will soon see, however, reason *is* in some respects transcendental; it is a priori to the realm of experience, indeed the translation of experience into democratic action. And, while there is much to appreciate in this view, what, as I will soon develop in full, Dewey appears suspiciously uncritical of, is the dialectical inverse of what accompanies making human habits “reasonable”: how this formula contains within itself the seeds for certain regulative norms to police what constitutes proper “reasoning” and “proper” reasoners. As Debra Morris and

³⁵ Ibid., 6. Emphasis added.

³⁶ Dewey, *Leibniz’s New Essays*, 110.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 154.

Ian Shapiro have noted, Dewey was “exceedingly optimistic” at times, especially with respect to his faith in scientific progress and the cultivation of a critical democratic consciousness.³⁹

Hence, in returning to the analogy, it is the conductor’s job (i.e. the state’s) according to Dewey, to ensure the preconditions for reason to prevail are realized for all. Building on J.S. Mill, T.H. Green, and others, Dewey identifies such preconditions as the constitutional protection of freedom of speech, as a state’s commitment to actively ensuring the freedoms of growth and equal participation for all, quality democratic education, and so on.

And what of the “orchestra’s” composition itself? Indeed, how is the orchestra oriented in relation to the conductor, or the conductor’s reason? If we conceive of the orchestra as the public – a community of “organic beings associated with one another” – we might also think about the ways in which the orchestra is subjected to the formal and informal modicums of control the conductor retains. These considerations indicate the need for a critical examination of Dewey’s stalwart defense of reason, and especially his emphasis on the cultivation of “reasonable” subjects through education and vocational training.

Turning to *Experience and Nature*, one can find a striking, typically Deweyan defense of reason that is conceived on the model of the scientific method:

The ultimate evidence of genuine hazard, contingency, irregularity and indeterminateness in nature is thus found in the occurrence of thinking. The traits of natural existence which generate the fears and adorations of superstitious barbarians generate the scientific procedures of disciplined civilization. The superiority of the latter

³⁹ Morris and Shapiro, “Real John Dewey,” xv.

does not consists in the fact that they are based in “real” existence, while the former depend wholly upon a human nature different from nature in general. It consists in the fact that scientific inquiries reach objects which are better, because reached by method which controls them and which adds greater control to life itself, method which mitigates accident, turns contingency to account, and releases thought and other forms of endeavor.⁴⁰

Dewey appears invested in advancing a post-Kantian reformulation of both Bacon’s and Leibniz’s basic philosophical principles. Following Kant, “thinking” functions at a certain level of abstraction; it confirms the ontological short circuit between the “indeterminateness” of nature and modern “scientific inquires” thereof. It is here where he sees the relevance of demonstrating how existence can be analyzed “logically” while still minding the irreducible “indeterminateness” of nature. Dewey understands the relationship between the variability of experience and scientific knowledges dialectically: “The traits of natural existence which generate the fears and adorations of superstitious barbarians generate the scientific procedures of disciplined civilization,” he writes. But what is one to make of Dewey’s noticeably linear reading of “scientific inquiry’s” capacity to “mitigate accident[s]” and “turn contingency to account”?⁴¹

John Beck notes how Dewey appears adamant at times that the “scientific method *must be* disseminated as a form of liberation.”⁴² If we consider Beck’s analysis alongside Dewey’s

⁴⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 69-70.

⁴¹ Ibid., 70. Emphasis added.

⁴² Beck, *Writing Radical Center*, 60. Evidence of this is perhaps most evident in Dewey, “Science as Subject-Matter,” 69-80, 74-5 in particular.

own references to “the fears and adorations of superstitious barbarians,” a more limited, less critical picture of Dewey’s ostensibly dialectical understandings of science and freedom begin to emerge. Despite his awareness of “thinking’s” own limits (i.e., that it necessarily is an exercise in abstraction), Dewey appears either unaware of, or unconcerned with, the normalizations of everyday experience that accompany the rendering of “contingency to account.” Instead, the properly dialectical position, a position I claim Dewey often falls short of, would be one that can accommodate the very *reversal* of this equation: one that would be attuned to the power dynamics of who is implicitly recognized as being *capable* of giving an account; one that recognizes the indivisible loss of experience internal to the modernist passage.⁴³

One should then read how Dewey speaks of the “releas[ing] of thought and other forms of endeavor” with caution. What might he mean by the “releasing” of thought? Somewhat ambiguously, Dewey is not saying that civilized human beings can “overcome” contingency; instead, he suggests that a “civilized,” scientific (and presumably democratic) community must be *disciplined* in its collective receptiveness to evidence-based, interpretative analyses of natural phenomena. Hence, “release” is in *this* case not additive for Dewey (i.e., x , a catalyst, releases, emits y , thus allowing it to flourish), but immanently *subtractive* – x is detached from y , x lets go of y : the “barbarian” must let go of their superstitions in order to become

⁴³ Judith Butler develops an adjacent line of thought in *Giving an Account of Oneself* where she addresses the social dynamics of the “I” in giving an account of what “[I] ought to do.”

civilized.⁴⁴ They must be educated, disciplined, in order to “mitigate accidents” and functionally transcend the utter variability of the human experience. The scientific method “must be disseminated,” cultivated, and instilled in the “superstitious barbarians.” Disciplinarity is the locus of the barbarian’s subjectivity in Dewey’s eyes – “releasing” a pronouncement of the newly constituted subjects’ commitment to being-in the (“civilized”-modern) world.

Relatedly, we can isolate a similar line of thought in “Search for the Great Community,” chapter five of *The Public and its Problems*. Here Dewey strikes a noticeably similar pose when he writes in *Experience and Nature* that

Everything which is distinctively human is learned, not native, even though it could not be learned without native structures which mark man off from other animals. To learn in a human way and to human effect is not just to acquire added skill through refinement of original capacities. To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and

⁴⁴ “Modernization,” becoming modern, is, of course, not always-exclusively “subtractive” for Dewey; he was indeed radically committed to “additively” (i.e., positively) cultivating certain empirical habits of thought and action among people, especially through education and the likes. Paradoxically, negation is, however, not always negative for Dewey. In this case, the act of “negating” superstitious thought does not positively contribute to the construction of a modern subject in an empirical sense (that is, there is nothing positively gained, no “skill” or custom instilled); rather, negation opens up a certain positive space for the enactment of modern sensibilities.

who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values.⁴⁵

In this formula, reason again serves two related functions. First, to differentiate the “distinctly human” from the native (i.e., the non-human, the barbarian). Here we catch traces of his notion that those who are fully civilized are infused with reason while the native, the uncivilized, the superstitious, are foreign to it; they must be educated. Learning, indeed learning scientifically through persistent “experimentalism,” is a necessary condition for living democratically in an organic world regulated by the laws of entropy, for Dewey.⁴⁶ Consequently, reason’s second function is to inform scientifically individual social, communicative, political, etcetera, acts. Reason, as he suggests in *Essays in Experimental Logic*, must mediate “the relation of truth to reality”; it must distinguish the incompleteness of reality from our scientific accounts thereof; it is central to the crafting of truths *We know*.⁴⁷ This second function is key, both from a critical genealogical perspective, and from a more “basic” epistemological standpoint. Reason in this sense, I claim, is a priori inscribed in the act of production – the reproduction – of the reasonable, the non-superstitious; it governs who is latently capable of being free, who can exercise “intelligent choice and power in action.”⁴⁸ Reason is what sutures the incompleteness of reality; what ensures the installation of the individual qua subject into a given set of social norms and power/knowledge relations.

⁴⁵ Dewey, *Public*, 154.

⁴⁶ Dewey, *Influence of Darwin*, 8.

⁴⁷ Dewey, *Essays in Experimental*, 75.

⁴⁸ Dewey, “Philosophies of Freedom,” 135.

Let us delay developing this in full, however, until section two.

1.3 Subjects of Reason or Objects of Rationality?

Despite the apt starting point for a critique of industrial society that Dewey offers, some limitations of his faith in a community's "amenability" to reason become clearer when we examine his analysis of how reason functions in contemporary society. While there are fruitful aspects of Dewey's view of reason, there are also narrow, parochial, potentially exclusionary, and often unrecognized aspects of his analysis that accompany his reliance on the Ciceronian subject. Max Horkheimer helpfully broaches a similar issue in Dewey's thought in the course of his critique of positivistic reason in *Eclipse of Reason*, which I turn to now.

Writing from New York in the aftermath of the Nazi's defeat, Horkheimer notes how positivism's

relegation of reason to a subordinate position is in sharp contrast to the ideas of the pioneers of bourgeois civilization, the spiritual and political representatives of the rising middle class, who were unanimous in declaring that reason plays a leading role in human behavior, perhaps even the predominant role ... *Reason was supposed to regulate our preferences and our relations with other human beings and with nature.* It was thought of as an entity, a spiritual power living in each man. This power was held to be the supreme arbiter—nay, more, the creative force behind the ideas and things to which we should devote our lives.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 7. Emphasis added.

Of the “representatives of the rising middle class” that Horkheimer then takes aim at, John Dewey was target number-one. Horkheimer cites Dewey extensively in his attempt to challenge emerging, “uncritical” forms of reason like “empirical positivism” and “radical pragmatism.” Similar to his contributions to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer points out how modern advances in the “technical facilities for enlightenment [are] accompanied by a process of dehumanization.”⁵⁰ Crucial to my interests is how Horkheimer takes a further step and links the inversion of modern progress – “the process of dehumanization” – with “the pragmatistic *narrowing of the field of vision*.”⁵¹ That is, Horkheimer understands pragmatism (or, “pragmatistic” epistemologies) as a kind of “philosophical technocracy” that “model[s] all spheres of intellectual life after the techniques of the laboratory,” and, “is the counterpart of modern industrialism.”⁵² Pragmatism, for Horkheimer, thus operates at the site of a certain ontological foreclosure of the possible. Accordingly, he argues that “Professor Dewey ... whose philosophy is the most radical and consistent form of pragmatism ... abolishes philosophical thought *while it still is philosophical thought*.”⁵³ In essence, Horkheimer reads Dewey as an anti-philosopher – a bastion of what Jacques Lacan would later recognize as the hegemony of “university discourse”⁵⁴; he is a thinker for whom “reason

⁵⁰ Ibid., vi.

⁵¹ Ibid., 29. Emphasis added.

⁵² Ibid., 41, 35.

⁵³ Ibid., 33-4. Emphasis added.

⁵⁴ In university discourse (or, discourse of the university as Lacan alternatively develops it), (K)nowledge assumes the position of the master-signifier over any authentic Master. See Lacan, *Other Side of*, 103-105; and, Žižek, “Lacan’s Four Discourses,” 85.

... takes on a kind of materiality and blindness, [and] becomes a fetish, a magic entity that is accepted rather than intellectually experienced.”⁵⁵

But how does this help us locate the latent subject undergirding Dewey’s writing, or point to some potential ways in which the individual *qua* subject is constituted in relation to the prevailing rationalistic cultural logic of the era? For starters, Dewey would sharply disagree with Horkheimer’s analysis of modern pragmatism. According to Dewey, the use of objective scientific reason – reason that is unencumbered, critical, and reflexive – is exactly how one prevents this approaching-fascistic scenario. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, he gives us one of his most mature reflections on what constitutes a viable and properly modernist definition of reason.⁵⁶ “Reason, as a Kantian faculty that introduces generality and regularity into experience,” he writes, is found in

[c]oncrete suggestions arising from past experiences, developed and matured in the light of the needs and deficiencies of the present, employed as aims and methods of specific reconstruction, and tested by success or failure in accomplishing this task of readjustment. [...] To such empirical suggestions used in constructive fashion for new ends the name intelligence is given.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., 16. Here we can easily imagine a spirited exchange between Dewey and Horkheimer over the extent to which reason is an “intellectual experience,” as Horkheimer defends. Dewey would likely – and perhaps rightly – challenge Horkheimer on the grounds of his defense in and of itself being predicated on a certain elitism; the elitism concerning which he famously debated Walter Lippmann on.

⁵⁶ For interesting, albeit relatively unstable examples of how Dewey understands the distinction between “unmodern philosophy” and “modern philosophy,” or “modernist reason” and “non-modernist reason, see: Dewey, *German Philosophy*, 122-32; and, Dewey, *Unmodern and Modern*, 3-6.

⁵⁷ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 95-6.

While there is much to unpack here, let us focus on one key clause that contemporary readings of Dewey cannot afford to miss: his interests in the extent to which reason is “developed and matured in the light of the *needs* and *deficiencies* of the present.” One immediate question arises: what qualifies, who qualifies – how does something or someone – qualify as a viable subject of the present, of *predicates*, of “needs” and “deficiencies”; more precisely, what sets of power relations install the Deweyan subject in the discursive uniformity of the present?⁵⁸ While Dewey frequently refers to “all affected persons” as the fundamentally equal agents of reasoned, ethical democratic decision making – decisions consequently “developed and matured in the light of the needs and deficiencies *of the present*” – he appears to maintain this position while, simultaneously, implicitly expecting certain “Ciceronian” competencies for a subject’s full inclusion in these deliberative

⁵⁸ One interesting thread to consider is the extent to which Lacan attempted to ask these same questions in Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Language is inherently a castrating experience for Lacan; there is a certain elemental loss of one’s aboutness, a foundational gesture of alienation, inscribed into human languages as such. Alienation is internal to language: “This alienating [“or”] is not an arbitrary invention, nor is it a matter of how one sees things. It is a part of language itself. This ‘or’ exists. It is so much a part of language that one should distinguish it when one is dealing with linguistics. I will give you an example at once. Your life or your money! If I choose the money, I lose both. If I choose life, I have life without the money, namely, a life deprived of something. I think I have made myself clear.” (212). In asking what sets of power relations elevate the Deweyan subject to the discursive uniformity of the present, one can imagine Lacan posing a similar question (a question, coincidentally, that does not necessarily conflict with Foucault’s analysis of subjugated discourses, as some have tried to suggest): how does this gesture of alienation internal to language uphold what I have describes as the discursive uniformity of the present? *Is not the fundamental question for Lacan in Part IV of Seminar XI the extent to which the subject’s installation into the uniformity of the present is itself a violent form of symbolic castration?* There are, perhaps, further and more fruitful Lacanian questions that might assist our reading of Dewey, although I cannot explore them in detail here.

processes.⁵⁹ If we carefully put this in conversation with his earlier assertion in *Experience and Nature* that reason “introduces *generality* and *regularity* into experience,” an interesting epistemological tension arises.

On one hand, Dewey was indeed mindful of the contingent foundations of modern historical consciousness. He saw rooted within this matrix of experiential contingency the uniquely *human* potentialities for ethical engagement, morality, reflexivity, and meliorism.⁶⁰ Dewey further grasped how reason is in some ways paradoxically *incomplete* by its very nature, and that it never fully comprehends all it seeks to analyze. Generality and regularity, he notes in passing, are themselves necessary abstractions, selective interpretations of the concreteness of the present. In constantly rendering the aleatory generalizable (and therefore interpretable, “concrete”), reason posits a sense of stasis that, on the surface, *appears* as pre-reflexive.⁶¹ Accordingly, Dewey understands finding stasis in the utter randomness of being as the fundamental hermeneutic task.

Here things get confusing, however, owing in part to the absence of a fully developed theory of how the pre-reflexive surface of experience is constituted through reason. Dewey is not naïve; he does not plainly think that generality and regularity are pre-reflexive; in fact,

⁵⁹ One possible adjacent connection future work might explore is the ways in which Dewey’s implicit expectations of certain “Ciceronian competencies” are the very competencies that contemporary works in critical disabilities studies are currently, powerfully addressing. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to fully develop this here.

⁶⁰ For an example of how Dewey characterizes the relationship between “moral sovereignty” and modern morality, see Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 156.

⁶¹ I am following Marvin Rogers’ line of thought in Chapter Two of *The Undiscovered Dewey*, whereby he critiques the “potentially disabling features” of Dewey’s method (87). See 85-8 especially.

he states exactly the opposite in later chapters of *Psychology* and again in *Experience and Nature*. Instead, Dewey uncritically accepts this sense of stasis as an important aesthetic precondition for generality, one that he claims cohabitates organically with the “unanalyzed totality” of human “wills.”⁶² Despite their possible hermeneutic deficits, in other words, generality and regularity produce a certain ontological consistency that contingently links otherwise unrelated associations, identities, and becomings; they unify the radical indeterminacy of the present, according to Dewey. This is the basic structure of experience in the present.

I find this relevant insofar as this seemingly pre-reflexive surface, this *everydayness* that is paradoxically constituted through “reason made into habit,” is the basis upon which Dewey grounds his philosophy of action (i.e., *responding in the present, responding to concrete actualities*). Deweyan pragmatism moves forward in the present; it accepts and departs from the organic regularities of the now. Here, however, I claim we need a more dialectical reading of the ways in which Dewey mobilizes the ripeness of the present. Where his hermeneutic sensibilities fall short is in grasping the inverse of reason’s reflexive capacity to ontologize aleatory phenomena: to make randomness, contingency, the *perhaps* of collective democratic action. Here reason encounters its own terminal limits in the present. That is, in acting in the present, one is always already acting on an interpretation of the present, an interpretation that Dewey himself often too-simplistically presupposes as

⁶² Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 8.

objective “naturalisms” or “given” conditions.⁶³ Instead, Dewey could here benefit from being *more* Hegelian and embracing how an authentic Act not only changes the coordinates of the present, but restructures how one engages with the past.

Admittedly, Dewey is frustratingly ambiguous here. While he gestures toward a model of cognition that demands repetition – *we must constantly act on the Natural, the present* – the extent to which we need to retroactively “change” nature, on how nature is in-itself ontologically incomplete, is unclear. Paul Ricoeur has tactfully demonstrated how accompanying near-every act of historical interpretation is an act of erasure – of memory, of unique historicities, and of subjectivity.⁶⁴ I claim that Deweyan reason is tellingly indifferent to this web of reciprocal relations of memory and forgetting that mediate the human condition. Put more simply, reasons “source of possibility,” in Dewey’s philosophy, at times also “operates as its own limitations.”⁶⁵

But where, or in what, are we to look for reason’s own “source” of possibility? How are we to locate the Deweyan subject – the subject capable of reason, reasoning, reason-ability –

⁶³ Heidegger’s treatment of this exact paradox in the opening throes of *Being and Time* is eerily close to an indictment of Dewey’s logic: “Basic concepts determine the way in which we get an understanding beforehand of the area of subject-matter underlying all the objects a science takes as its theme, and all positive investigation is guided by this understanding. Only after the area itself has been explored beforehand in a corresponding manner do these concepts become genuinely demonstrated and ‘grounded’. But since every such area is itself obtained from the domain of entities themselves, this preliminary research, from which the basic concepts are drawn, signifies nothing else than an interpretation of those entities with regard to their basic state of Being. Such research must run ahead of the positive sciences, and it *can*.” 30, emphasis in the original.

⁶⁴ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, Chapters 1, 5, and 6 in particular.

⁶⁵ Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 79.

within this reciprocal matrix of memory and forgetting? Let us turn to explore this deadlock in detail.

2. Deweyan Historicities

Several scholars already have observed a similar foreclosure of subjectivity in Dewey's work with respect to how he conceptualizes the reasonable subject, or what I have referred to as the *Ciceronian subject*. Cornel West, for example, offers an erudite analysis of the underlying subject at the heart of Dewey's pragmatism in *Keeping Faith*. West highlights Dewey's lack of sensitivity to the tragic – what West mobilizes to encapsulate the lived experiences of oppression and disillusionment unique to the legacy of African slaves and colonized indigenous subjects.⁶⁶ This lack of attunement to the tragic leads him to conclude that underscoring Dewey's model of democratic citizenship is a somewhat narrow and noticeably racialized partition of what is socially considered “sensible.”⁶⁷ That is, Dewey's archetypal democratic actor is, according to West, by extension, the embodied negation of the tragic; the tragic figure is inherently seen as flawed in the Deweyan community, a deviation from the norm, limited. Conversely, Dewey's idealized democratic actor embodies the inverse of how the tragic is manifest in a “blues people,” as Cornel West might suggest.

⁶⁶ West, *Keeping Faith*, 107-118. Eddie Glaude Jr. has challenged West's account of Dewey's relationship with the tragic, however. Departing from West's suspicions of the tragic's absence in Dewey's work, Glaude locates fragments of it within Dewey's understandings of our embodied, existential (and what Dewey tangentially calls “experiential”) contingency. Glaude challenges West precisely on the extent to which the tragic can speak to a unified or universal black experience, advancing instead a “darker shade of Dewey's pragmatism,” that seeks to engage with the concrete, everyday realities of blackness and being in America. For our purposes, what is important to note is that even in sympathetic readings of Dewey, a healthy suspicion of his capacities for grappling with the problematics of race thinking is still, rightfully, the default position.

⁶⁷ See Rancière, *Moments Politiques*, 41-8, for a discussion of what Rancière calls the “partition of the sensible.”

Relatedly, in *Habits of Whiteness*, Terrance MacMullan offers a provocative reading of Dewey that further illuminates the assumed subject undergirding his democratic philosophy. MacMullan engages with Dewey on two fronts: his understanding of the relationship between habit and inquiry; and the extent to which race-thinking is constitutive of Dewey's epistemology. Building on William James's psychological investigation of habits, MacMullan finds certain habits of whiteness interspersed throughout Dewey's theories of logic and inquiry. The clearest example of this is found, according to MacMullan, in Dewey's "frequent rhetorical distinction ... between civilization and savagery."⁶⁸ "Whiteness," MacMullan suggests, "is a network of interrelated habits that gives meaning to what Dewey calls 'native tendencies,' such as pugnacity, fear, pity, and sympathy."⁶⁹ This is highly relevant to my concerns given how, as I have argued in the previous section, Dewey treats these habits, conditions, and tendencies as "organic" and "natural," rather than open and contingent.

In a similar spirit, Shannon Sullivan cross-reads Dewey with- and against- W.E.B. Du Bois, in particular on the questions of democratization and post-War self-determinism.⁷⁰ She focuses on the limitations of how Dewey understood the global critical juncture opened up by World War One – an event which Dewey saw as another massive "laboratory" for the expansion of democracy, freedom, and new-individualism. Sullivan argues that Dewey's goal of reconstructing the liberal imagination is largely incompatible with the social, political, and

⁶⁸ MacMullan, *Habits of Whiteness*, 91.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 86. Emphasis added.

⁷⁰ Sullivan, "Dewey and Du Bois," sections 2, 3, and 4 especially.

economic liberation of “literally the other half of the world.”⁷¹ Why? Because “World War I,” she writes,

led the white world to slightly widen the circle of who counts, but white people continued to draw the circle and to leave people of color outside it. All the while, *the white world lauded itself for pursuing universal values of equality, fairness, and democracy, making invisible both the circle itself and the rules that define it.*⁷²

Comparing what Du Bois and Dewey each say about the prospects of U.S. involvement in the war, Sullivan sees Dewey’s democratic vision manifest in such attempts to slightly widen the circle of “who counts.” Du Bois shrewdly saw the hypocrisy of “America condemn[ing] in Germany that which she commits, *just as brutally*, within her own borders.”⁷³ In contrast, Dewey’s primary concern was “miss[ing] the great experience of discovering the significance of American national life by seeing it reflected into a remaking of the life of the world.”⁷⁴ Now, if we apply Terrance MacMullan’s reading of whiteness as “Deweyan habit,” one can see again how Dewey appears to treat certain historically contingent “American” traits as normative, “natural” expressions of the good that are universally worth cultivating.

2.2 Toward a Theory of the Ciceronian Subject

Dewey himself provides important clues elsewhere to how he conceives of the ideal subject of communicative interaction. One major reoccurring theme in his writing is an interest in

⁷¹ Ibid., n.p.

⁷² Ibid., n.p.

⁷³ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 34.

⁷⁴ Dewey, “Conscription of Thought,” 280.

the constitution of the ethical subject (or, what Foucault calls “the ethical subject of *the truth I know*”).⁷⁵ Consider the following lines in one of Dewey’s earliest essays, “Moral Philosophy”:

Such maxims as “Know thyself” and “In nothing excess” already contain in themselves the principle of a free as distinct from a customary morality. The development of democracy, with its popular judicial tribunals and its assemblies for the general discussion of political matters, was a further influence in promoting the growth of moral reflection. A premium was put on power to persuade and to move the citizens of a community in all matters of public policy.⁷⁶

Note how Dewey carefully situates the maxims of knowledge of the self (“know thyself,” γνῶθι σεαυτόν, *gnōthi seauton*) as something that is already contained within an approaching-universal set of moral discourses. Knowledge of the self, according to Dewey, is a necessary precondition for ethical political engagement, for access to morality discourses, and for the telling of truths – the ethical “truth I know.” Similarly, Dewey fleshes out a related line of thought in a later essay, “Ethics,”: “[T]o know is to grasp the essential, real being of a thing—its ‘nature,’ or end; ‘*know thyself*’ is the essence of morality; it means that man must base his activity upon comprehension of the true end of his own being.”⁷⁷ Again, we get a specific commentary on the relationship between morality and knowledge of the self, of knowing thyself, *gnōthi seauton*. Crucially, the practice of the self for Dewey is not simply a necessary condition for the constitution of the moral subject – the ethical subject of *known*

⁷⁵ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 463.

⁷⁶ Dewey, “Moral Philosophy,” 133.

⁷⁷ Dewey, “Ethics,” 45.

truths. This formula offers a more revealing glimpse into how he thinks the ethical subject is constituted as such. It is the precise act of reflexive knowledge of oneself, in the care of oneself, which allows one to craft a proper self, a subject: a potential witness to the truth discourses of an ethical being. As Foucault notes, this reflexive auto-positioning of the self-as-subject exposes the self to “a fundamental obligation and a set of carefully fashioned ways of behaving.”⁷⁸ Thus, when Dewey writes that free morality is “already contained” in the knowledge of the self, what he is saying by extension is that subjectivity is always already mediated through the preconditions of reflexivity, of truth telling, and care of the self.

Still we can take this further. In two revealing texts on reason and ethics, Dewey lauds Cicero’s move to situate “intuition” as an organic faculty of human existence.⁷⁹ “As rational,” he writes in *Ethics*, “Cicero held, man ought to recognize the law of reason. As human, he is endowed by nature with a sense of order, decency, and propriety; he should therefore conform to the law of nature and respond to the intrinsic worth of what is honourable—*honestum*.”⁸⁰ Note that *honestum* takes the masculine Latinization here: the honour of the man, the father. Dewey continues on in praise of Cicero’s “account of the *subjective faculty* needed in order to make the law of nature available for the practical purposes of life.”⁸¹ Intuition, according to Dewey, is decisively described in a formula from Cicero’s *Pro Milone* that he cites, untranslated, at length: “*est igitur haec, iudices, non scripta, sed natal ex, quam non didicimus, accepimus, legimus, verum ex natura ipsa adripuimus, hausimus, expressimus,*

⁷⁸ Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 494.

⁷⁹ Dewey, “Intuitionism,” 125; and, Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, Parts I & II especially.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 141.

⁸¹ Dewey, “Intuitionism,” 125.

ad quam non docti sed facti, non instituti sed umbuti samus... - (This, therefore, is a law, O judges, not written, but born with us, which we have not learnt or received by tradition, or read, but which we have taken and suckled-in and drank from nature herself; a law which we were not taught but to which we were made, which we were not trained in, but which is ingrained in us.)⁸² The law according to Cicero is not written, but born within us (*non scripta, sed natal ex*); it is already contained within the subject as such. It is not taught (*non docti*) but crafted inside [of us] (*sed facti*).⁸³ And so, if intuition, an understanding of the law – the faculties of reason – is embodied within “us,” why does Dewey stipulate that these are “subjective faculties”? Perhaps, implicitly, the subject of subject-ive faculties – the faculties without which Dewey says “thinking is impossible”⁸⁴ – is the ethical agent of the *gnōthi seauton*. When *gnōthi seauton* is Latinized it becomes *cognosce te ipsum*. Again, the –sum of *ipsum* christens the master of the self in the masculine; the master of the self is the man, the father, etc. Jacque Derrida has noticed a similar trend elsewhere, a turn worth reproducing at length:

I thus wish to suggest the oneself [*soi-meme*], the “self-same [*meme*]” of the “self [*soi*]” (that is, the same, *meisme*, which comes from *metipse*), as well as the power, potency, sovereignty, or possibility implied in every “I can,” the *pse* of *ipse* (*ipsissimus*) referring always, through a complicated set of relations, to possession, property, and power, to the

⁸² Cic. Pro. Mil., 4.10. Translation my own.

⁸³ Here we see a nice example of how, paradoxically, the subject is both pre-moralized while constantly becoming moral, to put it in the language of Deleuze. In order to be a member of a becoming moral community, one already must contain the coordinates of the law within them-selves.

⁸⁴ Dewey, *How We Think*, 119.

authority of the lord or seignior, of the sovereign, and most of the host (*hospites*), the master of the house or the husband. So much so that *ipse* alone, like *autos* in Greek, which *ipse* can actually translate (*ipse* is *autos*, and the Latin translation of “know thyself,” of *gnōthi seauton*, is in fact *cognosce te ipsum*), designates the oneself as master in the masculine: the father, the husband, son, or brother, the proprietor, owner, or seignior, indeed the sovereign. Before any sovereignty of the state, of the nation-state, of the monarch, or, in democracy, of the people, *ipseity* names a principle of legitimate sovereignty, the accredited or recognized supremacy of a power or a force, a *kratos* or a *cracy*. That is what is implied, posed, presupposed, but imposed in the very position, in the very self- or autopositioning, of *ipseity* itself, everywhere there is some oneself, the first, ultimate, and supreme source of every “reason of the strongest” as the right [*droit*] granted to force or the force granted to law [*droit*].⁸⁵

If we compare this with Dewey’s account of justice, the law, and sovereignty of the people, we can discern some subtle ways in which “the commonwealth,” or “the people,” effectively functions as a synecdoche that universalizes the non-universality of the political:

As law is the fundamental principle of nature and of the universe, so law and justice (which is only another name for that law which is the true law of nature) form the basis of that association of men which we call a commonwealth. The commonwealth, says Cicero, is the affair of the people, but the people is not every sort of aggregation of men, but an association united by a compact of law, and by participation in common utility. Like the sentiments concerning equality and liberty in the preceding paragraph, this definition

⁸⁵ Derrida, *Rogues*, 11-12.

of a commonwealth might be regarded as an ideal rather than as corresponding precisely to the actual conditions in the Empire. Nevertheless, in the two hundred years of peace which followed the reign of Augustus, there was a large measure of justice in the imperial law, and the common well-being which made property and commerce and industry reasonably secure was measurably realized.⁸⁶

Again, Dewey aligns himself with Cicero, the stoic, the practitioner of the self, in an effort to reaffirm his commitments to fostering a democratically inter-dependent society. “The commonwealth, says Cicero, is the affair of the people, *but the people is not every sort of aggregation of men, but an association united by a compact of law, and by participation in common utility.*” There are a number of viable interpretations of what he is getting at here. One reading might attempt to make sense of it through a deconstruction of “aggregation” and “association.” Aggregation, stemming from *aggregatiō* – a third declension i-stem noun in the original Latin – translates to [a] gathering. *Pace the Oxford English Dictionary*, it denotes “[t]he action or process of collecting particles into a mass, or particulars into a whole.”⁸⁷ Aggregation is organic, molecular, mechanical, but noticeably devoid of play, resistance, and error. Inversely, association stems from the *ad-* (to, motion towards, with) of *sociō* (joining, [I] join], uniting, [I] unite]). Crucially, *associō* is a first conjugation verb. It carries connotations of action, of openness, and possibility.

There are good reasons, however, to interpret Dewey as suggesting a more particular link between the “compact of law” and the “participation in common utility.” If, as we have seen,

⁸⁶ Dewey and Tufts, *Ethics*, 140-1.

⁸⁷ Available online:

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3939?redirectedFrom=aggregation#eid>

the law – the subjects of the “compact of the law,” the truth I know – implicitly describes those -selves (*ipsos*) capable of engaging in truth discourses, in the care of the self, perhaps the law itself (*ipsum*) bears witness to its own transgressions. That is, the implicitly exclusionary “compact of the law” is its own common utility; *it materializes the juridical force of excluding the non-common, the Other, from the commonwealth*. Thus, the subject(s) of the commons, the common-people of the common-wealth, speaks not of everyone, but instead of the ones capable of being a self.⁸⁸ It is here where one might note the fundamental tension at the heart of Dewey’s work. Despite his intentions of developing a new and radical philosophy of democratic individualism and equality, as he elaborates in *Liberalism and Social Action*, Dewey’s own understandings of how the individual is constituted often fall short of the necessary grounding in the relationships of power and domination that regulate the very crafting of the subject.

2.3 Dewey with Cicero and Shakespeare

To buttress this interpretation of the exclusionary power dynamics implicit in Dewey’s idealization of the reasonable subject, I would like to claim that we might root future analyses not simply in a hermeneutics of the subject, but with a certain *hermeneutics of ipseity* as our point of departure. In doing so, the problematic character of Dewey’s idealization of the reasonable subject – his Ciceronian subject – becomes even clearer, especially when looking back to his earliest references to William Shakespeare. We can observe a similar trend, a similar foreclosure of how the proper subject is to behave, in his *Observations Toward a Critical Theory of Ethics*. Here Dewey addresses Shakespeare’s overtly

⁸⁸ Dewey makes some similar remarks to what I have critiqued here in “Motivation of Hobbes’s,” 33-5 in particular.

“ethical postulates” as they are found in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Dewey was invested in working *through* the Shakespearian logic of individuality, social morality, and objectivity; he saw in Shakespeare’s references to the self a becoming-democratic, process-oriented system of ethical autonomy:

The postulate is that there is a community of persons; a good which realized by the will of one is made not private but public. It is this unity of individuals as respects the end of action, this existence of a practical common good, that makes what we call the moral order of the world. Shakespeare has stated the postulate – to thine oneself be true; And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou can’st not then be false to any man.⁸⁹

Dewey finds viable insights in Shakespeare’s dictum of the self, particularly in relation to his then budding interests in restructuring the logic of democratic individualism. Sharing stark similarities with the stoic practice of the self, of knowing thyself, Shakespeare’s formula grabs Dewey’s interests for reasons likely similar to his concurrent investments in Cicero. If we carefully read how Shakespeare mobilizes the self in Act I, Scene III of *Hamlet*, we can again see how the designation of a “oneself” – a -self that Dewey at least partially endorses – is often defined in violent contrast to the socially subjected non-selves of the present. Dewey’s didactic misreading of Polonius’ advice to Laertes before departing for Paris is especially revealing in this regard.

The chariest maid is prodigal enough

If she unmask her beauty to the moon.

⁸⁹ Dewey, *Critical Theory of*, 131.

Virtue itself 'scapes not calumnious strokes.

The canker galls the infants of the spring

Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,

And in the morn and liquid dew of youth

Contagious blastments are most imminent.

...

Neither a borrower nor a lender be;

For loan oft loses both itself and friend,

And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

This above all: to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Farewell. My blessing season this in thee!⁹⁰

For Polonius, the father, the consummate symbol of paternal authority, the proper self is one who does not borrow or lend money (i.e., engage in “Jewry”). The individual, the self, does not associate with women of loose moral (“the chariest maid is prodigal enough,”) for virtue cannot escape the social defamations of public sexuality.⁹¹ Instead, it must be relegated to the private sphere, regulated, and pathologized. The individual qua subject is, by extension, reasonable, can think reflexively about their own image, and is privileged with

⁹⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, n.p. Available online:
<https://www.owleyes.org/text/hamlet/read/act-i-scene-iii#root-71604-12>

⁹¹ Ibid., n.p.

the time and space to reflect on their own futurity. In short, they are privileged with a viable future, futurability, *futurity*.

The maid, however, functions as an object devoid of its subjectivity. We can even read the maid as the symbolic Freudian hysteric object that retroactively confirms the underlying reason of Laertes; her very contrast is what renders Laertes capable of being a becoming-ethical subject. Her inability to think for herself, to master her body, gives contrast to Laertes own obligations to think of himself, for himself, to care for himself – to not be tempted by the “pleasures of the flesh,” as Foucault would come to articulate.⁹² Thus, when Polonius conveys to Laertes how to be an ethical agent, a proper guardian of his fleeting paternal authority, one should note how his maxims of ethical autonomy are themselves defined in this void of impermissibility; they are negativity materialized, as it were.

But how does Dewey position himself in relation to Shakespeare? How are we to read Dewey’s endorsement of Shakespeare’s “overtly ethical postulates,” especially given how Dewey was likely more interested in the conceptual process of reflexive autonomy rather than Shakespeare’s *exact* example? For starters, Dewey was, as we have seen, against all clear forms of religious discrimination. He is upfront about this in *A Common Faith* and elsewhere.⁹³ Dewey further disavowed the direct, sexualized relegation of women to the status of second class citizens: “the growing freedom of women can hardly have any other outcome than the production of more realistic and more humane morals,” he opines in a later

⁹² Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 446.

⁹³ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, Chapters 1 and 3 in particular.

essay.⁹⁴ Thus, the point is not to read Shakespeare's gendered catalogue of the subject onto Dewey. He – or at least a contemporary Deweyan – might even be receptive to the critical reading of the passages I have presented.

What Dewey's engagement with Shakespeare reveals instead are the limitations of his own critical understandings of a process-oriented system of ethical autonomy. I have previously emphasized the underlying negativity of Polonius's maxims of the self for a specific reason: I understand this negativity as central to the basic system of reflexive autonomy that Dewey saw as worthwhile in Shakespeare (and others). As I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous section, we can observe a similar void of impermissibility in the construction of the idealized Ciceronian commonwealth, in the Ciceronian subject. Both systems rely on a certain exclusion for any stable distinction of inclusivity, the included, to flourish. Inclusivity is defined only in relation to very *rabble* constitutive of the bourgeois commonwealth, as Hegel observed in his *Philosophy of Right*.⁹⁵ It is here where I see a certain irreducible tension between Dewey's convictions of crafting a more inclusive democratic community, and the fundamental exclusivity internalized in the logic of the self, indeed the modern state. This is to say, Dewey seems to take as an antidemocratic deviation the

⁹⁴ Dewey, "What I Believe," 276.

⁹⁵ Recall that Hegel identifies in his *Philosophy of Right* how the emergent regimes of industrial capitalism were producing an entirely new catalogue of immiserated, alienated labourers. Embodied in this displaced collective of alienated labourers are the very conditions, Hegel notes, for the subjectification of alienation expressed in the rabble: "The objective alienation of this aggregate of dispossessed and disenfranchised poor, relentlessly produced without mercy by the mechanisms and machines of industrialization, creates the conditions for a subjective alienation embodied by the rabble, with its hostile attitude to the rest of society and brute sense of indignant entitlement," Adrian Johnson writes. See Johnson, "Review of Hegel's," n.p.

exclusivity that is a positive condition for the existence of the very system he attempts to analyze. The bourgeois state does not simply produce “rabble” as a contingent byproduct of industrial production, as Hegel noted (as well as Dewey, in the form of modern exploited labour). Rabble is instead, I claim, the elemental substance of the modern state – it, as Jacques Rancière tells us, structurally cannot be included, yet is paradoxically internal to the modernist passage. Rabble then should not exclusively be understood as the amalgamated surplus of subjected alienation that can be, someday, democratically integrated. Rabble is not exclusively manufactured on the factory floor, but so too in the sexualized networks of unrecognized reproductive and emotional labour that are analytically prior to the modern capitalist mode of production.⁹⁶ Its singular role is to be excluded. And so, when Dewey affirms the basic processes of reflexive autonomy, he misses both the underlying negativity inscribed in the ideological experience of the self, and further misses how this negativity is constitutive of the system of ethical autonomy he sought to revitalize. Rerouting, indeed uprooting, such networks of seemingly neutral-ahistorical power relations requires, I claim, a fundamentally different philosophy of the subject, indeed a ruthless commitment to radically reimagining the very foundations of political community.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ An excellent example of this sexualized, “feminine” rabble can be found in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*. Recall Lysistrata’s famous line, “[T]here are a lot of things about us women / That sadden me, considering how men / See us as rascals.” 7, *Lysistrata*, trans. B.B. Rogers.

⁹⁷ One exemplary recent work that tackles this job full-on is Sophie Lewis’s *Full Surrogacy Now*. Here she takes Marx’s famous line about abolition of the bourgeois family seriously, and powerfully lays out the task of constructing and rerouting non-reproductive queer kinship networks, systems of accountability, and a-traditional communities of reciprocity.

3. Deweyan Presents

Now that I have sketched out a theory of the latent, implicitly exclusionary subject at the core of Dewey's work, let us turn to explore two specific ways in which the Ciceronian subject is manifest in his visions of history and the philosophy of education. In particular, we can see how the Ciceronian subject functions as an a priori point of abstraction from which his philosophy departs from.

3.1 Abstraction, Education, History

Lary Belman highlights how "empathy" and "foresight" are the two integral communicative traits that appear consistently throughout Dewey's political writings.⁹⁸ The ideal form of "human association" is, as Dewey opines, cooperative, aware, and adaptable; empathy and foresight are functional catalysts for cooperative, flexible, and moral democratic engagement. A systematically restructured liberal civic culture is one that is attuned to its relational character; it is a profoundly *human* exercise in inter-relationality: "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transaction to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for," he writes.⁹⁹ I find Dewey fruitful here: empathy and foresight *are* worth cultivating. Instead of empathy or foresight as such, however, let us turn to carefully analyze the assumed subjects *of* empathy and foresight in his writings. I claim we must ask: what is the latent subjective structure of these traits? – traits which indeed are, arguably, necessarily at the core of a vibrant democratic community. Dewey is clear in stating they ought to be universally

⁹⁸ Belman, "Concept of Communication," 29.

⁹⁹ Dewey, *Public*, 15-6.

fostered, that everyone is capable of exercising empathy and foresight. The contradictions of the capable Deweyan subject, however, present us with another opportunity to explore the inherent tension of how he mobilizes these traits. Hence, when Dewey speaks of fostering empathy and foresight in relations between “all those who are affected” by public concerns, I read this formula as both ripe with insight while tellingly leaving important questions unanswered, namely: just *who* or *what* is deemed *necessary* to be “systematically cared for,” how is this designation made (e.g., who decides this in the absence of a concrete, empirical “Public”), and who is to do the caring?

Our formula of the Ciceronian subject can here prove useful. Recall Dewey’s account of reason in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, especially how the everyday translation of “reason into habit” relies on certain aesthetic preconditions for generality – preconditions that, I have argued, Dewey often too simplistically presumes are “natural tendencies.”¹⁰⁰ Now, if we apply this model of reasoning to Dewey’s two core communicative traits, empathy and foresight, another interesting epistemological tension arises. Empathy and foresight “work,” they are viable – they “go autonomously,” as Louis Althusser puts it – *only from the very point of abstraction in which Dewey locates the subject of the commons*.¹⁰¹ That is to say, the practice of empathy and foresight necessarily require an assumed, modal subject from which Dewey’s liberal democratic values (freedom, equality, liberty, etc.) are abstracted from (e.g., the Ciceronian subject). This by extension, it would seem, further necessitates a capable subject

¹⁰⁰ i.e., “pugnacity, fear, pity, sympathy,” and so on, as Terrance MacMullan suggests in “Whiteness as Deweyan Habit.”

¹⁰¹ See Althusser, *Reproduction of Capitalism*, 67, for a nice example of how “ideology goes all by itself.”

minimally deserving of empathy, or foresight, of futurity. Of course, this phenomenological reliance on abstraction is, however, neither idiosyncratic to Dewey, nor to Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx and so on. Arguably, this deadlock has always been one of *the* central antagonisms of western philosophy. We should not fault Dewey here, then.

Dewey's epistemological blind-spots, as I see them, are not rooted in his reliance on abstraction, however. Instead, they are manifest in his lack of recognition of how his subjects of empathy are themselves ideological abstractions at the most basic level: how they are functional expressions of the "carefully fashioned ways of behaving," that have generally become socially regarded as "natural" and "normal."¹⁰² They are inherently ideological. Thus, when Dewey addresses the importance of empathy and foresight in communications, he misses the important questions that are analytically prior to his own "objective" concerns with the temperament and flow of linguistic exchange. That is, instead of directly tackling the "methodological" questions of how democratic communities and institutions are to foster such traits, our task is to first think and critically analyze who such traits are "aimed at," to put it simply. Although Dewey claims they are for everyone, we must recall how Dewey expects certain competencies in order for one to participate in democratic, public communicative exchange in the first place. These embodied habits of intelligible exchange, capabilities for reciprocity in the communicative act, Dewey claims, are "conditions of intellectual efficiency": "[T]hey are blinders that confine the eyes of mind to the road ahead," he opines in *Human Nature and Conduct*.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Two clear examples being heterosexuality and the performance of prenatal gender designations.

¹⁰³ Dewey, *Human Nature and*, 172.

Here is where Dewey is substantively blind to how the subtle foreclosures of subjectivity internal to his epistemology are constitutive of his abstracted, empathetic subjects – how his “narrowing of the field of vision” is *internalized* in his model of reflexive socio-communicative exchange. Put another way, the silent ontological negation of alterity is, paradoxically, the source of Dewey’s democratic horizon of the possible: only abstract capable subjects are capable of democratically actualizing their capabilities.¹⁰⁴ This is not to say that any requisite skill for meaningful communicative exchange (of all varieties) is necessarily an act of totalizing domination, or that they should be directly dismissed. Instead, I raise this insofar as I see this elemental loss of being, of aboutness, this subordination of difference to the realm of pure negation, as the nodal point of modern historical consciousness. I read the utter subjective desolation of this unconscious loss, the incapability of communicating the thing in-us more than ourselves – our thrownness into the symbolic order – as the epicenter of modern art, literature, and cinema.¹⁰⁵ It speaks to our collective willingness to live in the comfortable, pre-arranged meaninglessness of the “four iron collars of representation.”¹⁰⁶ Above all, and perhaps most directly related to Dewey, I understand the modernist project’s political acceptance of this loss – the smooth embrace of these “blindings” confining us to the road ahead – as the carefully orchestrated undoing of an affirmative, unabashedly intractable, anarchist philosophy of difference. The rejection of difference as an affirmative ontological category is fundamentally a political project. And so,

¹⁰⁴ Again, we might revise our previous formula of the pre-moralized, becoming-moral subject as the pre-moralized, abstract capable subject.

¹⁰⁵ Recall Lacan’s formula in Seminar XI, “*I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the object petit a – I mutilate you.*” 263, emphasis original.

¹⁰⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 262.

with this reading, we might better make sense of Dewey's tendencies to regard the subjects of communications near one-dimensionally, as *tabula rasa*, an embodied expression of the Possible (i.e., subjects amenable to reason, to freedom) – not as the embodied normalizations of their own subjected impossibilities.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, if we examine how Dewey speaks of what is “made common” with communication in *Experience and Nature*, one can discern these same processes in action. “Such is the essence and import of communication,” he writes,

something is literally made common in at least two different centres of behavior. To understand is to anticipate together, it is to make cross-reference which when acted upon, brings about a partaking in a common, inclusive undertaking ... The heart of language is not “expression” of something antecedent, much less expression of antecedent thought. It is communication, the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are patterns, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by the partnership.¹⁰⁸

Let us read Dewey *with* Dewey. I have argued in a number of previous sections how the latent Deweyan subject – in this case a partner of communicative partnership – is implicitly exclusionary, how it functions in-part as a regulative tableau of “proper” democratic reasoning. I have further argued how such a regulative tableau of the reasonable subject is

¹⁰⁷ Curiously, Dewey's own position is precisely what Hegel prohibits. Consider Hegel's remarks in the preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “When the knowing subject goes around applying this single inert form to whatever it encounters, and dipping the material into this placid element from outside, this is no more the fulfilment of what is needed, i.e. a self-originating, self-differentiating wealth of shapes, than any arbitrary insights into the content. Rather it is a monochromatic formalism which only arrives at the differentiation of its material since this has been already provided and is by now familiar.” (9).

¹⁰⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 179.

in-itself the zero point of abstraction from which Dewey locates the centrality of empathy and foresight in communications. Now, recall how Dewey understands the “subjective facult[ies]” requisite for the translation of natural law into an everyday, becoming-democratic politics – a politics of the commons, the commonwealth. It is here where I find reason to extend our critique into the realm of how Dewey mobilizes empathy and foresight in communications. In *Experience and Nature*, we can further see how Dewey’s logic of communications reads in some ways as reliant on the embodiment of certain subjective faculties necessary for “partaking in a common, inclusive undertaking.” There is a certain skill, “faculty,” attitude, way of life one must possess, depart from (or, be “released” from!), in order to participate as an “inclusive” partner of the commons, of communications. I read this act of “making common” indifferent, “blind[ed],” to the negation of *différance* internal to how he envisions an “inclusive undertaking.” It is a phenomenological “trade-off” that he willingly accepts, to put it simply. Again, negation assumes a positive character in his epistemology. And so, setting aside the host of “carefully fashioned ways of behaving” constitutive of this idealized, capable partner, we must further consider where such modes of being, such “technologies of the self,” as Foucault put it, are normalized in fabric of the everyday.

Dewey’s critical engagements with the philosophy of education provide clues for us. One on hand, his recognition of the synergies between expanding access to quality education and the cultivation of a vibrant, democratic civic culture is, arguably, on the mark. Dewey’s contributions to the critique of yesterday’s educational practices – practices whereby “old truths become so stale and worn that they cease to be truths and become mere dictates of

external authority” – are considerable; they should not be ignored.¹⁰⁹ He was presciently aware and concerned with how education is susceptible to “external authority,” assumedly hierarchical and organized in nature. Nonetheless, Dewey’s own critical pedagogy should be read with an eye toward the more “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic *unfreedom*” that potentially undergirds his vision of the “Schools of To-Morrow.”¹¹⁰

One reason education is so important, so relevant for Dewey, is that it provides an institutional space for the civic maturation of the subject. Consider this important passage from *Democracy and Education*:

The primary ineluctable facts of the birth and death of each one of the constituent members in a social group determine the necessity of education. On one hand, there is the contrast between the immaturity of the newborn members of the group – its future sole representatives – and the maturity of the adult members who possess the knowledge and customs of the group. On the other hand, there is the necessity that these immature members be not merely physically preserved in adequate numbers, but that they be initiated into the interests, purposes, information, skill, and practices of the mature members: otherwise the group will cease its characteristic life. Even in a savage tribe, the achievements of adults are far beyond what the immature members would be capable of if left to themselves. With the growth of civilization, the gap between the original capacities of the immature and the standards and customs of the elders increases. Mere physical growing up, mere mastery of the bare necessities of subsistence will not suffice

¹⁰⁹ Dewey, “Freedom,” 254.

¹¹⁰ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1; and, Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow*, n.p.

to reproduce the life of the group. Deliberate effort and the taking of thoughtful pains are required. Beings who are born not only unaware of, but quite indifferent to, the aims and habits of the social group have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested. Education, and education alone, spans the gap.¹¹¹

In this formula, maturity is a reflection of the subject's existential temporality: "the birth and death of each one of the constituent members in a social group determine the necessity of education." Education is, by extension, how a "civilized" society is to confront their very embeddedness in temporality and contingency. The mature, the adult members of a community, "possess the knowledge and customs of the group," Dewey observes. It – knowledge, customs, how one structures their enjoyment – must, by extension, be passed down in order for the Mature to reproduce themselves, for the common of the commonwealth to ensure the hegemony and character of their "characteristic life."

But here we seem to catch Dewey in tension with himself. Echoing Hegel, recall the sedimentation of truths he explicitly prohibits in *Moral Principles of Education*: "old truths become so stale and worn [...]." If not stale truths – "truths" which carry performative weight – what then are customs, habits? Is gender a habit? Is the commonness of heterosexuality a custom? Arguably, yes, on both accounts. He would likely respond that "reasoned habit" accommodates contingency, that the logic of habit is ultimately adaptable and must be susceptible to change. However, change for Dewey takes place, it progresses, in the present – not the past. Change requires discipline, education, "[d]eliberate effort and the taking of thoughtful pains," for Dewey. Remember: he clearly states that the functional role of

¹¹¹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 5-6.

education is to reproduce a people's way of life; education is the source of their futurity, their facts and history. Education segregates the civil from the savage, the ahistorical. However, Dewey himself is evidently uncomfortable with the linear, hierarchical distribution of facts and norms. History for Dewey is instead the dialectical repetition of being in all its vagaries: it is the other side of "turning contingency into account," as he states in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Dewey departs from Hegel, however, insofar as Deweyan history appears to move exclusively forward, not backwards. Consequently, what he misses is how his conception of the future is in some respects indebted to his implicit omissions of who is capable of giving an account of the past. Conversely, the radically emancipatory gesture is, as Walter Benjamin tells us, to retroactively *change the past*: to recognize how the fullness of the past can only be accessed through embodied histories of the present.

3.2 Futurity, Nostalgia, Power

We can further see how the subtle foreclosures of subjectivity are diffuse in the spandrels of his nostalgia for the past. Only those capable of embodying a viable future are the subjects of Dewey's nostalgia. One nice example of this is found in Seyla Benhabib's reading of *the Public and its Problems*.¹¹²

Granting that the experience of industrial and urban modern societies undermined "the genuine community life" out of which American democracy had developed, Dewey admitted that "the public seems to be lost ... If a public exists, it is surely as uncertain about its whereabouts as philosophers since Hume have been about the residence and make-up of the self." Nonetheless, Dewey tried to articulate a vision of radical democracy

¹¹² Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 203-15.

according to which individuals could be reconstituted as democratic citizens by revitalizing those ties of community out of which the American experience with democracy in New England towns was born. Indeed, theories of the public sphere, from Walter Lippmann to Hannah Arendt, from John Dewey to Jürgen Habermas, *appear to be afflicted by a nostalgic trope*: where once there was a public sphere of action and deliberation, participation and collective decision making, today there no longer is one; or, if a public sphere still exists, it is so distorted, weakened, and corrupted as to be a pale recollection of what once was.¹¹³

Benhabib's reading of Dewey resonates with the interpretation I have advanced in two respects: the ideological "nostalgic trope[s]" central to Dewey's critique of the political, and the presupposed societal togetherness expressed in his grievances of the public lost. Both complement one another. To the first point, Benhabib suggests Dewey was in particular motivated by his belief that although imperfect, there was at one point a viable "public sphere of action and deliberation, participation and collective decision making." From a contemporary perspective (indeed in the eyes of Dewey's contemporaries like W.E.B. Du Bois, Claudia Jones, and Harry Haywood!), Dewey's faith in the viability of this public is problematic. As Benhabib and others show, Dewey's halcyon public was never substantively extended to everybody. It only was accorded *de facto* to *somebodies*, interpellated subjects grounded in their own metonymical rationality (i.e., white bodies, male bodies). Secondly, Dewey's claims to a certain togetherness that accompanied this public – the Public Lost – are similarly limited by his own epistemological lacunae. Benhabib's reading of the togetherness

¹¹³ Ibid., 203-4.

of the Deweyan public sphere is akin to the foreclosed subjective commonness of the commonwealth that we can see in Dewey's own mobilizations of Cicero. In both cases, Dewey's nostalgia appears to gravitate around an idealized, capable subject of history. Thus, when Dewey seeks to act on the present, he is near-destined to miss the underlying negativity of the present – of who, what, (and even where) is *not present* in the present.

We can see this manifest in a morbid way in his remarks on “the frontier” in *The Living Thoughts of Thomas Jefferson*. Here Dewey praises Jefferson's blend of “practical experience” and “moral idealism.” He notes how the former President was

conscious that chances for greater success of the experiment in the United States were dependent upon events which might be regarded either as fortunate accidents or as providential dispensations: the wide ocean protecting the country from oppressive governments in Europe; the Anglo-Saxon tradition of liberties; even the jealousies of religious denominations that prevented the State Establishment of any one church, and hence worked for religious liberty; the immense amount of free land and available natural resources with consequent continual freedom of movement; the independence and vigor that were bred on the frontier, etc. Even so, he had fears for the future when the country should be urbanized and industrialized, though upon the whole, he says, he tended by temperament to take counsel of his hopes rather than his fears.¹¹⁴

In the “immense amount of free land” and the “continual freedom of movement”; the “Anglo-Saxon tradition of liberties” and the “independence and vigor bred on the frontier,” Dewey

¹¹⁴ Dewey, *Living Thoughts of*, 19-20. Emphasis added.

finds the figure of “our first great democrat.”¹¹⁵ Setting aside for a moment the overt racisms and revisionisms apparent upon an initial reading, we *must not* lose sight of the more discrete ways in which Dewey reduces the largest genocide in human history to a set of “fortunate accidents.” I find this remark especially illuminating insofar as, I believe, it provides ground to call into question the rigor and criticality of Dewey’s understandings of historical contingency. For example, although Dewey would dismiss reading history as a plain catalogue of “brute” facts, Dewey’s revisionisms of the colonial legacy – his reduction of a peoples’ very erasure to a set of “fortunate accidents” – still necessarily seems to rely on a certain “brute” embodiment of historical ownership, of owning “Our” history.

Perhaps even more important, however, are the often overlooked implications of what is meant when he speaks of the “oppressive governments in Europe.” Here, European settlers are *capable* of being the subjects of persecution and oppression; they retain the minimal element of subjectivity – of dignity and humility – that retroactively reasserts their status as human subjects of oppression. Indigenous peoples, however, are merely objects – they retain no elemental subjectivity; they are devoid of even the minimal dignity afforded to human subjects of oppression. By completely overlooking the genocidal foundations of “the experiment in the United States,” Dewey both erases the very historicities of indigenous peoples, and retroactively reasserts the subjectivity of the settlers. This is perhaps why Dewey finds Jefferson’s “fears for the future” both prescient and justified – they are the only futures that matter; they are the only histories capable of bearing witness to a future.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 2-3.

And, again we can find a similar pattern of exclusion manifest in his reflections on public sphere in *The Public and its Problems*. “Our concern at this time,” he writes,

is to state how it is that the machine age in developing the Great Society has invaded and partially disintegrated the small communities of former times without generating a Great Community. The facts are familiar enough; our especial affair is to point out their connections with the difficulties under which the organization of a democratic public is laboring. For the very familiarity with the phenomena conceals their significance and blinds us to their relation to immediate political problems.¹¹⁶

In the language of “small communities of former times” we can grasp the logic of longing that Benhabib identifies. Dewey’s greatest fear is that these communities would continue to grow more and more “disintegrated” and lose their groundedness (Craig Calhoun has recently dubbed this “publicness”) in “face-to-face intercourse.”¹¹⁷ While sharing some sympathies with Marx’s analysis of the two-sided genesis of technological refinement and the alienation of labour, Dewey’s optimism in the future – optimism which we might now rephrase as optimism in the *capable subject of the future* – is limited in its concern with who was ever “integrated” in the first place. Tellingly, he continues, “[r]ailways, travel and transportation, commerce, the mails, telegraph and telephone, newspapers, create enough similarity of ideas and sentiments to keep the thing going as a whole, for they create interaction and interdependence.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Dewey, *Public*, 126-7.

¹¹⁷ Calhoun, *Facets of Public*, 23-25; and, Dewey, *Public*, 211.

¹¹⁸ Dewey, *Public*, 114.

To stake out a properly dialectical reading of Dewey, however, is to grasp how even his discussions of the “similarity” of how *one* travels necessarily still revolve around the assumption that all can travel equally, openly, and freely. To Dewey’s credit, he saw through the “fiction” of space segregated on the basis of race, he opposed it unconditionally.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, what Dewey missed – what he could not see – is how such technologies and seemingly apolitical institutions – sometimes literal abiotic structures (e.g., railroads) – can, were, and continue to be used to segregate communities, divide peoples, and manage populations.¹²⁰ In other words, Dewey did not simply underestimate the immersive potential for alienation inscribed into the becomings of scientific development: he missed the already existing gradations of alienation and psychosocial administration that they were being built on.

¹¹⁹ Dewey, “NAACP,” n.p.

¹²⁰ Foucault speaks to this directly in *Security, Territory, Population*. Sven-Olov Wallenstein offers an excellent, succinct overview of such possibilities in *Biopolitics and the Emergence of Modern Architecture*.

4. Deweyan Futures

Returning one final time to the question posed at the beginning of this thesis - who certain performative discourses of democratic action are implicitly embodied in - let us turn to Dewey's own references to Cicero once more. I have argued throughout this thesis that the assumed subject - the *Ciceronian subject* - at the heart of Dewey's work is inherently foreclosed to certain gendered and racialized materializations of alterity. Now we might see more clearly how Dewey's vision of democracy has aided in reinforcing certain patterns of subjective exclusions in the classroom. I conclude with a discussion of how critically re-reading Dewey today can illuminate some contemporary connections between the critique of subjectivity, discourse, and power, especially in the era of "post-humanity."¹²¹

4.1 Dewey at the limits

In *Schools of To-Morrow*, a surprisingly idiosyncratic pre-war survey of the "experimental method" in education, we encounter a more lucid, conversational Dewey. Here he offers readers less a systematic, academic investigation of the philosophy of education, and more a somewhat meandering overview of his work on aesthetics, politics, and society to date. In a chapter simply titled "Play", Dewey praises the "social values of dramatizations."¹²² That is, dramatizing history and literature in the classroom, according to Dewey, allows for new possibilities of active learning, citizenship, and engagement. They provide a "unifying influence in a foreign community," and "[help] the children understand what they are

¹²¹ Slavoj Žižek has recently developed how the imago of the posthuman is a "pure void" of radical negativity, how it no longer holds a stable identity. In *Like a Thief in Broad Daylight: Power in the Era of Post-Humanity*, he shows how "Posthumanism is no longer an eccentric theoretical proposal but a matter concerning our daily lives." (46).

¹²² Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow*, 125. Emphasis added.

supposed to be enthusiastic about.”¹²³ Consequently, the turgid memorization of texts and dates is – as we saw previously – an “isolated and unsocial performance” that falls short of the necessary civic vision Dewey considered necessary for democracy to flourish.¹²⁴ “The Francis Parker School is one of many using the dramatic interest of the pupils as an aid in teaching history,” Dewey writes.¹²⁵

They model Mycenae in sand-pans, ruin it, cover it, and become the excavators who bring its treasures to light again. They write prayers to Dionysius and stories such as they think Orpheus might have sung. They play Greek games and wear Greek costumes, and are continually acting out stories or incidents which please them. To-day, as heroes of Troy, they have a battle at recess time with wooden swords and barrel covers. In class time, with prayers and dances and extempore song, they hold a Dionysiac festival. Again, half of them are Athenians and half of them *Spartans in a war of words as to which city is more to be desired*. Or they are freemen of Athens, *replying spiritedly to the haughty Persian message*.¹²⁶

Note the operative themes of pedagogic dramatization as Dewey has characterized them: enactment, embodiment, desire, and action. Upon a closer reading, we can discern how each of these traits implicitly functions only in reference to a signifier worth repeating: enactment *of* Hellenistic customs; embodiment *of* the heroic Greek soldier’s piety; desire *of* Spartan grandeur; action *in* preservation of Athenian freedoms. Here, dramatization as pedagogic

¹²³ Ibid., 129, 130. Emphasis added.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 124.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 124-5.

method circulates at the level of repetition; it is predicated on the presupposed worth of what is being repeated. Yet, the act of repetition does not merely confirm the worth of these traits as such. Again following Hegel, the act of repetition – of dramatizations of great, “world-historical” men – is, in some respects, *more* authentic than the original, for Dewey. “History taught in this way to little children acquires meaning and an emotional content; they appreciate the Greek spirit and the things which made a great people.”¹²⁷ Education in Dewey’s mind thus provides a platform for the cultivation of democratic citizenship and “scientific” and “critical” intelligence. It is one of many institutional estuaries for the crafting of a new “great people.”¹²⁸

It is perhaps wrong to write this off entirely. Education arguably is a platform for the cultivation of democratic citizenship. Dewey is justified in advocating for more investment, both intellectual and financial, in public schools. However, where he falls short is in recognizing the ways in which his understandings of democratic citizenship are *always-already* mediated through certain selective interpretations of what is worthy of repetition. The Greeks are worth repeating; Athenian freedoms are worth defending; “Persian haughtiness,” however, implicitly must be defeated. Here one can see precisely where Dewey forgets to ask the most important question: *what relations of power and knowledge are in place so as to create a binary historical catalogue of what is worthy of repetition?* Nonetheless,

¹²⁷ Ibid., 125.

¹²⁸ This is one potential explanation for Dewey’s seeming obsession with World Historical men. Recall that in *The Public and its Problems* we get a chapter explicitly calling for the “Next Great Community.” So too do Dewey’s interests in Thomas Jefferson seem to resonate with how Hegel describes World Historical men. Lastly, Dewey’s frequent references to Cicero also clearly map onto the paradigm of understanding history through the pen of Great Men.

Dewey himself still adamantly claims to be against near-all “rigid” forms of indoctrination. As such, the end goal for Dewey is not simply to instill the presumed democratic ethos of Greek and Roman antiquity – at the expense of the Levant – into students. Recall that for Dewey, democracy is not an end goal, but a “way of life.” Therefore, Dewey locates such desirable ancient values (*of the Athenians, of the Spartans*) as the foundational ethics of the Possible. Thus, dramatizations of a *desired* history repeat more than a given narrative: they universalize the supposedly intersubjective values, customs, and traits that one is implicitly expected to embody in their desire.¹²⁹

Now, because dramatization affirms the ontological consistency of the possible, one can also see how the act of understanding is, by extension, delimited to the supposedly intersubjective coordinates of desire as such. That is, understanding is dependent on the social coordinates of a “way of life” located in one’s desires. If dramatization, at least in-part, communicates the qualities of a life one is to desire, it follows that desires too are bound in the same ontological web of the possible Dewey finds himself in. Here we might follow George Orwell, however, and think about the silent ways in which dramatizations of history are inherently propagandistic: they tell us not simply what (*histories, people, places*) to desire; they even tell us *how* to desire.¹³⁰ We should ask - what are the dramatizers implicitly being told to desire?

¹²⁹ We get perhaps Dewey’s clearest articulation of dramatization – what he later calls “creative dramatics” in his *Lectures in China, 1919-1920*.. See “Creative Dramatics and Work” for a precise summary of what dramatization (here “creative dramatics”) seeks to achieve.

¹³⁰ See Orwell, *Art is Propaganda*, 223-31.

In *Schools of To-morrow*, Dewey is unequivocal: students desire being understood. They “always have to think clearly and speak well, or their audience will not understand them,” he writes.¹³¹ Noticeably, Dewey understands “their audience” – student’s peers, fellow classmates – as a representative sample of American society at large. It was not, for obvious reasons. Communicating effectively with fellow peers, being understood by an audience, is central to the satisfaction of our desire to be understood. Dewey saw this as integral to sustaining a healthy, integrated community of mutuality and reciprocity. While he is again not entirely wrong here, his next move is striking. He abruptly turns and singles out dramatizations of Cicero himself – specifically his famous orations against Cataline – as the “purest” form of “dramatic interests” accessible to the students of the Francis Parker School. Dewey’s message could not be any clearer: in order for students to be understood, they ought to model their methods and mannerisms of communication off of Cicero. Five years on Dewey while lecturing in China, he would claim that only through “creative dramatics” can “moral insights and moral behavior be cultivated through the acting out of stories.”¹³² Cicero, it would seem, is the archetypal democratic orator around which all acts of communicative understanding gravitate. The sensibilities of Cicero are what the capable are to embody.

4.2 On the Non-Neutrality of the Present.

I have raised this point one final time for reasons that, I believe, extend far beyond Dewey. Today, critical and democratic theorists – despite their differences – are still tasked with some of the very same questions Dewey himself grappled with over the course of his career.

¹³¹ Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow*, 127.

¹³² Dewey, *Lectures in China*, 205.

In particular, his concerns about the dangers of “pecuniary culture” and the limits of capitalist transformation, labour activism, educational reforms, and the future of automation remain in many ways more relevant than ever before. Now, despite Dewey’s best attempts to understand how the bases of communications and assembly were changing even prior to the turn of the century, he could not possibly have imagined how bizarrely accurate Marx’s echo that “all that is solid melts into air” would hold.¹³³

Over the last 30 years, claims of late capitalist commodity terror and the aesthetic visualizations of our everyday lives have become increasingly commonplace – and for good reason.¹³⁴ One concern I hold, however, is the extent to which “commodity terror” has become so virtualized that it has effectively devalued any substantive, stable distinction between “the virtual” and “the real”. Perhaps surprisingly, a critical reading of Dewey’s texts on technological transformation and communications – a reading from a genealogical perspective, readings attuned to his shortcomings – might help contemporary thinkers avoid

¹³³ Consider his remarks in *Philosophy and Civilization* on the “rapidity” of change in modern society. “Domestic life,” he writes, “...political institutions, international relations and personal contacts are shifting with kaleidoscopic rapidity before our eyes. We cannot appreciate and weigh the changes; they occur too swiftly. We do not have time to take them in. No sooner do we begin to understand the learning of one such change than another comes and displaces the former. Our minds are dulled by the sudden and repeated impacts. Externally, science through its applications is manufacturing the conditions of our institutions at such a speed that we are too bewildered to know what sort of civilization is in process of making.” Dewey’s comments share some striking similarities with Marx’s position in the manifesto (and notably with Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of enlightenment). Dewey was evidently aware that progress is not unconditionally “good” progress; that change is not inextricably democratic or “positive” change. If anything, we get Dewey at his dialectical best here. Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization*, 319.

¹³⁴ For a sample, see: Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Chapters 7 & 8; and, Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 297-418.

reproducing and acting on similar assumptions about the “underlying singularity of a universal-virtual subjectivity.”¹³⁵

Today, the virtual *is* the real. This is relevant insofar as accompanying this ontological slight-of-hand is an even more diffuse matrix of power and knowledge relations that continue to structure the micropolitics of our daily lives. It makes asking the questions I have charged Dewey and others for *not* asking even more difficult. For example, recall Dewey’s claim in *Liberalism and Social Action* about the democratizing prospects of “[t]he stationary engine, the locomotive, the dynamo, the motor car, turbine, telegraph, telephone, radio and moving picture.”¹³⁶ Our task today demands more than simply asking how to integrate modern technological transformations into the materialist critique of political economy and culture. Instead, one path forward – a path vigilant not to repeat Dewey’s and other’s mistakes – is to question how such technologies don’t simply mediate, *but constitute* one’s identity *as such* today.

Margaret Morse offers a nice formula in *Virtualities* that shares some notable synergies with Dewey’s own languaging. “Freeways, malls, and television are the locus of virtualization,” she observes.¹³⁷ They are

an attenuated *fiction effect*, that is, a partial loss of touch with the here-and-now, dubbed here as *distraction*. This semifiction effect is akin to but not identical with split-belief – knowing a representation is not real, but nevertheless momentarily closing off the here-

¹³⁵ See Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 143-152.

¹³⁶ Dewey, *Liberalism and Social*, 74.

¹³⁷ Morse, *Virtualities*, 99.

and-now and sinking into another world – promoted within the apparatuses of the theater, the cinema, and the novel. Its difference lies primarily in that it involves two or more objects and levels of attention and the copresence of two or more different, even contradictory metapsychological effects.¹³⁸

It is the “partial loss of touch with the here-and-now” that I am interested in; it reanimates the debate about reason and knowing that I have tried to explore explicitly in subsection 1.3. If we recall how Dewey conceives of what it means to analyze “present conditions” in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, one can see two sides of yet another fascinating debate. On the one hand, Dewey, following Kant, concedes that scientific reason can never truly comprehend everything; that there is an elemental reduction, a loss which grounds the human act of understanding. Nonetheless, he still is quick to affirm the basic ontological unity of the present; Dewey’s entire philosophy of action is, as we saw, seemingly grounded here (*present conditions, concrete actualities*). Morse, on the other hand, takes just the right step in *rejecting the very consistency of the present* altogether. Drawing on Deleuze and Baudrillard, she presents what she calls “derealized, nonspace,” the fictionalized other-worlds we craft in order to endure ourselves, as Emil Cioran puts it.¹³⁹ Like the fundamental unity of language, “[t]he nonspace of privatized mobility is not neutral ground,” she

¹³⁸ Ibid., emphasis original.

¹³⁹ There is a possible connection worth exploring that links Emil Cioran’s musings on of space, place, and despair, with Morse’s idea of “nonspace.” For example, when Cioran writes in *The Trouble with Being Born* that “from morning until night” he “endures himself,” his next turn – one that I believe is intentional – is to present two aphorisms on the worthlessness of language and the underlying vanity of contemporary belief. Like Cioran, Morse too appears to hold late modernity as little more than assemblage of arbitrary simulacra that are expressive of their own internalized power dynamics. The bridge between the two appears to be what Cioran calls despair, and Morse non-neutrality.

argues.¹⁴⁰ While Dewey generally regards the present as neutral insofar as the act of being is installed within one, equally totalizing present, Morse is focused on highlighting the active, intersectional foreclosures of the “here-and-now.” Present work can learn a great deal from Morse, and still, perhaps impossibly, John Dewey. At large, developing a critical theory of communications attuned to the non-neutrality of the present; the assumptions of a universal subjectivity and capability that undergird the discursive categories of the possible, remains our task today.

¹⁴⁰ Morse, *Virtualities*, 121.

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