

## Stéphane Madelrieux, *La philosophie de John Dewey*, Paris: Vrin, 2016

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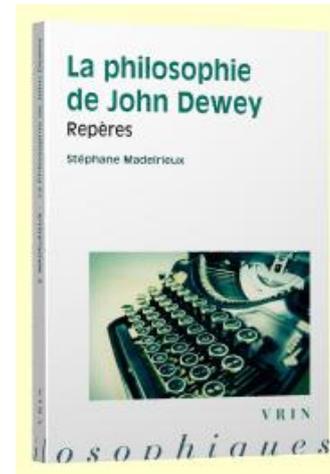
### Abstract

This book aims at giving Dewey his own medicine in order to get a comprehensive insight of his thought. To explain his whole philosophy, it does not start with a specific doctrine such as his theory of experience, his theory of inquiry or his theory of value. Instead, it begins by asking what problem Dewey intended to solve and then reads all his various theories as means, aspects or phases of the resolution of this problem.

In its pre-philosophical terms, the central “problem of men” is a kind of crisis of civilization, conflicted between pre-modern and modern tendencies so that the course of humanity is divided about where to go to and what to do. Dewey’s philosophical diagnosis consists in identifying this cultural problem with a discrepancy between what has rightful authority in man’s beliefs about the world he lives in, i.e. scientific inquiry, and what has actual authority in his moral values and in the direction of his conduct (anything but inquiry). Dewey’s proposition to unify civilization and to give humanity a shared direction by integrating cognitive and moral beliefs is to be found in his attempt to extend scientific inquiry into an experimental method of moral reflection. These diagnosis and prognosis are backed up by a genealogical survey of modernity that situates the origin of the dualism between science and morals in the tremendous effect the modern scientific revolution had in dissolving the Greek and medieval integrated outlook. In such an outlook, the identification of the supreme Good (moral philosophy) was indeed grounded in the certain knowledge (epistemology) of ultimate reality (ontology), a kind of knowledge that scientific inquiry has rendered obsolete not only in its content but also in its method. To achieve modernity by extending the modern scientific revolution to morals (understood in a comprehensive sense designating whatever is taken to have rightful authority in the direction of conduct) is thus Dewey’s main proposition to solve what he sees as the essential strife of modern life.

But the road towards the constitution of a moral or human inquiry is blocked by a series of intellectual obstacles. A preliminary critical task is thus needed to remove all the dualisms that echo the central dualism of modernity inside the specific fields of being, knowledge and value. 1) Dewey’s theory of experience aims at showing that nothing in the subject matter itself prevents the extension of the methods of natural sciences into human sciences, as there is no dualism between nature and humanity: human experience, which is reflective and communicational, is not superimposed from the outside on a nature reduced to physical mechanisms (*naturalist empiricism*). 2) His experimental theory of knowledge shows that nothing in knowledge itself prohibits this extension, as the dualism between theory and practice that would forbid any use of knowledge in the regulation of conduct (as if knowledge and action were two worlds apart) does not have any ground in the actual practice of scientific inquiry (*pragmatic instrumentalism*). 3) His theory of value (notably specified in his moral, political and educational philosophies) shows at last that nothing in the nature of values and ends would prevent them to be knowable by empirical methods and modifiable by practical means, as there is no dualism between means and ends in the actual course of our actions (*practical idealism*). According to Dewey, reconceiving the relation between humanity (experience) and nature, theory (knowledge) and practice, ends (values) and means, in a way that both overcomes modern dualistic ways of thinking and restores a new integrated outlook capable of rivaling with the old Greek triangular metaphysics is thus the way by which philosophy can make its own contribution to the collective effort of solving the central conflict of culture.

This requires that philosophy is not a specific kind of knowledge developing doctrines that would provide certainty in an uncertain world. Instead Dewey defends the idea, central for all pragmatists, that philosophy is only an attitude, a set of virtuous dispositions and habits, which is in the last instance identical to the scientific mode of thinking as well as with the democratic way of living. The only non-reductionist way of applying scientific inquiry to morals is thus to first extract the immanent morals of inquiry itself. Once this dissociation between science as an attitude and



science as a body of doctrines has been made, it becomes possible to adopt this generic attitude to face the problems of associated life and to democratize it by way of a reconstructed education. The deep-rooted reason is that such an attitude is not only the means to reach the common good, but is already the common good itself, the greatest discovery of humanity so far in its emancipation from dogmatism. The search for the good means is already and by itself the search for the good end. The progress of the scientific attitude in life is already the progressive realization of what is the most valuable in our personal and collective experience.

This comprehensive account of Dewey's philosophy is preceded by a short survey of Dewey's life and followed by a quick sketch of some of Dewey's major books.

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## The Author

Stéphane Madelrieux is "Maître de conférences" (Associate Professor) at University Jean Moulin – Lyon 3 (Lyon, France) and member of the Institut Universitaire de France. He is the author of a comprehensive study of William James' complete works, *William James. L'attitude empiriste* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008, 503 pages), which aims at reading James's thought by referring it to empiricism taken not as a doctrine but as an attitude. He is the editor of the collection *Bergson and James* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), which takes advantage of the new scholarship in France on Bergson and James to revisit their relationship a hundred years later. He has also edited the new French translation of James's *Pragmatism* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007) as well as Bergson's collected writings on James and pragmatism (Bergson, *Sur le pragmatisme de William James*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011). He is finally the co-translator and co-editor of Dewey's *Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (Dewey, *L'influence de Darwin sur la philosophie*, Paris: Gallimard, to be published in 2016). Among his current research projects is a critical inquiry into contemporary French philosophies of experience from a pragmatist perspective, along the line of his article "Pluralism without Pragmatism: Deleuze and the Ambiguities of the French Inheritance of James" (in S. Bowden, S. Bignall and P. Patton (Eds), *Deleuze and Pragmatism*, New York and London: Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, 2014, pp. 89-104). Member of the European Pragmatism Association and founding member of the French Association for Pragmatist Studies *Pragmata*, he has attended since 2013 a number of SAAP's conferences (Athens, Denver, Grand Rapids, Dublin, Portland).