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Some Deweyan Reflections”

In: Yvonne Huetter–Almerigi and Robert Sinclair (Eds.) (2026).  
*Pragmatism, Metaphysics and Method—Essays for Bjørn Ramberg*  
(pp. 121–130). Nordic Studies in Pragmatism 5. Helsinki: Nordic  
Pragmatism Network.

ISSN-L 1799-3954

ISSN 1799-3954

ISBN 978-952-67497-4-7

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Nordic Pragmatism Network,  
Helsinki 2026

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# Growth, Education and Cosmopolitan Identity: Some Deweyan Reflections

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Whenever philosophy has been taken seriously, it has always been assumed that it signified achieving a wisdom which would influence the conduct of life. John Dewey

## 1. Introduction: Ramberg's Challenge

This essay is offered as an attempt to respond to a specific worry Ramberg has raised over the point, purpose and value of philosophy. He invites us to consider the following set of concerns: "What sustains the idea of philosophy as a subject and a discipline? What supports a claim that philosophy be recognized and funded as a worthy intellectual project, to be commended to *bildung*-aspiring young adults? What, in short, is philosophy good for as a *public endeavor*?" (2018, 309–10). This line of questioning is further examined within the complex metaphilosophical dialectic offered by pragmatists of various stripes, where Ramberg confronts his central concern over balancing the undermining power of radical critique with the continuing need for relevance and authority within philosophical practice. Here, I wish to retreat to the prior set of concerns listed above over the value of philosophy, what I will call Ramberg's challenge.

For what it's worth my answer to such questions is as follows. Starting with a core commitment of the classical type of pragmatism I favor, namely, its emphasis on the central connection between thought, evaluation and action, I quickly infer that it is this that drives its practical func-

tion.<sup>1</sup> Knowing is for the sake of doing, as they say. This results in an ineluctable bond between the philosophical and the existential, between attempts to judge what is good, worthwhile or helpful and the lived struggles we confront in a rapidly changing world. Pragmatist thought is then committed to what I have elsewhere called a central “moral imperative”, involving the central task of locating and promoting both theoretical and practical goods in order to improve human moral life (2016). So, a general answer to Ramberg’s challenge is relatively straightforward. Philosophy’s value is to be found in its ability to address this moral imperative. But, as good pragmatists, we might want this further demonstrated in practice, by showing how philosophical reflection informs what we do, where this very doing addresses a human moral problem. What follows is then a brief attempt to describe the main outlines of how philosophy when conceived along the pragmatist lines I have briefly sketched addresses a real lived problem.

The first section lays out the main problem concerning the forging of a cosmopolitan identity by balancing the possible conflicts and tensions between the familiar and the foreign. Second two provides a conceptual platform for addressing these difficulties by discussing central features of John Dewey’s view of the self and their bearing on personal identity. The concluding section applies these ideas to a real case drawn from my own personal experience as a teacher of philosophy. The main conclusion is that a proper understanding of Dewey’s notions of self, interest and moral growth help to alleviate the conflicts inherent in the cosmopolitan stance. Here we can then locate one instance of the value of philosophy as it emerges from the pursuit of the moral imperative found in pragmatism.

## 2. Cosmopolitanism and its Problems

We can usefully begin with a brief description of the cosmopolitan orientation or stance and a brief survey of some of its challenges. Hansen offers the following useful definition of this stance, when he explains that “a cosmopolitan outlook[ . . . ] fuses reflective openness to the world with reflective loyalty to local roots, traditions, and practices” (2009, 126). This stance acknowledges the existence of difference between individuals and cultures, with a further ‘reflective openness’ signaling an awareness and responsiveness to this difference. There are obviously different possible

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<sup>1</sup> This core commitment is developed in various ways in the work of James 1907, Dewey 1920 and C.I. Lewis 1946.

ways to approach diversity and difference. We can reject it through exclusion or attempts at assimilation. Or we can accept it, learn from it, and ultimately find a way to live with it. This cosmopolitan stance as a reflective openness then further exemplifies what has been described as a philosophical pluralism, one that is seen as characteristic of pragmatism and American philosophy more generally. This pluralism, Campos further explains “means the principled embracing and nurturing of difference in philosophical ideals, moral values, religious beliefs and political and economic arrangements among peoples who co-exist and cooperate” (2018, 109). For the pragmatists, including John Dewey, this pluralist perspective is grounded in the diversity of human experience. Our diverse experiences generate conflicts and problems, both personal and interpersonal, requiring reflection for their attempted solution. As I then interpret the cosmopolitan perspective, the reflective openness of the cosmopolitan stance is closely affiliated with the philosophical pluralism of pragmatist thought, and its view of philosophy as addressing the problems of daily life.

Hansen’s definition of cosmopolitanism further emphasizes a reflective loyalty to the local—a sense of home, of belonging, where this is found in the familiar places and people that shape our basic identity. This reflective commitment to the familiar could involve a culture, town, region, language or practice, vocation, or career. This, it is claimed, is a necessary element of the cosmopolitan outlook. My interpretation of this idea is that this loyalty provides a relatively stable basis, starting point or framework from which we encounter diversity and difference. We are not simply thrown into a world of difference and asked to find our way from scratch. Rather, we approach difference as individuals with a culture, language, and identity that we were initiated into from the start. We cannot ignore or completely forget the cultural background that we bring to our engagement with diversity. This, of course, influences the way we encounter diversity, but the key point here is that a genuine cosmopolitan view requires an openness to difference from within our own attachment to the familiar, local surroundings that made us who we are.

Hansen notes some of the difficulties in combining these two suggested elements of the cosmopolitan stance. I want to elaborate somewhat on these difficulties, especially those found in the reflective loyalty to the local dimension just mentioned. Consider an example: leaving your home country to work abroad. We can distinguish at least three elements within such experiences. It has a first emotional, felt quality, involves a further

second set of connections or reactions to new people and surroundings, and lastly, a third element involving the direction of your life, in terms of overall aims and goals.<sup>2</sup> Think briefly about this last element concerning the overarching ends of one's life. Your situation is now one of working abroad in a foreign country, where you increasingly see your life in terms of your work as a teacher in this new and unfamiliar environment. How do you achieve a balance in terms of your current goals? Possible questions that may require reflection: do I share the same aims for education that my students seem to have? As a foreigner, do I share the same general view of what society should look like, and the place of education in that society? If not, how should I engage with it, through confrontation, or conformity? Notice how this balance can be seen in terms of the definition of cosmopolitanism given above. How do I now bring together my reflective openness to the difference I now face with a corresponding loyalty to the familiar? We are confronted with the need to form a balanced stance with regard to my own life aims and the aims of the community I find myself in.<sup>3</sup>

There is a further difficulty that is relevant here. How does living and working abroad impact the loyalty to the local? Once you have the experience of living in other places and cultures, there is the opportunity to reflect on one's roots, in a new way, perhaps in a more critical light. This loyalty to the local can be hard to sustain. It can, of course, change, as we move beyond our cultural roots. This can result in you understanding these roots differently than before. Perhaps, you are now inclined to reject them in part or remain firm in your commitment to them. Further questions may flood in: What if embracing diversity causes you to see your home in negative ways, resulting in a loss of loyalty to the local and familiar? Can we remain loyal, how should we do so? How do you recover the standpoint needed to achieve cosmopolitan balance? This process can be complicated, as it requires achieving a balance between such loyalty and the openness to difference that is also part of the cosmopolitan view. Call this needed balance your 'cosmopolitan identity'. If we characterize education broadly, as Dewey would, then education is basic to achieving the required balance.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this Peircean tripartite analysis of personality and its application to immigrant experience, see Campos, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For further examples from immigrant experience and their attempt to achieve a balanced stance, see Campos, 2011; 2018.

Most of us are familiar with the challenges faced by being open to difference. However, there is the additional worry I am highlighting here, concerning our prior commitments to the local cultural tradition and customs that have influenced us. What happens when these come into contact with new circumstances, cultures and values. You may find yourself stuck between two poles, as it were, not able to fully identify with your new surroundings and yet unhappy with aspects of your familiar cultural background. Faced with this sort of dilemma, how should we proceed? In order to attempt to answer such questions, let us turn to relevant details concerning Dewey's view of the moral self, interest and growth. Dewey's view provides us with some useful tools for coming to grips with the needed personal balance needed with the cosmopolitan stance; for helping us create and sustain what I have called a 'cosmopolitan identity'.

### 3. Dewey on the Self, Interest and Growth

In order to address these issues we need to begin with a brief survey of the interconnection between Dewey's conception of the self, habit, interest and growth.<sup>4</sup> In part II of the 1932 *Ethics*, Dewey argues that there is an identity between self and act, where this means, in part, that our actions constitute and make the self. This identity of self and its actions is based on his view of habits and interests. Through our actions we create the self, where this further means that such actions strengthen or weaken aspects of our habits or dispositions to act. By acting in specific ways, we reinforce those tendencies that make us the kind of person who acts in such ways. Someone who is often late becomes that kind of person, an unpunctual individual, as we might say. Dewey goes so far as to claim that our habits constitute the self. Here, he means much more than the tendency to repeat prior actions:

[...] habit reaches even more significantly down into the very structure of the self; it signifies a building up and solidifying of certain desires; an increased sensitiveness and responsiveness to certain stimuli, a confirmed or an impaired capacity to attend to and think about certain things. Habit covers in other words the very make-up of desire, intent choice, disposition which gives an act its voluntary quality. LW, 171

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<sup>4</sup> For further details concerning the interconnections between these elements of Dewey's moral philosophy see Levine, 2021.

Our habits shape our personal tendencies so that our acts form a distinctive pattern that we call a person or self. We are thus given the following general picture concerning the formation of the self: the self is created through feedback loops between habit, immediate perception and reflection, where we are motivated to act through dispositions influenced by what we have learnt from the consequences of past experiences and actions.<sup>5</sup> Motives to act in certain way are further tied to the central idea of interest: “Any concrete case of the union of the self in action with an object and end is called an interest[ . . . ] An interest is, in short, the dominant direction of activity, and in this activity desire is united with an object to be furthered in a decisive choice” (LW 290). An interest is here defined as the union of self and object in action: “Interest means the active or moving *identity* of the self with a certain object” (1916, 336). If someone is interested in poetry, for example, they will have the tendency to pursue opportunities to read, listen to, discuss and perhaps write poetry. Interest here represents a motivated engagement with poetry. These ‘objects’ are part of, internal as we might say, to this interest in poetry. If you do not seek out such objects, then an interest in poetry is not displayed or manifested in your actions, and so it is not a genuine interest for you.

Our interests or interest is, then, to use a common philosophical distinction, both objective and subjective. It is objective because it results in the realization of dispositions or tendencies to act towards specific objects. However, it is also subjective because these objects would not be objects of interest if we were unmoved by them. Here, Dewey presents personhood and interest as coextensive. My personhood, or personal identity is continually being formed, created through activities I participate in and through the specific way in which I participate. Interest as referring to that specific form of engagement that is definitive of your personhood, in terms of your aims as a person. Dewey gives an example of the Doctor continuing to help the sick within the context of a plague, or pandemic. His life, who he is, is found in that work, and it is interest that explains his commitment in the face of danger. Having an interest then requires the relevant impulses and desires, as these are more fundamentally internalized within our habits as tendencies to respond to objects or sets of objects:

[ . . . ] when we say that a man is moved by kindness, or mercy, or cruelty, or malice. These things are not independent pow-

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this point see Levine, 2021, 140–2.

ers which stir to action. They are designations of the kind of active union or integration which exists between the self and a class of objects. It is the man himself in his very self which is malicious or kindly, and these adjectives signify that the self is so constituted as to act in certain ways towards certain objects.

LW 7, 291

Lastly, we can briefly see how this is further connected to the central ideas of growth and freedom. The view of self, briefly sketched above relies on the familiar difference between a higher and lower self. However, for Dewey this difference points to a self-satisfied self with its actions brought about by its existing habits, as contrasted with a self that is attempting to change, to grow. Moving from a fixed, unchanging self to a more dynamic self, is a growing, expansive, more liberated self, which is engaged with new demands and opportunities, thereby remaking the self. In order to further develop the capacity to enjoy and possibly create poetry, abilities that through a process of refinement becomes an interest, requires being open to new experiences, where this would include new relations with others, mentors, teachers, friends etc. To isolate oneself from such relations, is to limit this process of discovery, and to stunt one's growth. To form a varied, yet relatively cohesive self, requires that one enable one's interests, and the groups, relationships that encourage such interests to communicate as fully as possible.

The kind of self which is formed through action which is faithful to relations with others will be a fuller and broader self than one which is cultivated in isolation from or in opposition to the purposes and needs of others. In contrast, the kind of self which results from generous breadth of interest may be said alone to constitute a development and fulfillment of self, while the other way of life stunts and starves selfhood by cutting it off from the connections necessary to its growth.

LW 7, 302, quoted in Levine, 2021, 151

We can sum up this account of personhood, by noting that "the self is not something ready-made but something in continuous formation through choice of action", where our identity is forged through developing motives to act, which are definitive of self through the establishment of interest (1916, 336).

#### 4. Concluding Applications

Our key concern now focuses on the question of precisely how these features of Dewey's view help with the problems sketched above. Recall the central example: your new life as a teacher in a foreign country invites deep questions concerning your ability to achieve the needed balance between your loyalty to the familiar and the openness to diversity you now face. Let me begin with two preliminary points concerning Dewey's method. First, Dewey does not think that philosophy alone offers solutions to these problems, to the problems of daily living as we might say. The point is to provide resources for thinking through the problem for ourselves. In explaining his conception of philosophy, he tells us that: "Its value lies not in furnishing solutions (which can be achieved only in action) but in defining difficulties and suggesting methods for dealing with them" (1916, 313). Secondly, what I have said about how Dewey's view may help depends on a certain philosophical conviction presupposed by Dewey. The idea as I understand it goes something like this. If we can change the way we think about a specific problem or issue, change the way we conceive of it, then we will be in a position to better cope with this problem, perhaps even changing the conditions that generate the problem, thereby making positive changes. Philosophy provides no guarantees, but, the hope, or working faith, as he sometimes calls it, is in the power of positive change through reflection.

I suggest we read Dewey's view of the self as precisely an attempt to suggest methods for addressing the cosmopolitan challenges I sketched at the outset from this general philosophical perspective. By placing the attempt to arrive at a cosmopolitan identity within Dewey's framework of the self, we can provide a much needed sharper formulation of the basic problem. The issue now can be seen as one of determining our interest in the face of conflicts between locating ourselves within our newfound diversity, while remaining relevantly connected to the familiar and local. We saw that a cosmopolitan identity requires a balanced stance between our engagement with diversity and attachment to the familiar. This can now be seen as involving the cultivation of those interests required of the new self you are becoming as you deal with new experiences.

As we saw, the problem pushes us to confront both the new and the old, asking us to rethink our attitudes and interest towards them. In terms of addressing our problems with the familiar, where this may involve a partial rejection of our past cultural interests, we struggle from the loss

of the familiar cultural background needed for confronting our newfound diversity. In general, however, the solution to this issue is straightforward. In such cases, what we need is to establish new local, familiar interests, by exploiting our new contacts with diversity. In the process, we may be able to locate a new source, or reinterpretation of what is familiar to us from within the diversity we now experience.

This can be seen by adding some further details to the general examples already sketched above. By appealing to the Deweyan view of selfhood as a process, we can view the case of the teacher working in a new country, as involving a personal identity that is a work in progress being formed through conscious choice. Realizing this helps us to see that part of his or her ongoing education now includes dealing with new aims as a teacher. Imagine the situation being one of teaching philosophy in an international liberal arts setting. There may be a general question concerning whether one can do this in an educational setting that may not be historically open to the idea of liberal arts education as you understand it. In addition, when faced with this challenge, you may come to realize a conflict with the familiar, in this case, your prior experience as a teacher and philosopher, where this includes your own more local philosophical education. The new global setting you find yourself in, the international liberal arts program, highlights the one-sided nature of your own philosophical background and education. Furthermore, this one-sidedness has only become explicit within your new found context of diversity. By confronting the international diversity that is basic to your new educational setting, you begin to recognize how ill-suited your own personal, cultural and philosophical background is to that setting. Regaining a sense of balance is then to be sought through a renewed appreciation for one's interest in philosophy in terms of your familiar, local career. Being a student of philosophy and then teacher is a central element of this past familiar background, but retaining this element of your identity requires change, where this requires an expansion of what is understood as philosophy, or concerning what is taken as central to the study of philosophy. Such education now needs to be seen in more global terms, as a global approach to the study of philosophy or what is called global philosophy. In this case, a loyalty to the local and familiar has been transformed through a reflective openness to difference, the result being a new identity that is at once more cosmopolitan while maintaining a renewed loyalty to one's initial culture, philosophical background. Dewey's view of the self as a process, where growth is tied to interest, has played a key role in achieving this

cosmopolitan identity. Here philosophical reflection has been applied to a real, lived problem concerning one's identity under new global conditions. Philosophy conceived along the Deweyan pragmatist lines sketched here proves its worth, not, it should be noted, by solving this problem, but rather by providing reflective resources that aid us its reformulating in ways that enable improved judgment concerning how to live.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi for her comments and her work as co-editor of this volume. Special thanks to Henrik Rydenfelt for his help in preparing the volume for publication.