

Design and Making Things Better: Relating the Pragmatism of John Dewey and Richard McKeon in Design Inquiry

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- 1 Emmanuel Tseklevs, Rachel Cooper, and Jak Spencer, eds., *Design for Global Challenges and Goals* (London: Routledge, 2021); David B. Berman, *Do Good Design: How Designers Can Change the World* (San Francisco: Peachpit Press, 2008); Katie Puckett and William Gethering, *Design for Climate Change* (London: Routledge, 2019); Sofie Pelsmakers, Aidan Hoggard, Urszula Kozminska, and Elizabeth Donovan, *Designing for the Climate Emergency: A Guide for Architecture Students* (London: RIBA Publishing, 2022); Jeanne Liedtka, Awais Sheikh, Cynthia Gilmer, Marilyn Kupetz, and Lynette Wilcox, "The Use of Design Thinking in the US Federal government," *Public Performance and Management Review* 43, no. 1 (2020): 157–79.
- 2 Mike Monteiro, *Ruined by Design: How Designers Destroyed the World, and What We Can Do to Fix It* (San Francisco: Mule Design, 2019).
- 3 Anne-Marie Willis, "Ontological Designing," *Design Philosophy Papers* 4, no. 2 (2006): 69–92.
- 4 Tony Fry, *Becoming Human by Design* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 5 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 6 Fin Moorhouse, "Longtermism: An Introduction," *Effective Altruism*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.effectivealtruism.org/articles/longtermism> (accessed August 6, 2023).
- 7 William MacAskill, *What We Owe the Future* (London: Basic Books, 2022), 4.

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Design, it is regularly claimed, has the capacity to respond to the grand challenges of our age; whether that be the inequities of global poverty, the climate emergency, or the complexity of contemporary governance.¹ Although these claims are met with reasonable skepticism in some quarters, many continue to pitch agendas promoting the idea that design can progress meaningful change at scale.²

The positioning of such work remains broad. At one extreme, with the concept of ontological design, scholars argue that design transforms humanity as new products, services, and systems give rise to new realities and new ways of being.³ Some suggest we are afforded the opportunity to work to consciously frame an alternative, more sustainable course for our species and planetary life more generally.⁴ By way of contrast, through another proposal, referred to as "autonomous design," it has been suggested that design can enable indigenous communities to reclaim and reestablish their distinct cultural identities, apart from the global capitalist system.⁵

The challenge of navigating such possibilities is ultimately a matter of balancing present and future needs in the decision-making process. Do we work with the problems of the present or simply look ahead? Equally, there is the matter of whom to involve in the process. Do we turn to those who have the power to effect change now, or do we work to support those who are currently marginalized?

The temptation is to prioritize the future and rely on expert-led decision making. An example here is in the concept of "longtermism." Originating in the philosophical and philanthropic movement known as effective altruism,⁶ longtermism's key premise is that present-day humans have moral obligations toward future humans. As William MacAskill—one of the central figures puts it—"positively influencing the future is a key moral priority of our time."⁷ Not only that, it is claimed that we hold a moral obligation to avoid future existential threats, whether relating to artificial intelligence, nuclear war, or pandemics. The danger of such an

approach is that present-day problems are deprioritized at the expense of what might be. Moreover, what might be or what the future should look like is defined by the few and not deliberated by the many, thereby prompting the question of democratic legitimacy.

A different approach is to be found in social design. Emerging over the latter half of the twentieth century, this term has often been used to refer to those projects with an explicit aspiration to make a difference at the social level, often drawing in environmental and economic concerns.⁸ Here, the present, with its very real and immediate problems, is seen as a path to addressing the problems of the future, whether possible or definite. Although projects vary in focus, many center around designers working directly with broadly defined communities to effect both immediate and longer-term change. An example here would be the Nutrire Milano project, which sought to connect communities in Milan with their immediate agricultural hinterland through a series of markets and other services such as a farm box system.⁹ In such work, emphasis is generally placed on achieving positive outcomes that reconstitute how we come together as a society, maximizing the common good at the same time as mitigating potential negatives.¹⁰

Although such work shows promise, social design can be seen as ambiguous—its agenda is vast, and some have questioned the meaningfulness of the term itself.¹¹ Thomas Markussen notes that “social design has become a murky concept [that is] so multifaceted in theory and practice that it seems to deter anyone from trying to say exactly what social design is.”¹² Indeed, the breadth and variety of positions reflected in some recently edited collections make it difficult to see what unifying principle might bind the multitude of the alleged manifestations of social design.¹³ Notably, when seeking to frame a single social design identity, contributors have begun to embrace this apparent diversity. Nold and colleagues refer to the idea of a potluck—a meal where guests contribute individual dishes that together form an unplanned whole.¹⁴ Similarly, Kaszynska proposes that Wittgenstein’s “family resemblance” concept offers a way of seeing “common threads” connecting manifestations of social design at the same time as acknowledging project-based difference.¹⁵

In this article, we aim to position social design as a viable alternative to future-focused, expert-led positions such as longtermism by overcoming the questions of definition and principles and moving past the complications of disciplinary terminology. Instead, we explore the potential modeling of a form of social design inquiry directed toward shaping shared societal goals that work outward from the present toward the future. This amounts to a theoretical framing of the process, which again allows for project-based difference.

In scoping our model, we turn directly to philosophy, particularly the work of American classical pragmatist John Dewey

8 Francesco Zurlo and Cabirio Cautela, “Design Strategies in Different Narrative Frames,” *Design Issues* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 19–35.

9 Davide Fassi, Anna Meroni, and Giulia Simeone, “Design for Social Innovation as a Form of Design Activism: An Action Format,” paper presented at Social Frontiers: The Next Edge of Social Innovation Research Conference, Glasgow, November 14–15, 2013.

10 Ezio Manzini, *Design When Everyone Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

11 “Social design” has been used as an umbrella term to span such diverse names as William Morris, Walter Gropius, Buckminster Fuller, through Victor Papanek, to Richard Buchanan, John Thackara, Nigel Whiteley, Bruce Mau, and more recently, Victor Margolin, Enzo Manzini, and Alastair Fuad-Luke. For the vast agenda, see Iipo Koskinen and Gordon Hush, “Utopian, Molecular and Sociological Social Design,” *International Journal of Design* 10, no. 1 (2016): 65–71.

12 Thomas Markussen, “Disentangling ‘the Social’ in Social Design’s Engagement with the Public Realm,” *CoDesign* 13, no. 3 (2017): 161–62.

13 Elizabeth Resnick, ed., *The Social Design Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

14 Christian Nold, Patrycja Kaszynska, Jocelyn Bailey, and Lucy Kimbell, “Twelve Potluck Principles for Social Design,” *Discern: International Journal of Design for Social Change, Sustainable Innovation and Entrepreneurship* 3, no. 1 (2022): 36.

15 Patrycja Kaszynska, “The Genealogies of Social Design and Claims to the Common Good,” in *Design as Common Good/Framing Design through Pluralism and Social Values*, edited by Massimo Botta and Sabine Junginger (Zurich: Swiss Design Network, 2021), 298–309.

and his one-time student Richard McKeon, whom some also classify as a pragmatist.¹⁶ Regarding Dewey's work, attention will be directed to his special vision for social inquiry and its evaluative aspects, alongside his underexplored concept of meliorism, which refers to the commitment to making things better. We pick up on McKeon's distinct approach to communication and plurality, where he argues that the resolution of social problems requires the coming together of multiple perspectives in deliberation. The Dewey-McKeon coupling allows us to position social design inquiry as an approach to designing that aims to improve the conditions of all, but crucially without fixed goals or absolutist ethical grounds and without excluding voices based on ideological difference or disagreement.

Deweyan Social Inquiry and Meliorism

Dewey's philosophy is now a firmly established reference point in design literature. His work sits behind Schön's model of reflective practice, threads through human-computer interaction design approaches, and underpins participatory design's famous "publics" concept,¹⁷ Beyond these key examples, there is perhaps an even more impactful theory, one that design scholars have increasingly drawn from in recent years—the theory of inquiry.¹⁸

Most often, design scholars turn to what is referred to as the theory's pattern of inquiry, a generic overview of the steps involved in conducting an inquiry. Here, Dewey discusses the identification and definition of problems and solutions, as well as the process of iterative experimentation and reasoning that follows. Famously, inquiry is defined as the "controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one which is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole."¹⁹ This focus on problems, solutions, and iterative experimentation and transformation has allowed for straightforward alignments to be drawn with design where the pattern has come to offer a useful descriptive overview of what takes place in design inquiry.²⁰

Beyond the above pattern, Dewey's theory of inquiry addresses social inquiry in direct terms—a fact that is often overlooked by design scholars. Here, in distinguishing social inquiry, he foregrounds its inherent complexity. Operating in this space, inquirers must contend not only with the interactions between people but also their interactions with their physical environment and the things therein, that is, it is not only social but materially bound. Equally, transforming a problematic social situation into a "unified one," is said to be "much more difficult to accomplish" than transforming other problematic situations (e.g., in physical inquiry).²¹

The key lies in ensuring that these conditioning factors, unavoidably part of the methodology, do not determine the identifi-

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- 16 Peter Simonson, "Richard McKeon in the Pragmatist Tradition," in *Recovering Overlooked Pragmatists in Communication*, edited by Robert Danisch (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 23–51, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14343-5_2.
- 17 See Peter Wright and John McCarthy, "Experience-Centered Design: Designers, Users, and Communities in Dialogue," *Synthesis Lectures on Human-Centered Informatics* 3, no. 1 (2010): 1–123; Carl DiSalvo, "Design and the Construction of Publics," *Design Issues* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 48–63; Brian Dixon, Lynn Sayers McHattie, and Cara Broadley, "The Imagination and Public Participation: A Deweyan Perspective on the Potential of Design Innovation and Participatory Design in Policy-Making," *CoDesign* 18, no. 1 (2022): 151–63.
- 18 Brian S. Dixon, *Dewey and Design* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020).
- 19 John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 12, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1988), 108.
- 20 For an explicit mapping to codesign, see Marc Steen, "Co-Design as a Process of Joint Inquiry and Imagination," *Design Issues* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 16–28.
- 21 Dewey, *The Later Works, Volume 12*, 496.

cation of a social inquiry's problems (and from this its solutions). No more than in physical inquiry, a problem in social inquiry cannot be prescribed in advance. Otherwise, it becomes nothing more than "a truncated and distorted business of realizing objectives already settled upon."²² Rather, for social inquiry to function as inquiry, the problem must be identified gradually through careful analysis. Such analysis will allow for determining possible solutions or goals—what Dewey refers to as "ends-in-view"—as well as what the best means or method of attaining it might be. Here, we are effectively analyzing for the future of the present.

Crucially, just as with the identification problem, these means-ends visions for the future cannot be fixed. Indeed, Dewey strongly rejects the idea of fixed means-ends. Appropriately devised, means-ends can only ever be "hypothetical and directive," with ends-in-view functioning as guides to possible means and possible means acting as guides to what is attended to in inquiry and what is not. This is presented as an evaluative process based on practical judgment, that is, a form of judgment that relies on one's situational observations. For Dewey, if social inquiry is to be successful, such evaluative practical judgment must be threaded through the whole, with the ends-means structure constantly undergoing review.²³

This idea holds a wider register for Dewey. Strong evaluation, based on practical judgment, is the key to bettering. Discussing the developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dewey saw evaluative processes as the key driver of improvements in the context of, for example, car and radio manufacturing. In such cases, he argued, progress had been underpinned by a constant focus on securing robust means-ends alignment.²⁴ In the abstract, the process was seen as being framed as a longer-term evaluative working through of whether particular means had delivered the desired (desirable) ends-in-view or whether they had failed, with "discrepancies, which are experienced as frustrations and defeats [leading] to an inquiry to discover the causes of failure."²⁵ In other words, what didn't work should lead one to what does through further inquiry.

All of this is backed by a foundational commitment: that "better" is possible. Here we encounter "meliorism," a key Deweyan concept, which he introduces in the context of moral concerns. It is positioned in direct contrast to what are perceived as the equal dangers of blind optimism or passive pessimism, offering a third option, defined as "the belief that specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event can be bettered."²⁶ Although this may seem naive, Dewey is clear in acknowledging that positive outcomes do not come about without dedicated effort; we must act to see desirable change. Such action cannot be unthinking but must be guided by the form of inquiry outlined above. This allows us to approach problems with

22 Ibid., 490.

23 If the hypothetical end-in-view is found to be unattainable, that is, unlikely to deliver a positive solution, it can be dropped; if a particular means is found to be an ineffective approach to attaining of an otherwise attainable solution, it can be avoided or adjusted.

24 John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 13: 1938–1939* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1988), 210.

25 Ibid., 218.

26 John Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1899–1924, Volume 12: Reconstruction in Philosophy and Essays* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1988), 180–81.

a “reasonable hopefulness” that acknowledges rather than glosses over the difficulties in a situation.²⁷

Inquiry thus becomes a method for moving forward, toward what is right—or what appears to be the best option at any given time—way of acting in social contexts. How can what’s right be specified if the end-in-view cannot be defined independently of the ongoing means-ends adjustment through inquiry? How can we know that through the commitment to meliorism we actually make things better for all? Such questions ultimately relate to normative reasoning—how one determines whether a particular course of action should or should not be undertaken.

Social Inquiry: Where the Epistemic and the Ethical Meet

We have explored how Dewey understood social inquiry as a goal-oriented activity, one guided by ongoing means-ends adjustment based on a process of evaluative practical judgment. Here, knowing and acting are drawn together in the fullest possible terms; put simply, we know through action and act in knowing, on and on in cycles. This ultimately allows for a direct interweaving of the epistemic (i.e., relating to knowledge) and the ethical (i.e., relating to right or appropriate conduct). In this sense, we might suggest that the Deweyan social inquiry has a normative character. “Normative” is broadly understood as “the concept of what there is a reason to do, and the concept of what ought to be done.”²⁸ To say that an inquiry is normative is to say that it is underpinned by norms that can be discussed, defended, and criticized—in short, deliberated and reasoned about.

Such an interlinking of the epistemic and the ethical in the normative may seem puzzling to readers of Western philosophy who will be accustomed to a separation of facts and values, that is, the idea that scientific claims and ethical claims ought to be developed independently.²⁹ Dewey rejected this view. For him, ethics was a matter of imaginative experimentation, where the possible consequences of particular courses of action were to be envisioned and progressively tested as one advanced through an inquiry. The point was to arrive at the most desirable outcome, avoiding any negative consequences whether possible, and seeking to accentuate the positive at all times.

For Dewey, this basic movement was to thread through all inquiry, especially social inquiry. The transformation of the indeterminate situation was not just a matter of arriving at an outcome, knowing something, but of arriving at a better situation, too. Evaluative practical judgment, if sensitive and attentive to the situation, would direct one toward desirable outcomes and, equally, at the end of the process, allow one to claim that “better” has been achieved. Crucially, Dewey rejected the notions of abstract knowledge and scientific verifiability in the context of inquiry. Instead, he preferred the concept of “warranted assertability,”

27 Ibid.

28 Michael J. Zimmerman, “Value and Normativity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Value Theory*, edited by Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 13.

29 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015); Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

whereby the conclusions of a given inquiry were to be judged on the extent to which they could be evidenced and defended and enable further inquiry. Here, “experience, reason, [and] argument” all come together.³⁰ If our actions and reasoning are defensible, if they can withstand the challenges of other reasons and other arguments, then we are right so far as it goes, right for now.

It is important to note that inquiry, whether social or otherwise, is a social activity. It is not conducted by isolated individuals operating independently of one another but by members of wider communities, civic or academic.³¹ Indeed, as Dewey stressed, evaluative practical judgment and asserting claims must be understood as deliberative processes and collective activities. Here, deliberation is not seen as a matter of simply reaching an agreement but, as a question of “*how* conflicting claims are to be settled in the interest of *all* . . . to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately.”³²

Social inquiry, then, is social exactly in the sense that it proceeds as a way of relating to others and their needs—not just in one’s immediate environment but as widely and broadly as possible—again in the words of Dewey, 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.”³³ In following this view, we can say that ignoring the perspective of others carries the risk of acting unethically and is detrimental to solving social problems because it limits the breadth of insights available.

However, to access the perspective of others, we need to establish clear communication. This has never been simple and has become increasingly complicated in our ever more divided societies, where a plurality of diverging viewpoints compete for dominance. Here, we encounter the concept of “publics.”

Dewey’s Publics and Design Inquiry

Social pluralism has long been recognized as an important consideration in design. In approaching the subject, many reference Dewey’s famous concept of publics to contextualize how citizens can be seen to separate into distinct groups, which hold highly particular political positions. A public, Dewey proposed, is formed when individuals converge around one or another viewpoint relative to an emergent matter of concern; for example, in design terms, the lack of an effective public sewerage system.³⁴ The more channels of communication, the more potentially conflicting sources of information and consequently the more publics. This was already seen as a pressing challenge in the early twentieth century as the radio and cinema came to pervade everyday life, but with the

30 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Morality and Politics: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 52.

31 Putnam, *Reason*; Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism*.

32 John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 11: 1935–1937* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1988), 56.

33 John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 7: 1932, Ethics* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1988), 299.

34 *Ibid.*, 299; Tanja Rosenqvist, “Redirecting a Scattered Public toward Alternative Matters of Concern: Shifting Perceptions of Urban Wastewater Governance in Indonesia,” *Design Issues* 34, no. 4 (Autumn 2018): 51–65.

rise of digital technology generally and social media in particular, the challenge has become more pronounced.³⁵

Although Dewey did not offer an explicit solution to addressing the crisis of the many publics, he recommended that the form of inquiry outlined above act as a means of coordinating a broad-based response. Working with the public, researchers would undertake a grand program of problem solving—a social inquiry at scale—progressively attending to the issues at hand by developing and testing solutions.³⁶

As a field, design has broadly followed this strategy, with the publics concept now firmly established in areas such as participatory design, where it points to a special commitment to a particular form of civic engagement.³⁷ Alongside this, complementary positions have also emerged over the years, for example, agonistic and adversarial design, which focus on working through disagreement rather than striving for rational consensus.³⁸ These contributions all allow for and embrace pluralism in design inquiry. Through them, we have a range of perspectives on how communication should be understood and managed in plural contexts.

With a view to furthering the potential line of investigation in the field, we draw a connection that leads beyond the Deweyan position by turning to the work of the often-overlooked Richard McKeon, who offers a special position on managing social problems via a distinct understanding of communication.

Communication between Publics: McKeon on Social Problems

In design studies, McKeon is perhaps best known through the work of Richard Buchanan, who has explored the value of his approaches to rhetoric and “modes of thought” for the field.³⁹ Alongside McKeon, Buchanan has been a key advocate for Dewey, representing the latter’s historical contributions to design as well as drawing reference to various Deweyan theories in his own work.⁴⁰ Importantly, he notes a key distinction between Dewey and McKeon. For Buchanan, a line can be drawn in relation to communication: Dewey’s action-centered logic does not properly account for how language has the tendency to restrict ideas and become a “vehicle for ideology, fixing culture in a seemingly changeless order and structure of thought that blocks inquiry.”⁴¹ McKeon, on the other hand, is seen to sidestep this issue through a willingness to question meanings and, equally, how meanings can inform action;⁴² in other words, an inclination to productively work through issues of language, definition, and ultimately communication, to progress new understandings on which one might act.

We may note an important point concerning the crisis of the many publics—if the crisis is to be addressed, clear communication and inquiry must go hand in hand. From this perspective, inquiry becomes as much about the “what” of communication as it is about the identification and solving of particular situational problems as

35 James G. Webster and Thomas B. Ksiazek, “The Dynamics of Audience Fragmentation: Public Attention in an Age of Digital Media,” *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 1 (2012): 39–56.

36 For a contextualization of this in design terms, see Brian Dixon, “From Making Things Public to the Design of Creative Democracy: Dewey’s Democratic Vision and Participatory Design,” *CoDesign* 16, no. 2 (2020): 97–110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2018.1555260>.

37 See Christopher Le Dantec, *Designing Publics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

38 Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren, “Agonistic Participatory Design: Working with Marginalised Social Movements,” *CoDesign* 8, nos. 2–3 (2012): 127–44; Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

39 Richard Buchanan, “Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration in Design Practice,” *Design Issues* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 4–22; Richard Buchanan, “Systems Thinking and Design Thinking: The Search for Principles in the World We Are Making,” *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 5, no. 2 (2019): 85–104.

40 Richard Buchanan, “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking,” *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 5–21.

41 Richard Buchanan, “The Ecology of Culture,” in *Pluralism in Theory and Practice: Richard McKeon and American Philosophy*, edited by Eugene Garver and Richard Buchanan (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 155.

42 *Ibid.*, 156.

per Dewey's pattern. Indeed, this is McKeon's prescribed strategy. All problems, he believed, whether social or otherwise, were ultimately problems of communication.⁴³ Communication was about relationships—how people relate to not only each other but also to themselves and their circumstances, allowing for a mapping of ideals and future possibilities. In a plural society where there are potentially many competing publics, the interplay between these aspects—dimensions, as McKeon refers to them—determines the extent to which problems can be addressed. In other words, the more diverse the society, the greater the importance of peoples' relationships with others, themselves, and their circumstances.

In terms of addressing problems through communication, McKeon calls for the cultivation of a "deliberative rhetoric." Publics would exchange perspectives with other potentially opposing parties to persuade them of their position's value. As an initial focus, the scope of a problem would need to be defined; this requires that the situation, including its interests and dangers, be jointly explored and given form.⁴⁴ The aim is to get to a stage where differences of opinion can be stated, and agreements noted and used. In this, McKeon is clear that the process must not be narrowly prescribed. Neither the frame of the discussion (i.e., the how, what, when, and where of sharing) nor the process by which agreement is reached can predetermine what is accepted as truth. Furthermore, one group's perspective cannot be granted greater weight than that of another; all must be given an equal place. The overall point is to create a forum in which insights can emerge out of the opposition between perspectives.⁴⁵ For McKeon, unlike Dewey, before we act, we can interpret language and make sense of a situation through the medium of language.

For Buchanan, such a stance can be seen to relate to a general concern McKeon holds with how we bring things together conceptually, whether ideas or methods. At its best, inclusive deliberation could allow us to identify novel ways of organizing our situations and circumstances. This, in turn, may offer "unexpected insight into common problems and values."⁴⁶ Ultimately, the more perspectives, the stronger the insights to be gained.

For McKeon, the value of insight emerges by considering its potential consequences, but crucially, the form of the communication can influence this; in McKeon's words, how what is communicated "bears" on the problems at hand.⁴⁷ Like Dewey's ethical deliberation, the potential impact of action must always be imaginatively explored; it is rhetorically expressed and put into action through language. Agreement can allow for decision making and a progression of a response to problems. In a plural society of many publics, the challenge is to manage the relationship between these agreed-on values and how, next to this, people can continue to relate to themselves and their circumstances in particular ways, that is, balancing the ideals and possibilities they

43 Richard McKeon, "Communication, Truth and Society," in *Freedom and History and Other Essays: An Introduction to the thought of Richard McKeon*, edited by Zahava K. McKeon (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 94.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid, 97.

46 Buchanan, "The Ecology of Culture," 148.

47 McKeon, "Communication, Truth and Society," 101.

cherish alongside the agreements they hold. As long as there can be a relationship—a relationship of communication in difference and diversity—the crisis of the many publics can be addressed.

Design and Making Things Better: Social Inquiry and Communicative Plurality

On the face of it, it is simply not possible to make things better for all. There are too many constituent groups and too many opposing publics with divergent interests and agendas. The goals of some will inevitably have to override the goals of others. There can be no collective bettering if one group's needs are met and not those of another.

Turning to Dewey and McKeon offers a route by which this can be reimagined; specifically, we can model a form of design inquiry directed toward the shaping of shared societal goals. Dewey's special vision for social inquiry acts as a foundation. Problems are identified through a progressive exploration of ends and means. This exploration is guided by a constant evaluation, where practical judgment is used to test the extent to which our ends and means are appropriate. Both can change and should do so if needed. In this, the epistemic meets the ethical. The epistemic process through which we get to know specific situations is ultimately an ethical process, but one in which there are no absolutes. We can only envisage right or appropriate action through imagination and deliberation. Approached in this way, inquiry becomes a normative practice, that is, a tracing of what should happen.

We moved from Dewey to McKeon concerning the sharing of perspectives. Although it is clear that Dewey understood the potentially fractious nature of social inquiry by noting the crisis of the many publics, it is also apparent that his social inquiry does not fully attend to the potential dangers and pitfalls of communication, whether ideological or otherwise, and the use of language in action. McKeon, on the other hand, addresses this by offering a strategy by which many publics can work to untangle difference and disagreement through communication. As we have seen, this is based on insights emerging from an opposition. Where agreement can be reached, it will be gradual. Following Deweyan ethics, we are to test ideas by imagining their consequences. The value of insights will depend on the extent to which the relationship between groups can be balanced against the relationships to self and circumstances, ideals, and possibilities. In this way, plurality is maintained, but difference and disagreement are managed.

Ultimately, by bringing McKeon into dialogue with Dewey, we can envision an enriched social design inquiry, one that can attend to many publics, where means and ends, ends and means are collectively evaluated through practical judgment and the interpretative efforts of groups working with groups, publics with publics.

It is about embracing the gaps, knowing that in difference there is the potential for something unexpected to emerge. This must involve all as opposed to only some. Dewey's meliorism is given an implementable form.

Though our modeling is theoretical, it does suggest a framework by which a specifically social design inquiry can progress. We can imagine a Dewey-McKeon approach based on means-end evaluation and communication in plurality. Means and ends and imaginative and deliberative ethics are all bound up in process of sharing between many potentially opposing publics. Following such a course, the questions identified at the beginning of this article in relation to managing practical problems—how we balance the present and future and whether we are drawn in with the power to affect change or those who are marginalized—fall away. By ensuring that our goals are not fixed, that our ethics is not absolute, and that difference and disagreement are embraced, we ultimately have a means of working through problems together. As such, we can make things better for all.