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## EXPANDING THE DEWEYAN SELF: REVISITING AN UNDEREXPLORED PAST TO INFORM FUTURE INQUIRY

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The concept of self is a core concern within philosophy of education. That is, how do we understand the self that we are educating? Indeed, this is a perennial concern, as “any theory of education today that seeks to persuade teachers and public alike should be grounded in a healthy, substantial, well articulated conception of the human.”<sup>1</sup> As such, the concept of selfhood is as important today as it ever was. And while I believe Charles Taylor stands out the most in leading the contemporary discussion of selfhood,<sup>2</sup> I urge that we also consider John Dewey’s philosophy in this regard, as his philosophy has a great deal to offer the way we conceptualize the human self. Accordingly, I will consider the Deweyan conception of self in this essay. I begin my inquiry by looking back on underexplored research in the field and ultimately offer suggestions for future inquiry based on insights from self psychology.

Although I believe the concept of self has been an underexplored area within Deweyan scholarship, it has not been completely neglected. Indeed, recent analyses by Terri Wilson and Matthew Ryg, Thomas S. Popkewitz, and Jim Garrison take up various aspects of the concept of self within a Deweyan framework.<sup>3</sup> Wilson and Ryg address the notion of autonomy, a theme that is closely related to selfhood, in a recent paper that informs contemporary debates pertaining to school choice from a Deweyan perspective. In addition, Popkewitz considers the notion of a “*modern self* embodied in Dewey’s pragmatism,” emphasizing that such a concept “presupposes radical political theses about the individual as a purposeful agent of change in a world filled with contingency.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, Jim Garrison’s analysis in *Dewey and Eros* speaks eloquently to the possibilities of self-realization and growth through interpersonal relationships. Moreover, his book devotes considerable attention to unraveling the ways complexly organized interactions take shape in the

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<sup>1</sup> Leroy F. Trounser, “John Dewey and the Existential Phenomenologist,” in *Existentialism and Phenomenology in Education: Collected Essays*, ed. David E. Denton (New York: Teachers College Press, 1974), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Terri Wilson and Andrew Ryg, “Non-Ideal Autonomy: Dewey and Reframing Educational Authority,” in *Philosophy of Education 2014*, ed. Michelle Moses (forthcoming); Thomas S. Popkewitz, *Inventing the Modern Self and John Dewey: Modernities and the Traveling of Pragmatism* (New York: Macmillan, 2005); Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Popkewitz, *Inventing the Modern Self*, 4.

realization of self through transaction with the environment around us. Among this recent research, Garrison's project comes the closest to my own, as I am interested how the self develops and grows in transaction with the environment. But there is an important aspect of the relation between the realm of the individual and the realm of the social that does not come out clearly enough in this recent literature. The need for clarifying the way these realms interrelate becomes evident through revisiting earlier scholarship pertaining to Dewey's conception of self.

Beyond these recent examples, scholars have been considering Dewey's conception of self for quite some time now. In 1974, Leroy F. Troutner established a history of controversy surrounding Dewey's conception of self that dated as far back as 1932 when H. H. Horne concluded, "Dr. Dewey's view is depersonalizing; it denies the private personal self."<sup>5</sup> A contrasting position was taking up in 1962 when Robert J. Roth stressed the primary importance for Dewey in "work[ing] out the conditions for the development of human individuality."<sup>6</sup> In laying out this controversy, Troutner cited six references, making it clear that this is indeed an area in which Dewey left us with an open question. One of these citations in particular caught my attention because its misreading of Dewey's account of the interrelations between the individual and social aspects of self draws out the need for clarification on this matter.

As such, in this essay I will take up a particular critique of Dewey's philosophy posed by Norman Roseman in a 1963 *Educational Theory* article.<sup>7</sup> In doing so my aim is twofold: first, to clarify an important way in which individual and social aspects interrelate in Dewey's account of impulse, as I believe this is the crux of my dispute with Roseman; second, to consider how Roseman's reading, although flawed, productively informs further considerations of a Deweyan conception of self. Although his analysis ultimately fails because it rests on a misunderstanding of the role of impulse, the broader issue concerning the relation of the individual and the social that Roseman is speaking to merits further consideration. Roseman's forgotten critique is important today because it points to the need for recognizing self-experience as individual and idiosyncratic. So, while Dewey maintains that the self is inherently social, at the same time his account could do more to emphasize that our unique histories coalesce into a continuity of self-experience, accounting for the stable structures of the *individual* self.

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<sup>5</sup> H. H. Horne, *The Democratic Philosophy of Education: Companion to Dewey's Democracy and Education, Exposition and Comment* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 421, quoted in Troutner, "John Dewey," 14. Notably, this position appeared prior to Dewey's *Art as Experience* that was published in 1934.

<sup>6</sup> Robert J. Roth, *John Dewey and Self-Realization* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Roseman, "Self-Realization and the Experimentalist Theory of Education," *Educational Theory* 13, no. 1 (1963): 29-38.

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ROSEMAN'S 1963 *EDUCATIONAL THEORY* ARTICLE

Norman Roseman is a philosopher of education who I suspect has been almost completely forgotten within the field. However, his 1963 article caught my attention fifty years later because its compelling critique of Dewey's theory left me bewildered and stunned when I first encountered it. In short, Roseman contends that a Deweyan self is subsumed by the larger society and that if this is the case, educating for self-development and growth is called into question. Thus, concluding that there is no room for self-realization within a Deweyan framework, Roseman's account undermines the core of my interest in Dewey's philosophy. What was so shocking to me was that I could not easily pinpoint exactly where my reading of Dewey differed from that of Roseman. Indeed, the picture Roseman paints of Dewey's philosophy is so perilously close to my own reading of Dewey that it broaches the almost clichéd question among philosophers of education: "Whose Dewey are you talking about?" In this instance, Roseman is talking about a Dewey who is ultimately unable to reconcile the individual and society. And while I maintain that this version of Dewey rests upon a misreading of Dewey's philosophy, it nevertheless exposes vulnerability within Dewey's account pertaining to the stable aspects of the individual self that I believe is worthy of further attention.

Roseman's analysis begins by juxtaposing quotations from *School and Society* and *Democracy and Education*—the former describing an individual self struggling to manifest external, social realization through play and the later maintaining that there is no separate self outside the social milieu. Through this juxtaposition, Roseman alerts us to a tension between "two strands of Dewey's thought which he attempted to reconcile in his educational theory, namely, the categories of the individual and the social."<sup>8</sup> Thus, Roseman invites us to consider Dewey's philosophy and in particular his treatment of self-realization in order to weigh the merits of self-realization as a valid pedagogic category. Roseman identifies what he considers to be "the paradox of experimentalist theory," which he sees as arising "out of one basic uncertainty in its theory—whether human action is to be considered an expression of previous human behavior or as a manifestation of human nature." He adds, "To the extent that human action is seen as arising out of behavior, the category of the social becomes the explicandum. When human action claims a natural referent, the category of the individual dominates."<sup>9</sup>

I believe the tension between the individual and the social that Roseman alerts us to is indicative of a common move within Dewey's philosophy—i.e., to present two seemingly opposed notions only to show how these apparent opposites are not only related but also dependent upon one another. However, in this case Roseman ultimately concluded that Dewey was

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

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unsuccessful in reconciling the individual and the social, a surprising conclusion, which warrants an examination of the merits of his claim.

Roseman initially approaches the issue from a broad perspective, summarizing Dewey's "complete act of thought" and drawing out his emphasis on experience, which for Dewey "can stand on its own feet, requiring no further appeal beyond more experience."<sup>10</sup> Roseman praises the "undeniable grandeur in such a conception," as we are "freed from seeking an identity between the idea and the real, [because] knowing becomes knowing things in their uses."<sup>11</sup> Honing in on the issue at hand, Roseman draws on an important quotation in which Dewey offers, "Personality, selfhood, subjectivity are eventual functions that emerge with complexly organized interactions, organic and social."<sup>12</sup> Commencing from this point within his analysis, however, I believe that Roseman's reading of Dewey subtly shifts the focus of the complete situation of organism and environment more heavily to the significance of the social environment, relegating the biological aspects of our constitution to a position so subordinate as to be inconsequential. Hence, as we will see Roseman maintains, "human nature itself is *nothing more* than plastic organic activity to be shaped by the social medium."<sup>13</sup>

The heart of my dispute with Roseman's reading of Dewey resides in his understanding (or misunderstanding) of impulse within Dewey's philosophy. However, since Roseman does not present his discussion of impulse until much later within his argument, the picture he presents of Dewey's philosophy becomes oblique. As such, Roseman describes Dewey's account of the human self from a vantage point that I found to be ostensibly close to my own reading of Dewey; however, upon closer examination I determined that Roseman's reading was in need of correction. For example, Roseman maintains, "The acquisition of mind, or what amounts to the functional self, must be seen purely in terms of behavior that involves 'prior groupings,' that is, organized ways and habits of the social groupings into which the human being is born."<sup>14</sup> While I believe this might sound like a reasonable rendering of Dewey's account, I find it rests on a thin understanding of mind and all that underlies human behavior. And based on this limited understanding, Roseman infers, "This concept of mind obviates the need for a unifying self because the unity of the self is simply an identity of the individual and his actions."<sup>15</sup> In this, the self is no more and no less than what we find in the expressions of prior groupings that are demonstrated behaviorally within a moment.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1958), 208.

<sup>13</sup> Roseman, "Self-Realization," 32 (my emphasis).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 32.

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I believe Dewey affords a much richer account than the one presented by Roseman in these statements. In particular, I do not believe Roseman is fully accounting for the roles of habit and impulse within human conduct and that this leads to an overall reading of Dewey's philosophy that is untenable. As such, Roseman's account provides an opportunity to closely examine habit and impulse within Dewey's philosophy and to gain greater precision in understanding how impulse functions in conjunction with habit. Beyond simply sorting out my dispute with Roseman, I believe this examination offers an important contribution that fills gaps in the literature cited above concerning a Deweyan conception of self.

#### THE CRUX OF THE DISPUTE

In a bold statement, Roseman put forth an interpretation of Dewey that has given me a great deal to reflect upon: "Habit functions as the unit of coherent behavior, in place of a unifying self."<sup>16</sup> After a great deal of pause, I think there is something about this statement that essentially rings true. But this is not to say that Roseman substantiates this claim with a full rendering of what Dewey affords the notion of habit. Despite the fact that Roseman includes a footnote indicating the very same page from *Human Nature and Conduct* that I would first direct him in reconciling this concern, I do not believe he is fully accounting for habit's projective, dynamic quality, "which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, habit is not simply a matter of mimicking prior behavior, but is rather the organization and reorganization of means through a coordinated effort that has both biological and social components. Put simply, I think Roseman missed these crucial aspects of Dewey's theory of habit and consequentially Roseman did not appreciate the full import of this robust Deweyan notion.

This leads to the crux of my dispute with Roseman's account, namely, his understanding of the role of impulse within human conduct. According to Roseman's reading of Dewey, "impulses become proponent in conduct when habitual activity is inadequate to channelize them. They are internal stimuli but function only as 'blind, physical discharges.' As such, they play a *secondary role* in conduct."<sup>18</sup> Roseman understands impulse to play a secondary role in human conduct through his reading of Dewey's contention that "the *meaning* of native activities is not native; it is acquired. It depends upon interaction with a matured social medium."<sup>19</sup> However, Roseman does not seem to recognize that even though the meaning of activities are determined by the social medium, this in no way betrays that the initial impulse is native and resides solely within

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>17</sup> Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 33 (my emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 90.

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the individual. According to Dewey's view, babies "owe to adults the opportunity to express their native activities in ways which have meaning."<sup>20</sup> Hence, meaning is created with meeting of impulse and the social medium—even though the social medium does determine the precise meaning of the impulse, there would be no meaning at all were it not for an individual's impulse in the first place.

Thus, I maintain that just the opposite is true—impulse is primary. Indeed, impulse is a release of energy that arises when established habits are not in tune with present circumstances. Impulse is chaotic, tumultuous, and "of itself [does not] engage in reflection or contemplation. It just lets go."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, despite its turbulent and muddled nature it is vital that we cultivate impulse, as it plays a critical role in a growing life. Dewey asserts, "More 'passions,' not fewer,"<sup>22</sup> as "the man who would intelligently cultivate intelligence will widen, not narrow, his life of strong impulses while aiming at their happy coincidence in operation."<sup>23</sup> What Roseman does not appreciate is that impulse is vital and primary even though it is not nearly sufficient. Roseman picks up on Dewey's contention that "impulse does not know what it is after; it cannot give orders, not even if it wants to. It rushes blindly into any opening it chances to find. Anything that expends it, satisfies it. One outlet is like another to it. It is indiscriminate."<sup>24</sup> However, Roseman does not recognize the way in which impulse and thought subsequently work together.

Impulse is needed to arouse thought, incite reflection and enliven belief. But only thought notes obstructions, invents tools, conceives aims, directs technique, and thus converts impulse into an art which lives in objects. *Thought is born as the twin of impulse in every moment of impeded habit.*<sup>25</sup>

By not recognizing the *primary* role of impulse within human conduct and its intimate and vital connection to thought, Roseman reads Dewey's account to be logically inconsistent. We can see this misunderstanding reflected in the following example through which Roseman attempts to draw out what he sees as a conflict within Dewey's account.

In the context of experimentalism, self-realization *can* be seen as the integration of the self through social activity. Dewey uses the term "cooperative individualities" to characterize the inter-individual aspect of social purpose. But when he writes that "impulsive action becomes an adventure

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 254–5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 170–171 (my emphasis).

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in discovery of a self which is possible but as yet unrealized, an experiment in creating a self which shall be more inclusive than the one which exists” we are thrown back upon the individual as the *source* of its self-realizing activity.<sup>26</sup>

Roseman understands this to be inconsistent because he does not appreciate that it is the individual’s impulse that initiates self-realizing activity. Thus, impulse forms the linchpin for a viable conception of self-realization in Dewey’s account, as impulse occurs prior to social expression. This is not a logical inconsistency. There is no paradox. Self-realization occurs within the meaningful moments that impulse meets the social medium in a way that renders the initial impulse emanating from the individual coherent. As such, there is no tension between the individual and the social. Indeed, they are not only related, but depend upon one another.

This misunderstanding of impulse obscures Roseman’s reading of mind, which for Roseman “amounts to the functional self.” Based on this reading, Roseman contends that we can only talk about human behavior and not human nature:

Since the self is virtually a social construction, one must speak of human behavior rather than of human nature. That is, human personality being a social product, human nature itself is *nothing more* than plastic organic activity to be shaped by the social medium.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, what Roseman sees as “nothing more” than organic plasticity is precisely our biologically rooted capacity to respond and adapt to our environment according to our nature. Thus, in turning Dewey’s account against itself, Roseman creates a paradox between viewing human behavior or human nature that exists only within his misreading of Dewey.

Hence, what Dewey sees as an art of transforming impulse into lived objects, Roseman sees as a superficial, momentary doing that is essentially an empty act of mimicking the behavior laid down by those before us. This reading of Dewey denies the rich integration between impulse and thought that lies at the heart of self-realization for Dewey and focuses solely on behavioral outputs without recognizing the richness Dewey afforded the processes that underlie behavior. Although Dewey does maintain that our behavioral outputs do involve “prior groupings” picked up from our cultural surroundings, what Roseman does not recognize is that this in no way betrays the considerable act of integration and transformation emanating from an individual’s creative power of mind that is so integral to the behavioral outputs Roseman spotlights.

Roseman’s ultimate blow to experimentalist theory comes out in the following quotation:

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<sup>26</sup> Roseman, “Self-Realization,” 36.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

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Some room must be made for unique creative activity as it emanates from the self-realizing person. There is no question that the specific character of individual potentialities is determined in large part by the nature of the cultural milieu. But the  *motive*  of human activity has its source in the self-realizing tendency of human nature. To make motive purely social is to deny the reality of tendency. The child's self-activity . . . becomes harnessed to a group purpose which obscures the unique creative function of self. The experimentalist wishes to preserve creative activity for social purpose . . . but he contends at the same time that creative activity is of the  *nature*  of social purpose, an instrument of action whose ends are social, not individual. If this is so, then there is no place for self-realization even on experimentalist terms.<sup>28</sup>

This critique rests on a lack of recognition of the integral way impulse and mind work together to transform native impulse to a social end, providing a concrete, social manifestation of our nature. Therefore, Roseman is simply mistaken in asserting that Dewey “make[s] motive purely social.” The motive of human activity initiates with individual impulse and gains meaning through the meeting of the social medium. Indeed, harnessing a child's self-activity to a group purpose does not obscure the unique creative function of self, but rather provides the individual self an opportunity for concrete realization through transforming an individual's raw impulse toward a meaningful social end.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE INQUIRY

Even though I do not accept Roseman's ultimate critique of experimentalist theory, his analysis highlights a weakness within Dewey's account of self that I believe merits further consideration. I find that Roseman raises an important a point with the following quotation regarding the need to account for stable aspects of self.

The question as to the validity of the concept of self-realization in experimentalist theory, which must ultimately be answered by the experimentalist in terms of stable personality structure, cannot be so answered because it has no personal referent, no self that is intrinsic to its own nature, and no end that is not a function of the confronting situation.<sup>29</sup>

While I do not think Roseman and I would agree on the mode of personal referent that would satisfy this lack within Dewey's account of self, I agree that

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 35.

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there is a lack and that it is important for a Deweyan conception of self to account for the stable aspects of self that provide the experience of personal referent. I believe that Dewey's conception of habit goes a long way toward accounting for this stable aspect, however I think that Dewey's account of habit could benefit from further elaboration in this direction.

To show what I mean, I turn to Dewey's later works in which he offered a concise and straightforward rendering of his conception of the process through which self is discovered. Thus, in *Art as Experience* Dewey put forth:

Individuality itself is originally a potentiality and is realized only in interaction with surrounding conditions. In this process of intercourse, native capacities, which contain an element of uniqueness, are transformed and become a self. Moreover, through resistances encountered, the nature of the self is discovered.<sup>30</sup>

While I agree that this does describe the process through which the self is discovered when all goes well, this is not to say that the meeting of unique native capacities and environing conditions necessarily coalesce into a stable structure or that all environments are equally supportive of this process. Hence, while I essentially agree with this account, I believe much more detail is needed in order for Dewey's conception of self to uphold and to address all that would be necessary for articulating a full theory of self.

To this end, I propose that self psychology, a branch of contemporary psychoanalytic theory founded by Heinz Kohut, offers promise in providing such detail. Similar to that of Dewey, this perspective is rooted in the interaction between native capacities and the social milieu, however it hones in on the types of interactions that are necessary for evoking and maintaining the self, such that a stable and coherent continuity of experience endures.

The most fundamental finding of self psychology is that the emergence of the self requires more than the inborn tendency to organize experience. Also required are the presence of others . . . who provide certain types of experiences that will *evoke* the emergence and maintenance of the self.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, all the while upholding the Deweyan conception that we only become a self through interaction with others, this perspective affords much greater detail as to how this process unfolds.

For example, one key idea that self psychology proposes that might address the lack in Dewey's account pertaining to the stable structures of self, is that a certain threshold of supportive experience must be met in early life in

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<sup>30</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Perigee, 2005), 293.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst S. Wolf, *Treating the Self: Elements of Clinical Self Psychology* (New York: Guilford, 1988), 11.

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order for a cohesive self to emerge. Perhaps we could envision this emergence as a fundamental kind of habit that forms the necessary background from which to make sense of future interactions—a sort of original habit that once established provides the basis for the continual remaking of the self throughout life in conjunction with the environment. To offer a clearer picture of how this might work, I turn to Kohut’s notion of the virtual self.

Kohut maintains that in the beginning of life a baby’s very self exists more in the minds of its caregivers than within the baby. Kohut points out that we automatically bestow a version of selfhood upon infants through interpretations of their reflexive movements and reactions—and it is important that we do so. We say things like: “He wants the stuffed bear” or “She likes you” well before research tells us that babies are developmentally ready to enact such independent initiative.<sup>32</sup> Such phenomena are indicative of what Kohut refers to as the virtual self, the image of an infant’s self that resides in the minds of caregivers and “thus determines how the parents address the neonates as yet unformed self potentials.”<sup>33</sup> This virtual self is a complete psychological being if seen within the entire infant-caregiver milieu, although there is no doubt at this point in development that in actuality the baby’s self exists almost completely in the mind of the beholder.

According to this view, it is the virtual self that spawns the more cohesive and stable unit that Kohut refers to as the nuclear self. This process has no clear beginning or end, “never a moment of ‘real’ self defined in its essence as differentiated from others.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Kohut puts forth that the baby takes in the selfhood afforded her by the environment and after a certain threshold of experience is met, her own self emerges. This nuclear self “is the basis for our sense of being an independent center of initiative and perception, integrated with our most central ambitions and ideals and in space and a continuum in time.”<sup>35</sup> Kohut proposes that the nuclear self is formed through interaction with biological endowment and the social milieu and coalesces in the formation of a self that experiences continuity and coherence throughout life. This is just one example of how self psychology might fill out Dewey’s account of self, rendering it less vulnerable to misunderstanding. Thus, I propose that self psychology might fruitfully extend Dewey’s conception of

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<sup>32</sup> Research on very young infants makes this point quite clear. For example, “During the first month of life most of a baby’s behavior is reflexive, meaning that his/her reactions are automatic. Later, as the nervous system develops, a baby will put more thought into his actions.” David Perlstein, “Infant Milestones,” eMedicine Health, [http://www.emedicinehealth.com/infant\\_milestones/page2\\_em.htm](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/infant_milestones/page2_em.htm).

<sup>33</sup> Wolf, *Treating the Self*, 182.

<sup>34</sup> Charles B. Strozier, *Heinz Kohut: The Making of a Psychoanalyst* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 287.

<sup>35</sup> Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (Madison, WI: International Universities Press, 1977), 177.

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self in order to address the stable aspects of self that endure in a continuum of experience while continually evolving in the meeting of new environments.

If education unfolds in the transaction between the self and enviroing conditions, I maintain that we should be intentional about the way we construct enviroing conditions in schools and beyond such that they are likely to be supportive of a self that can flourish through resistances encountered. In this, the need for the field of education to effectively theorize the self and the way the self grows through transaction with the environment comes to the fore. This discussion contributes to this important philosophical project in two ways: first, by clarifying the role of impulse within Dewey's philosophy; second, by pointing beyond Dewey's philosophy itself to contemporary theoretical frameworks that stand to productively extend the Deweyan self. As such, Roseman's forgotten critique—despite its flaws—helps us to more fully theorize the Deweyan self by pointing to the need for a richer account of the stable aspects of the individual self. Moreover, I propose that self psychology stands to productively fill out this aspect of the Deweyan self.

In the quest to understand the self that we seek to educate, I urge that we keep Dewey's contribution in mind while also considering the potential benefits that might be afforded through the addition of contemporary theories such as self psychology. In doing so, we can bring new ways of thinking to perennial questions in philosophy of education.

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