Guidebook for Jhe Original Position

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INTRODUCTION

The Original Position, the final volume in the Dreamcatcher Trilogy, traces the philosophical background of someone who is generally considered the greatest American philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century. This philosopher is someone whose unique insight has profoundly shaped American values—and who therefore has impacted the world.

It is impossible to reveal the identity of this philosopher at the outset of this guidebook without spoiling the accompanying novel, since it is an adventure in which a set of fictional characters set out to find the philosopher. Rest assured, however, that the adventure illustrates all of the major influences contributing to this philosopher's extraordinary achievement.

While the novel can be enjoyed and learned from on its own, this guidebook presents selections from primary sources by authors who were profoundly influential to our mystery philosopher's philosophy. The guidebook contains eight chapters, each focused on two to five successive chapters of the novel. Each guidebook chapter has three components:

- 1. A summary of the plot developments for those two to five chapters of the novel
- 2. A primary reading relevant to the storyline
- 3. Discussion questions concerning both the reading and the novel

These components will provide a rich backdrop for thinking about the deeper dimensions of the story as it unfolds.

Enjoy getting to know this singular individual, whose philosophy continues to inform the hard work that educated people around the world are undertaking to secure peace and justice.

A Note about the Readings: The readings in this book are the authors' original words. Some of them are challenging to read. Students may need to read passages more than once to understand the points that these writers are making. Readings that are too challenging can be skipped; however, the discussion questions at the end of each chapter will allow even students who do not read the selection to engage in thoughtful debates, prompting them to think about points that they may not otherwise have considered. Note, too, that approximately half of the questions concern the events in the novel. As such, even students who do not complete the guidebook reading or do not fully understand the guidebook reading can still take an active part in the discussions.

I. THE ORIGINAL POSITION CHAPTERS 1-4

Plot Summary

Gloria Geller is a twenty-one-year-old girl living in Princeton, New Jersey. Her father, who is chair of the philosophy department at Princeton University, asks her to attend the ninetieth birthday party of the famous American philosopher John Dewey. At the party, Dewey announces that he wishes to give a valuable dreamcatcher to the next greatest American philosopher, but he needs help from members of the Princeton Philosophy Department to determine who that should be. Gloria's brother Stanley had a plan for selecting someone, but he passed that responsibility on to a committee when he decided to leave early for a year of study in China. The committee is stymied when Dewey and his assistant Miriam announce that the dreamcatcher is missing. They believe that it was sent to Stanley to prevent the Columbia University provost's office from taking it.

JOHN DEWEY

John Dewey (1859-1952) was the greatest American philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century. He applied the abstract pragmatist principles of his forerunners William James and Charles Saunders Peirce to the concrete problem of how to strengthen the fragile democracy of our country.

Dewey's genius was to realize that political solutions are superficial band-aids on a deeper problem, namely education. Democracy is built upon an educated public. We must therefore turn our urgent attention to the quality of our public schools.



No philosopher before Dewey had had the courage to investigate so thoroughly the "unmanly" topic of how children actually learn. Through empirical observation, Dewey determined that children learn through meaningful experiences. He transformed the American education system by explaining how to create such experiences in the classroom. Anyone educated through such progressive methods as planting a garden or baking cookies has Dewey to thank.

Dewey's focus on real-life issues increasingly led him to disdain purely abstract academic philosophy, which was popular at all of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in

his day. In the selection that follows, he maintains that true lovers of wisdom like Socrates are needed to lend moral perspective to science.

"PHILOSOPHY'S FUTURE IN OUR SCIENTIFIC AGE," 1949

The bearing upon philosophy and its future of what has been said is not difficult to perceive. A hiatus exists within scientific inquiry, and it is intimately connected with our present disturbed and unsettled state. It is for the philosophers today to encourage and further methods of inquiry into human and moral subjects similar to those their predecessors in their day encouraged and furthered in the physical and physiological sciences: in short, to bring into existence a kind of knowledge which, by being thoroughly humane, is entitled to the name *moral*. Its absence seems to explain the prevailing worldwide state of uncertainty, suspense, discontent, and strife. It would also seem to indicate with startling clearness that the one thing of prime importance today is development of methods of scientific inquiry to supply us with the humane or moral knowledge now conspicuously lacking. The work needs to be done. It is not of urgent importance that it be done by philosophers, or by any other special group of intellectuals. It is, however, in harmony with the claim of philosophers to deal with what is comprehensive and fundamental that they take a hand, perhaps a leading one, in promoting *methods* that will result in the understanding that is now absent. This type of activity at least seems to be the only way to halt the decline of philosophy in influence and in public esteem and bring about something like restoration.

The problem is certainly not that of putting scientific inquiry under the control of some external institution, whether it be that of the Right or Left. The first step is to recognize that scientific inquiry is still so recent as to be immature and inchoate. It is to recognize that to arrest the development of scientific inquiry at the present stage is, in effect, to guarantee that insecurity, confusion, and strife will perpetuate themselves. What has been accomplished in the development of *methods* of inquiry in physiological and physical science now cries out for extension into humane and moral subjects.

Some twenty-five hundred years ago the forerunner and martyr of European philosophy declared that artisans had knowledge of the material processes and the ends of the activities they carried on. In consequence of this knowledge they were enabled to act intelligently within a very limited sphere. A shoemaker, for example, possessed the knowledge which enabled him to tell whether what was offered as a shoe was a real shoe or one only in appearance. He knew this because he knew the purpose for which shoes were made, and, in addition, knew the materials, the tools, and the processes by which leather or any other material could be made to serve the end in view. In short, in his one limited field he knew what was good and what was bad. The larger and more

comprehensive knowledge required by man for the conduct of his more important affairs was not provided by a limited type of knowledge. The existing knowledge served a man as a cobbler but not a man as a member of a community of free men.

Search for the kind of understanding that was lacking in Athens, Socrates termed philosophy, the love of wisdom. It was to be the Science of Sciences, because the knowledge sought for was so comprehensive that it would enable specialized and technical ways of knowing to be put to use in behalf of a common and shared good.

The similarity of our present situation to that in which Socrates propounded the need for philosophy as a search for a knowledge that was lacking should, it seems to me, be reasonably obvious. The difference between the situations in width and depth is great and obvious. The present world is rather a group of external associations than a community; nevertheless, it repeats on a vast scale the human conditions from which the Socrates of old derived his plea for a devoted search for a knowledge out of which would issue an art that would do for man as man what the lesser arts did for man in minor, because technical, ways. Those philosophers who are now subjected to criticism from their fellow-professionals on the ground that concern with the needs, troubles, and problems of man is not "philosophical," may, if they feel it necessary, draw support and courage from the fact that they are following, however imperfectly, in the path initiated by the man to whom is due the very term *philosophy*.

At all events, and in short, we are here presented with the conditions for finding an answer to the question, "Has philosophy a future?" We are supplied with the conditions, but not with the answer itself. The advance made by science in a comparatively short time is tremendous, but it is partial and out of balance. Its ambivalence with respect to good and evil, to construction and destruction, follows directly from its partial and one-sided estate. I have referred to the complaints now common which are made about the scantiness of our present knowledge about human beings and human affairs in comparison with what is known about distant galaxies of stars and about the equally remote constitution of atoms. What is held in view by the complainants is clear. But there is something in the use of the word "backwardness" that may account for the futility of these complaints. For they seem to suggest that all that is necessary is to subject the uses we make of the scientific knowledge now in our possession to control by the "moral" knowledge we already possess.

The assumption that this latter knowledge is adequate *now and here* to the present strains [that] man labors under is reflected in the appeal to "anchor science to morals"..... If our present store of moral knowledge does not enable us to foresee the consequences for good and evil that will issue from what, after all, is the most widely and deeply determining of all factors now operative

in human life, the anchorage it can provide for science (the very science, by the way, that accounts for the need of anchorage) seems to be a shoal of sifting sands.

For how can the best moral will in the world provide secure anchorage for its good intentions if those intentions can be put into effect only through the medium of conditions, means, and instrumentalities which *may*—and which, it is admitted, in many cases actually *do*—pervert them from constructive to destructive purposes?

The situation at the very least offers to those who profess love of wisdom a reminder that in matters technical, physical, and now physiological, knowledge gives guidance that can be depended upon in forming policies of action in limited areas. This reminder may well be forcible enough to remind them also that their predecessors did a definite, a needed work, positively—and negatively against entrenched institutional opposition—and that without this work physiological inquiry could not have been brought to its present prosperous technical estate.

If this reminder does not suggest that they, as *philosophers*, have a certain responsibility under the present conditions, it should at least notify them that scientific inquiry is still only partial, one-sided, immature in its development, and that a highly important work in science remains to be done.

In its detail, the work they must do will be harder and slower than that already done. But the obstacles to be met in *initiating* the task are not as entrenched as were those met and conquered by their predecessors. The obstacles now to be met are mainly sluggishness, inertia, discouragement, exhaustion: a statement that applies both without and within philosophy. For while the opposition from institutional sources is vigorous and, temporarily at least, aggressive, its efficacy is not intrinsic, but is derived rather from the absence of organized active opposition on the part of those who might be engaged in the endeavor to rectify the existing enormous imbalance between that understanding which gives direction in technical matters and that which is absent just where it is vitally needed.

It is barely conceivable that the existing store of knowledge will undergo throughout the whole world the fate of slavish subjection to external power that it is already undergoing in countries under Bolshevist control. It is not conceivable that the course of physical and physiological knowing will be turned backward in any other way than by some such institutional distortion. What is most to be feared is a continuation of the policy of indifference to the extension, to the development of *methods* of inquiry into human conditions—*methods* so basic that their results (and only these) merit the name *moral*. The fact that the professed and professional guardians of morals continue to assert the adequacy of moral standards and points of view that were framed in a society upon which competent understanding of the physical and physiological conditions of human life had not dawned, is one of the obstacles in the way of what needs to be done.

The force of a movement that in its own day and place had a claim to regard itself as "liberal" and as humanly progressive is also obstructive to what needs to be done. For it asserted that all that was necessary was to permit "Nature" to do its own beneficent work. It worked to get rid of some institutional customs and laws that had become humanly oppressive. But it was also a policy of systematic abnegation of the intelligence as a regulative factor in human affairs.

The obvious bad consequences of the policy of drift that ensued resulted in what the unthinking regard as revolutionary: a renewed strengthening of political power to offset the inhuman results of leaving to nature the work of man as man. For the one dependable factor in any policy is an intelligent grasp of the factors involved—an end not to be attained without systematic effort to complete the present one-sided, unbalanced state of "science."

 $From \ www.commentary.org/articles/john-dewey/the-study-of-man-philosophys-future-in-our-scientific-age/\#1.1$

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Dewey's primary concern in his essay "Philosophy's Future in Our Scientific Age" was bringing morality to science. To accomplish this, he wrote that philosophers need "to bring into existence a kind of knowledge which, by being thoroughly humane, is entitled to the name *moral.*" It is perhaps interesting to think about the concept of "moral knowledge," which seems to imply that there is a base of understanding, a fundamental set of facts, that pertains to morality. That, of course, is arguable because what constitutes moral thought or behavior is not universally agreed upon among the people of the world, or even among the people within a single community. We can discuss and teach scientifically proven knowledge—such as the fact that the atomic weight of oxygen is 15.879 units, or that animals use Earth's magnetic field for orientation, or that an individual blood cell takes about sixty seconds to make a complete circuit of the body-but how can we "bring into existence" moral knowledge as something to discuss and teach? My morals may be different than your morals. Who decides which ones are correct? And by extension, who decides which ones to apply to science? Dewey asserts that science is lacking morality, but he doesn't seem to consider the possibility that scientists may indeed be applying morality to their work—just not his morality. Consider: Is it moral to edit children's genomes to prevent genetic diseases? What about simply to enhance them physically? Is it moral to bring back an extinct species that died out millions of years ago? What about a species that went extinct only recently because of overhunting and human-caused habitat loss? Is it moral to colonize other planets, thus potentially disrupting and damaging their ecosystems? What if our own planet becomes uninhabitable? The point is that what's possible in science may be entirely moral to one person and utterly immoral to someone else. Who decides? Dewey bemoans the fact that "the professed and professional guardians of morals continue to assert the adequacy of moral standards and points of view that were framed in a society upon which competent understanding of the physical and physiological conditions of human life had not dawned...." In other words, the old morality didn't take into account new developments in science; it didn't address what hadn't yet been possible to achieve because, at the time, those possibilities had been unconceivable. In fact, none of the moral dilemmas posed in this very question were even possible to consider as viable options when he wrote this article, so in one respect, he is absolutely correct. But his statement holds with it the implication that morality is an ongoing conversation, and if that's true, then moral standards cannot now nor ever be set; they must be fluid. But is that not what they are now? When the first animal was cloned in 1996, the world engaged in a huge debate about the ethical implications of that act and whether or not it should be repeated. That debate only happened because of the question of the morality of cloning a living creature. Some people saw it as grossly immoral (playing God, if you will); others saw it as an incredible feat with enormous potential for good, including such benefits as enabling humans to mass produce organisms with desired qualities (already sheep have been engineered to produce human insulin). Since 1996, scientists around the world have cloned many different species of animals, so the moral debate on that topic seems to have been settled. However, no one has yet cloned a human, and the debate is ongoing as to whether or not anyone ever should. Who decided that cloning animals was acceptable? It would seem that society at large did. Who will decide whether or not we should clone humans? That question presumably has the same answer: we will. So is Dewey wrong that we need philosophers to set moral standards by way of bringing into existence "moral knowledge"? Haven't we as a collective group across the globe essentially done that, especially considering that the topics for debate are ever-arising? At some point scientists somewhere will clone a human, and the debate will rage over the ethics of that act, and the wider world will either allow it to happen again or will not. But that first instance may not be preventable, and for that reason, Dewey would likely argue that there is in fact a body of moral knowledge that ought to be applied to science. Is he right? Will science cross boundaries just to see if it can, thereby necessitating the application of morals at the outset? If so, how do we go about establishing what those are? Or is Dewey misjudging what is moral based on his personal definition of morality? Do we need others to tell us what's moral? Do we do a good enough job policing ourselves? Explain your answers.

2. Dewey's primary objection to science is that "The advance made by science in a comparatively short time is tremendous, but it is partial and out of balance. Its ambivalence with respect to good and evil, to construction and destruction, follows directly from its partial and one-sided estate." But is science really ambivalent? That would mean that it fluctuates back and forth between good and evil, but aren't those interpretations of scientific achievements—or rather, the application of scientific achievements—not science itself? We could say, for example, that the atomic bomb is a negative, evil, destructive scientific achievement, although it only truly

became that when it was actually used-which it was on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, four years before Dewey wrote his article. Is it true, then, that science in that instance was evil, a force for destruction? That would mean, conversely, that science can be good. The year 1945 also saw the development of the first flu vaccine, which saves millions of lives every year. That development and many more, including electronic computers, radar navigation, anti-aircraft weapons, microwaves, mass-produced penicillin, blood plasma transfusions, and even aerosol spray cans, all came about because of technological (i.e., scientific) advances driven by the need to innovate in order to win World War II. Was science good or evil in their development? Was it neither? Was it both? Perhaps the real questions are, first, whether or not science even has the capacity to be good or evil, and second, whether or not it should be one or the other. Dewey's claim that it is "partial and out of balance" seems to mean that it's not being used exclusively for good—that it's not being used with the appropriate "moral knowledge." But is that claim muddied simply by the existence of the list of beneficial scientific achievements that only came about because of a war effort? There's a difference, however, between building a bomb and building a flu vaccine. Those seem to land on clear sides of the good/evil line. But what about some of the other achievements, such as pressurized airplane cabins? That has been a tremendously productive invention, enabling people to travel in a way that they essentially couldn't otherwise. But it was developed for flying bombers, a decidedly destructive purpose. So is science ambivalent? Is it one-sided? Or is the entire point of science that it is (or should be) devoid of partiality to one side or another—that it should be "pure"? If that is the point, then does it actually achieve that aim, or is that just a lofty goal that is unattainable because it is performed by flawed humans who have their own ideas about where science should and should not be applied? Explain your answers.

3. In the novel, Gloria makes the following statement about John Dewey: "So far as I could tell, Dewey's philosophy boiled down to 'the problem of science.' On the one hand, science was curing diseases left and right; on the other hand, science had produced the atomic bomb. Would science save us or destroy us?... Gloria Geller's philosophy: If it's not up to me, then don't think about it. Why talk about such big, abstract issues?" Well, why? Is there a reason to talk about the topic of whether science will save or destroy humanity? Gloria's point is that she's not a scientist; she's not a philosopher; she's a young adult who likes to sew and dress up in stylish clothes and go out on dates with her boyfriend. What could she possibly contribute to a conversation about such a weighty topic—a topic that she has no say in or control over anyway? But let's pretend that she does have an opinion on the matter. Let's say she believes that science will kill us. Now what? What could she possibly do with that information except live in fear of her own demise at the hands of science? The scenario isn't nearly so bleak if she believes the opposite—that science will save us—but again, what will she do with that? And remember, these are just her opinions. She would simply be one of the millions of people in the country who have an opinion about a subject. So what? Is there personal gain to be found

in debating the topic? If so, what is it? Is there a broader good that could come from it? If so, what could that be? Defend your answers.

- 4. Why does Gloria blame the snag caused by a hangnail from digging potatoes in her father's Victory Garden for her ensuing involvement in the events that make up the story? After all, there are a variety of factors that lead to her involvement, including, notably, Stanley's decision to leave for China before Dewey's party—a party that he arranged. Is Stanley more to blame for her involvement than the snag? What about Gloria herself? When she arrives at the Delta Psi house, Dewey mistakes her for Stanley, and she allows him to be deceived by pretending to be her brother. Had she not done that, she wouldn't have been a part of the events that followed. Is she to blame? Every event, it can be argued, can be traced back to innumerable other events that set it in motion. One might even contend that the potatoes in the Victory Garden wouldn't have been planted had it not been for the war, and if they hadn't, there would have been no hangnail and thus no snag. Even so, do certain things stand out as singular enough to be a cause by themselves of something that happens later? World War II was of immense consequence in human history; it led to countless events, situations, and circumstances that would not have happened otherwise, both directly and indirectly. But is it too broad and removed to be considered a cause of Gloria's entanglement in the occurrences of the story? The snag is much more direct and personal. Does that make a difference? Consider, too, that the snag was accidental and incidental. Stanley's decision to leave early for China was not. Nor was Gloria's decision to pretend to be Stanley, as well as her decision to stay at the party when she might have left. Does it make a difference, when considering the cause of an event, if the circumstance was a chance occurrence versus a deliberate decision? If you had to identify the cause of Gloria's involvement in the subsequent events of the story, what would you choose, and why?
- 5. Gloria and Stanley argue before he leaves for China. The dispute is prompted by Stanley's decision to leave early and the resulting negative impact that that has on their mother. There may be misdirected disappointment and sadness on Gloria's part as well that escalates the exchange from a conversation to an argument. And once it becomes an argument, it begins encompassing other issues beyond that of Stanley's early departure. At one point, Stanley shouts at his sister, "I just think you've got so much more to you than...than *this*." Gloria explains: "He stabbed a finger at the dress on the table that my mother was helping me pin. 'It's *art*, Stan.' I crossed my arms over my chest, daring him to attack art. Stanley crossed his arms in a mirror image of me. 'It's not *art*, Gloria. It's *artifice*.''' Gloria is instantly on the attack after Stanley references Frankie, accusing her brother of jealousy toward her boyfriend for having gone to fight in the war and coming home a hero. But in doing so, she misses the point that Stanley is making: she's not creating art, according to him; she's creating a facade, a deceptive impression of who she really is and what she really looks like, all so that Frankie