Melvin Rogers’s book, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy*, aims to present Dewey’s historical commitments to respond to critiques of his notion of inquiry. This Dewey, Rogers admits, is not completely undiscovered but rather a novel composition of interpretations, from a different viewpoint and in a different context, can yield fresh insight and bring new perspective to old problems, just as rearranging the same players within an orchestra can create a new enlivening sound. Consequently, *The Undiscovered Dewey* emphasizes Dewey’s historical commitments to Darwinism, which informs his conception of inquiry. It is in and through the contingency and precariousness that Darwin’s position provides that Rogers frees the notion of inquiry from claims that its overemphasized role for rationality is unrealistic and impractical.

Rogers’s explication of both Deweyan inquiry and its historical framework brings about two different, but related, results. First, Dewey’s historical allegiances cleanse inquiry of the stain of Enlightenment rationalism argued for by Eric MacGilvray (3). Second, the radical contingency revealed in inquiry, as a result of Dewey following Darwin, bequeaths a view of political cooperation and communication that shapes the public sphere. The first half of the book shows the historical lynchpins of inquiry, while the second demonstrates that inquiry in religion, morality, and democracy are in fact “attentive to moral conflict and value pluralism” (4). Rogers then aims inquiry at these three institutions of sociality, and insists that the results of inquiry reshape and improve each institution, as if inquiry was a filter and each institution was the water cleansed. What relates the two text’s aims, and the book’s two halves, is Rogers’s claim that when thinkers such as Putnam, Westbrook, and Diggins examine Dewey’s inquiry within society, it remains “more ambitious and less attentive to moral conflict and value pluralism.” Meaning, if inquiry is guided only by the principles of clear and distinct ideas and not attentive to conflict and pluralism, then when inquiry performs within society the solutions to complex ideas will purely rational. This exaggerated expectation for the rational facet of inquiry is “the optimism of the Enlightenment” (3–4). If Dewey applies inquiry to politics as well as religion and morality, and this process is imbued with a
kind of Enlightenment rationalism, then when inquiry is brought to bear on
democracy, its fruits will be authoritarian in nature. In order to prove otherwise
Rogers takes on a host of contemporary thinkers: Putnam, Lippman, Wolin,
Schumpeter, and others. For reasons of brevity I will mainly focus on Rogers’s
dealings with Dewey.

Once Rogers explains the historical foundations of inquiry in the first
couple chapters, then, a shift in focus toward the function of inquiry in religion,
morality, and democracy reveals a religious naturalism that does not abstract
away from the existential situation, a morality that forms a more self-reliant
organism, and a democracy that is always addressing and undergoing strife,
while limiting and restricting the power of the elites. Each of these positions
reveal two things: one, that inquiry is active in only in the present moment –
without abstraction and existential transcendence – and, two, that inquiry is
subject to the radical precariousness of everyday experience. The chapters on
religion, morality, and democracy illuminate the practice of inquiry in the public
domain in order to show that inquiry does not yield a rationalism run rampant.
Rogers explains, “The problem is that too much attention is given to inquiry’s
aim and not to the background domain of action from which it emerges and to
which it must returns for assessment” (18).

Rogers argues that inquiry is subject to the same shifts, contingencies,
and precariousness that Darwin’s theory indentifies in reality. But, according to
Rogers, the more important revolution Darwin heralded is “the more lasting
issue of whether we will believe that our values emerge from ‘the mutual
interaction of changing things’ or look for ‘them in some transcendent ... region’” (10). Consequently, as Dewey stresses, Darwin marked not only a
revolution of science but also a revolution of meaning, for, as a result, meaning
is recognized to undergo the same shifts that affect all species. For Dewey, value
belongs to “the mutual interaction of changing things.” Values still have a
bedrock after the Darwinian revolution, but this foundation is within experience.
As Dewey explains in “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” the same
time that Darwin struck the notion of species down into the alterations and
modifications of time he also did the same for form, identity, and essence,
because eidos was first translated as species. Form and essence are both
processes that are subject to the shifts of time. Because truth and rationality are
not fixed, inquiry becomes a kind of phronesis. Inquiry, then, “denotes a
performative quality of practical action” (63). This Rogers identifies as lacking
in past theories of inquiry, and it is here where Rogers makes a profound
contribution. Since inquiry is practical action, then an explanation of inquiry
should include an account of those practical performances; it must include
accounts of inquiring into politics, morality, and democracy. While Dewey
outlines more domains of inquiry, Rogers only focuses on these three.

Since inquiry is undergone through the domain of practical action,
religion must proceed only from within these limitations (108). What Rogers
shows here is not that Dewey prefers one particular conception of religion over